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THE MEDIA AND THE MILITARY IN  
VIETNAM AND AFGHANISTAN

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## INTRODUCTION

“A great part of the information obtained in war is contradictory, a still greater part is false, and by far the greatest part is of a doubtful character.”--Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, 1832

Some wars end in definitive victory, others in abject defeat: flames rising from a sacked city; an emperor’s surrender address, delivered in an unexpectedly high-pitched voice; a vanquished general’s courtly raising of his plumed hat to his last great rival; the hoarse lamentations for the dead of an apocalyptic final battle.

But some conflicts trail off inconclusively: an outright rout is avoided, yet the scent of failure clings like musk to those who might once have imagined themselves invincible. At times like these, the actual outcome of fighting can be all but overshadowed by the struggle to shape the story of what went wrong. Thus, arriving at a commonly accepted narrative becomes an end in itself, with words wielded as weapons, and battle lines drawn in accordance with competing versions of reality.

Journalists - war correspondents, in particular - are by necessity part of this reckoning. The evolving tools of the trade, from satellite phones to social media, give news coverage of conflicts a greater reach and immediacy than at any point in human history. On the other hand, information remains a bitterly contested commodity; and interpretation of crucial events - both at the time they occur, and with the aid of historical perspective - is driven by competing interests, perhaps most starkly those of the military and the media.

In America’s two longest wars - that waged a generation ago in Indochina, and now the Afghan conflict - the relationship between the reporters and the generals turned increasingly adversarial as the conflicts in question came to seem more and more unwinnable. In light of that, I propose to examine some parallels between media coverage of America’s long process of extricating itself from Vietnam, and the present grinding down of the Afghan war.

Drawing on contemporaneous journalistic accounts as well as subsequent analyses, I look in this paper at two “pivot points” in the respective conflicts: the 1968 Tet offensive in Vietnam, and in Afghanistan, the “insider attack” phenomenon - Afghan troops killing U.S. forces and their allies - which came to the fore in 2012. Using these as case studies, I address the following research questions:

--By what means and methods does the modern-day military seek to exert control over media accounts of wartime events? And to what extent are news organizations cooperative with or resistant to these efforts?

--To what extent did military authorities succeed in influencing media coverage during pivotal periods of the wars in Vietnam and Afghanistan, as measured by similarities between official

statements and news' articles depictions of events?

--Did 'real-time' accounts - both those provided by the press and those reflected in military statements - clash with what became the widely accepted historical accounts?

I want, of course, to avoid facile comparisons. Taliban fighters, and those affiliated with them, are not the Viet Cong. The strategic imperatives that drove the two wars are vastly different. The fighting in Afghanistan has drawn only a fraction of the public dissent in the United States and other troop-contributing nations, compared to the tearing of the social fabric of the America of the Vietnam era. The NATO force is largely a volunteer army, not a conscript one. And the nature of the news business has changed dramatically in the past three decades, as has - though to a lesser extent - the military's manner of dealing with the press.

However, I also believe there are some overarching common themes to be explored from a journalistic perspective - the lessons learned, and lessons ignored - from two conflicts that went on far longer than anyone expected, culminating in the rebuke of powerful armies at the hands of foes who were initially dismissed as ragtag and disorganized.

Journalism is, at its core, a search for truth. These two wars, and the news accounts that emerged from them, tell a larger tale that speaks to human nature at its most powerful and poignant. War stories stand as testament to both wisdom and foolhardiness, determination and indifference, ennoblement and debasement, courage and cowardice. Perhaps our chosen profession encompasses those traits as well.

## Chapter 1 THE MEDIA AND THE MILITARY: AN OVERVIEW

### i. The battlefield scribe

The making of wartime chronicles was probably a simpler affair when those writing them were the combatants themselves, or closely tied to them. Julius Caesar fought his battles and recorded them as well. Josephus - fighter-turned-slave-turned-defector - recounted in unmatched detail the Jewish revolt against Roman occupation, though his throwing in of his lot with the Romans clouded history's verdict on his works. Thucydides' firsthand experiences as a military commander found their way into his monumental "History of the Peloponnesian War." And poets and novelists down through the ages have forged searing works of art by drawing on their own wartime encounters, or on others' accounts of battle and its aftermath.

The war correspondent as we know him or her today is a more or less modern invention, and the notion that the presence of outside eyewitnesses adds a valuable dimension to the interpretation of wartime events was relatively slow to take hold, perhaps resting even now on a shakier foundation than is widely acknowledged. William Howard Russell, covering the war in the Crimea for *The Times of London*, is generally held to be the first modern-day war correspondent – or in his famous self-description, “the miserable parent of a luckless tribe.”<sup>1</sup> More than a century and a half later, writing about war (or photographing it, or posting videos, or tweeting about it) is a vocation that has struggled to find and keep its footing - through America's Civil War, when a newly formed corps of correspondents penned dispatches by candlelight of awful carnage witnessed in the course of a single day; in World War II and the Korean conflict, when reporters donned military uniforms, travelled with troops and (with notable exceptions) readily submitted to military censorship; to the Vietnam era, whose latter-day reportage was infused with an unprecedented tone of angry scepticism over the course and aims of the war; to widespread media credulousness prior to the war in Iraq in the face of the Bush administration's claims of Saddam Hussein's possession of weapons of mass destruction; to the free-for-all documentation of the Arab spring by young bloggers and videographers.

If the journalist should be an “historian of the moment” - as Camus held, when he himself was chronicling the Resistance in France during World War II<sup>2</sup> - the moment is a moving target, and the motivation and self-image of those documenting conflict is undergoing

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<sup>1</sup> Knightley, Phillip, *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist and Myth-Maker From the Crimea to Iraq*, Andre Deutsch, London, 2003, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Camus, Albert, ed. Jacqueline Levi-Valensi, *Camus at Combat: Writing 1944-1947*, Princeton University Press, 2006, p. 24

fundamental changes. Whether today's war correspondents are in greater measure Cassandras or thrill-seekers, voyeurs or truth-tellers, propagandists or iconoclasts, the swashbuckling image of past years has given way to far more openly voiced introspection and doubts. Phillip Knightley, in his seminal work on the history of war reportage, *The First Casualty*, takes a bleak view: "Given the increased danger, greater degree of manipulation and control by the government, and the new emphasis on seeing the war through the eyes of soldiers, the age of the war correspondent as hero appears to be over."<sup>3</sup>

## ii. The rise of 'embedistan'

Much of the criticism surrounding media coverage of the major wars of this century, in Iraq and Afghanistan, has centred on the practice of "embedding" - that is, reporters living with and travelling with the military units they write about. Among U.S. military commanders, the practice has been generally viewed as a largely successful means of generating positive stories about troops' bravery under fire or other events casting war aims in a justifiable light. Editors tend to like embeds (the system was, after all, agreed to by news executives and military commanders in the 1990s); they require relatively little logistical planning on the part of news organizations; they entail a fraction of the cost of sending a reporter into a combat zone 'unilaterally,' and they offer the assurance of timely medical aid in the event of injury or other emergency. Many journalists working in the field, however, see embeds as a kind of Faustian bargain: they can indeed provide access to battle spaces deemed too difficult and dangerous to reach independently, as well as a gritty, close-up view of troops waging war and their commanders' on-the-fly decision-making, but these are counterbalanced by the pervasive sense of dependence engendered by being fed, transported and protected by the same soldiers one is writing about (Rod Nordland of *The New York Times* offers a biting description of "scribbling victims of Stockholm syndrome").<sup>4</sup>

Reporters quickly became keenly aware of the ability of commanders to withhold and manipulate information about unfolding events, and to either prevent or punish after the fact the publication of details that are considered to reflect poorly on the military. In addition, many journalists feel a natural degree of empathy for soldiers that can arise when the stress and terror of combat is jointly experienced, and that can make its way into battlefield accounts. An 'embed' is a fundamentally unequal relationship, dependent on journalists' adherence to both written and unwritten rules. In some cases, accreditation required not only to obtain field embeds, but even to attend news conferences at military

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<sup>3</sup> Knightley, p. 548

<sup>4</sup> Farrell, Stephen, *New York Times*, "At War" (blog), June 25, 2010

headquarters, can be withdrawn in response to a single high-profile piece of writing (Michael Hastings of Rolling Stone magazine became *persona non grata* at the Kabul headquarters of NATO's International Security Assistance Force following publication of "The Runaway General," the profile that led to the forced resignation of Gen. Stanley McChrystal, then the American commander of Western troops in Afghanistan).

Commanders can also invoke "operational security" - sometimes out of legitimate safety concerns, but at times for political-seeming reasons - to prevent the dissemination of the very details that bring a story to life in the most telling way. And when a journalist is travelling as an embed, contact with local nationals is going to be either non-existent or irrevocably tainted. From personal experience I can say that no Iraqi or Afghan villager is going to speak frankly with troops and their interpreters within earshot, and most civilians, reasonably enough, will take a reporter - especially one in the flak jacket and helmet that are generally mandatory when with troops in the field - as someone who is taking part in a military operation, even if not an actual soldier. So the scope of information garnered on embeds is largely limited to the military perspective, though that can sometimes be ameliorated by having a local 'fixer' operating in the same locale, or by making a 'unilateral' visit after the embed ends. But for most reporters, an embed by its very nature threatens to compromise the values of independence, specificity and objectivity.

Even fairly sophisticated consumers of war news, however, sometimes overestimate the amount of coverage that is generated by reporters embedding with troops, as opposed to that by journalists living and travelling independently in combat zones. (During my own three years as a correspondent in Afghanistan, I was asked countless times by friends and relatives if I lived in the "Green Zone." There wasn't one; like most correspondents, I lived in a lightly secured house in a fairly ordinary Afghan neighbourhood.) Most major U.S. and European news organizations (though in diminishing numbers as the recession and the battering of the traditional media business model took hold), maintained full-time bureaus in Baghdad and Kabul, whose correspondents tended to regard embeds as an occasional element of a coverage regimen that also included independent road trips throughout the country, diligent cultivation of Afghan or Iraqi sources, frequent visits to areas where civilian casualties had been blamed on one side or the other, and the like.

Not surprisingly, then, the military favours another practice closely related to the embed: that of flying in influential journalists for drop-in visits of a week or two, taking them on carefully tailored junkets, housing them at military HQ, granting them access to senior officials and generals who are often reluctant to speak to the 'permanent' press corps, flying them in and out on the commander's chopper while embedded colleagues might spend days waiting for "space-available" seats to open up on aircraft. These kinds of military-curated trips often yield a spate of op-ed pieces that begin, "One of the things rarely reported from Afghanistan is..." followed by a description of troops building a school in



Nuristan, or some such. (And of course, non-embedded and non-junketeering journalists sometimes *do* write about schools in Nuristan, though such a piece would likelier be leavened with a description of how difficult it was for girls to attend them, and why, or how angry the locals were about corruption surrounding Western aid projects.)

For many younger journalists, the ‘embed’ has been a part of the professional landscape since the beginning of their careers, and there is an increasing degree of matter-of-factness about the system. But some of journalism’s most distinguished elders are openly and vocally dismayed by the phenomenon. Seymour Hersh, the investigative journalist perhaps best known for his reporting of the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, in 2010 called embedding “the worst single thing that has happened to journalism in the last decade and a half.”<sup>5</sup>

### **iii. The ‘PAO’ culture**

Few Americans, or even journalists whose beats do not entail dealings with the military, are aware of the size and pervasiveness of the military public-relations effort. Even units unlikely to attract much in the way of media have public-affairs officers – PAOs - who keep vigilant watch over any hint of unfavourable coverage. The ‘grading’ of individual journalists deemed friendly or unfriendly to the military caused a minor stir some years into the Afghan war; many reporters working in a war zone assume such assessments can influence their degree of access. Technical advances have made it extremely easy for the military to precisely track the coverage provided by a given outlet; in recent years in Afghanistan, it was not unusual to get a phone call or an email from a PAO within moments of a story being posted on the website of one’s organization or a broadcast piece being aired. Even in the absence of any factual error that would need correcting, the swift and aggressive questioning of a story’s very premise - sometimes directed at the reporter, and sometimes to editors who might not be familiar with the story’s specifics - can have a chilling effect.

While the declared mission of PAOs is to assist reporters in obtaining whatever information they might reasonably seek for legitimate journalistic purposes, many PAOs see their role as one of advocate and defender of military practices and procedures, not as neutral conduit of information. Matthew Nasuti, a former military officer who now runs a website largely devoted to scrutinizing and criticizing the American effort in Afghanistan, sees a systematic effort to play down or conceal information incompatible with what he calls the “progress, progress, progress” narrative. “They rationalize not telling the whole truth by saying it is not

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<sup>5</sup> Hersh, Seymour, keynote speech, Global Investigative Journalism Conference, Geneva, April 23, 2010, via YouTube, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y\\_4RpHfHNCK](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_4RpHfHNCK)

their job,” he said. “They see their job as balancing out the negative news from the independent press. ...It is a different military from when I was in the Air Force.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Telephone interview with Matthew Nasuti of *Kabulpress.org*, Oct. 14, 2012

## Chapter 2 THE TET OFFENSIVE IN VIETNAM: A TURNING POINT IN 'THE WAR NOBODY WON'

### i. The war's course until Tet

Nearly two generations after the fact, the war in Vietnam is viewed as such a debacle that it is difficult to imagine an era in which U.S. policymakers and generals routinely declared that America and its allies would prevail over their North Vietnamese foes - or that this worldview could have been, for a time, relatively unchallenged by journalists. The conflict was a long time in reaching full boil; a full 15 years elapsed between the arrival of U.S. military advisers in 1950 in what was then French Indochina and the dispatching of the first American ground troops in 1965. By the end of that year, more than 180,000 Americans were fighting in Vietnam; in the next three years, those numbers would nearly triple.<sup>7</sup>

Although the American public strongly supported the initial troop deployment ordered by President Lyndon Johnson, domestic dissent began building as casualties rose, coalescing into a significant antiwar movement by 1967. The political and military establishment, however, continued to paint a consistently optimistic picture of battlefield prospects. In November of 1967 - less than three months before the North Vietnamese launched the wave of ferocious strikes in early 1968 that became known collectively as the Tet offensive - Gen. William Westmoreland, the commander of the American war effort, said the war was progressing well, and made to reporters his now-famous assertion that a "light at the end of the tunnel" could be seen.<sup>8</sup> But it would be five more years, and many thousands more deaths, before the Paris peace accords were signed and the last U.S. troops left Vietnam. A scant two years later, Saigon fell.

Stanley Karnow, a onetime journalist who went on to become one of the conflict's most respected historians, called it 'the war nobody won.'<sup>9</sup> By its end, almost 60,000 American troops had died, together with a quarter-million of their South Vietnamese military allies. North Vietnam's combatant death toll topped 1 million, and civilian fatalities, in north and south, are generally estimated at 4 million.

In the eyes of many, the turning point was the North Vietnamese offensive launched on Jan. 31 - the lunar New Year, Tet. Then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, a war hawk who eventually helped negotiate the peace accords, later called the offensive the "watershed" of the conflict - the point beyond which U.S. objectives could not be achieved "within a period

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<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Manpower Data Center

<sup>8</sup> *Department of State Bulletin*, Dec. 11, 1967, "Address on Vietnam" by Gen. William C. Westmoreland

<sup>9</sup> Karnow, Stanley, *Vietnam: A History*, Pimlico/Random House, 1994, p. Xv

or with force levels politically acceptable to the American people.”<sup>10</sup> The U.S. military leadership repeatedly depicted North Vietnam’s offensive as a failure, and from a purely military standpoint, that was arguably true. Near-simultaneous attacks on some 100 South Vietnamese towns, cities and bases were repulsed, although in some locales, such as the old imperial capital of Hue, dislodging the Viet Cong required weeks of bloody fighting. North Vietnamese fighter fatalities, estimated at 15,000 in the initial phase of the fighting, dwarfed the number of American dead by almost fifteen-fold. Yet the psychological benefits reaped by the attackers were incalculable. And to this day, many in military circles lay blame for that - and for the collapse of American public support for the war - at the doorstep of the press, creating a dynamic of antagonism which would colour military-media dealings in subsequent conflicts, including that in Afghanistan.

## **ii. The ‘Five O’Clock Follies’ and an increasingly adversarial relationship**

By the beginning of 1968, there were more than 400 accredited media representatives in Saigon.<sup>11</sup> Many represented established mainstream news organizations that had maintained bureaus in the South Vietnamese capital for years, but Saigon was also a place where a young freelancer could become a self-assigned war correspondent, essentially for the price of a plane ticket. Nominal affiliation with a newspaper or magazine or wire service, and the press accreditation that followed, were not that difficult to come by. The emerging counterculture at home in the United States meant that at least some of these newcomers embodied a shaggy, long-haired stereotype that the some in the military found inimical. But correspondents, courtesy of the military, enjoyed freedom of movement to a degree that would come to be almost unimaginable in later wars. “You could just call them up in the evening and tell them where you wanted to go, and at 6 a.m. you’d be on a chopper out - that was how it worked,” recalled Alvin Shuster, the Saigon bureau chief for The New York Times in 1970-71.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the greatest change from coverage of earlier conflicts was the role of television. By the mid-1960s, TV was a crucial source of news for most American households. As troop numbers rose, war coverage became a predominant theme of the nightly network newscasts, beaming often-grisly combat scenes directly into some 50 million American homes, marking the advent of what would become known as the “living-room war.” Prior to

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 24

<sup>11</sup> Braestrup, Peter, *Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet in 1968 in Vietnam and Washington*, Presidio Press, Novato, Calif., 1994, p. 52

<sup>12</sup> Shuster, Alvin, in telephone interview, Feb. 16, 2013

Tet, the TV narrative tilted strongly toward battlefield triumphs and heroic exploits of individual soldiers. But by 1967, ordinary grunts were beginning to express frustration \_ on camera \_ about the manner in which the war was being waged.<sup>13</sup> Well before that, friction was developing between a military establishment that assumed that correspondents' patriotism, as in previous wars, would trump any qualms about the mission raised by their field reporting, and aggressively challenged reporters when that was not the case. In one much-cited exchange, Malcolm Browne of The Associated Press, who had written critically about the South Vietnamese regime, was asked in public by a senior military official, Admiral Harry D. Felt, "Why don't you get on the team?"<sup>14</sup>

Reporters in the theatre sometimes felt undercut by editors or even by colleagues back home, with implicit pressure to conform to a version of events being put out by the Pentagon and by officials in Washington. Information itself became a highly politicized commodity, with U.S. military officials in Saigon placing greater emphasis on justifying overall war aims, rather than leaving that to the politicians in Washington. The press corps itself was becoming somewhat polarized; the evening briefings held by the U.S. public-affairs office were derided as the "Five O'Clock Follies" for their generally sunny take on the day's occurrences, but many correspondents relied heavily on these official versions of events to distil and characterize distant and confusing combat on any given day.<sup>15</sup>

Into this increasingly fraught atmosphere arrived the Year of the Monkey, with its celebratory inaugural holiday: Tet.

### **iii. The Tet offensive, viewed through the prism of three major news outlets**

Of the dozens of news organizations with reporters in Vietnam at the beginning of 1968, three of the most visible and influential were the *New York Times*, TIME magazine and the television network CBS. The *Times*, then as now, was considered the leading American newspaper (though in the 1960s there was far more robust competition than now from a number of other respected papers.) TIME and CBS News were also instantly recognizable brands, either at or close to the height of their power and prestige.

All three of these outlets had multi-person bureaus in Saigon when the Tet offensive began on Jan. 31, 1968. For purposes of analysis, I have examined their coverage of three separate

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<sup>13</sup> Bonior, David, Champin, Steven and Kolly, Timothy, *The Vietnam Veteran: A History of Neglect*, Praeger, New York, p. 24

<sup>14</sup> "Malcolm W. Browne, Pulitzer-winning Journalist who captured Indelible Vietnam Image, Dies at 81," *Washington Post*, Aug. 28, 2012

<sup>15</sup> Hammond, William, *Reporting Vietnam: Media and Military at War*, University Press of Kansas, 2000, p. 291

incidents: the attack on the U.S. Embassy in the first hours of the offensive; subsequent street fighting over the next week in Saigon's Cholon district, and the battle of Hue, which continued for three more weeks. An exact comparison is not possible because CBS and the *Times* were reporting in something close to 'real time' - via pieces for the nightly news and the daily paper, respectively, whereas TIME was working according to a weekly deadline. Nevertheless, articles in the magazine's issues of Feb. 9 and 16 address the same events during the first and second weeks of February that were chronicled daily by the *Times* and CBS.

For an observer looking at these reports now, one striking difference between coverage of these episodes and news reports one might have seen in recent years from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is the extremely graphic nature of the film and photographic images. And at times, even when the text accompanying the reports is relatively measured in tone, the images are so vivid and overpowering as to evoke an atmosphere of chaos and despair. In latter-day conflicts, photographs or video showing dead or wounded American soldiers - particularly when the person could be recognized - are generally prohibited unless specific permission is obtained from the wounded service member, or from a bereaved family. But in Vietnam, those photographs were an integral part of the record. TIME's Feb. 16, 1968 issue contains a photograph showing an armoured vehicle whose rear hatch is lowered. In it is a pile of bodies of between six and eight U.S. troops, stacked atop one another with stiffened limbs entangled. The same issue features the iconic Eddie Adams photograph - which editors presciently noted would be one "for the history books" - which captured the street execution of a bound and unarmed Viet Cong captive by the chief of South Vietnam's police force.<sup>16</sup> (The photo also appeared on the front page of Feb. 2nd's editions of the *Times*.)

Another notable feature of the reportage is the extent is the presumption of American moral superiority against a foe depicted as cunning and guileful. CBS' coverage of the embassy attack on Jan. 31 provided Gen. Westmoreland with ample air time to rail against a "deceitful" opponent who had violated an agreed-upon truce, and correspondent Robert Schakne described the attackers as having "sneaked up" on the fortified embassy compound, as if they should have announced themselves.<sup>17</sup> TIME described North Vietnam's Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap as "utterly contemptuous of the value of human life, even that of his own troops."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> "Picking up the Pieces," TIME magazine, Feb. 16, 1968, Vol. 91, No. 7

<sup>17</sup> "Attack on Saigon Embassy," CBS News, Jan. 31, 1968, via YouTube

<sup>18</sup> "The Man Who Planned the Offensive," TIME, Feb. 16, 1968, Vol. 91, No. 7

Across the coverage in the three outlets, the battlefield performance of American troops was portrayed in an almost uniformly positive light, even if the larger goals of commanders and politicians were being called into question. In *TIME*'s Feb. 16 issue, for example, a pair of photos shot in sequence are captioned: "Wounded and armed only with a pistol, G.I. glares at the enemy; seconds later, he collapses as a buddy comes to his aid."<sup>19</sup> Coverage in both the *Times* and CBS take an admiring tone in describing the exploit of diplomat George Jacobson, a retired colonel, who used a pistol to shoot and kill one of the embassy attackers who had broken into his villa. (The episode is the lead of a front-page *Times* story, and in the CBS report on the incident, the correspondent can be heard off-camera asking Jacobson what kind of weapon the attacker wielded. Upon being told it was an M-16 rifle, the reporter exclaimed in a congratulatory fashion: "And you got him!")<sup>20</sup>

That is not to say that the stories examined did not reflect subjective editorial judgments, some of which cast the conflict in an increasingly ominous light. *TIME*'s Feb. 9 cover, for example, was an artist's menacing-appearing portrait of Gen. Giap, the North Vietnamese commander, surrounded by a swirl of violent colour reminiscent of flames. A banner across the top corner reads 'Days of Death in Vietnam.' Of that 60-page issue, a full 12 pages were devoted to the war.<sup>21</sup>

But even in instances when the Tet offensive was being depicted as a seeming setback for U.S. forces, language used by the media outlets often conformed closely to that used by military briefers. A *Times* story from Jan. 31 refers to a "terrorist" attack on the U.S. Embassy<sup>22</sup>, and in stories by all three outlets, the Viet Cong are routinely referred to as the "enemy" and sometimes even "the Reds." Moreover, all three outlets gave prominent placement to the official assessment of events, even when their own reporting contradicted elements of it. CBS, reporting on the aftermath of the embassy attack, did not challenge Westmoreland's on-camera assertion that the wave of attacks against South Vietnamese cities, Saigon included, was "diversionary."<sup>23</sup> A Feb. 5 *Times* dispatch from the embattled city of Hue summarized American tactical gains and quoted a military official in the second paragraph as citing progress, though the fighting was to continue for weeks. After the fact, military officials also claimed that the attacks in Saigon received overblown and overwrought coverage because virtually all news organizations had bureaus in the capital, suggesting that reporters had been simply shaken up by the proximity of combat. (This was

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> "Attack on Saigon Embassy, CBS News, Jan. 31, 1968, via YouTube

<sup>21</sup> "The General's Gamble," *TIME*, Feb. 9, 1968, Vol. 91, No. 6

<sup>22</sup> "U.S. Aide in Embassy Villa Kills Guerrilla With Pistol," *New York Times*, Jan. 31, 1968

<sup>23</sup> "Attack on Saigon Embassy, CBS News, Jan. 31, 1968, via YouTube

to become a recurring theme years later in Afghanistan, when military spokesmen accused reporters of exaggerating the significance of attacks targeting either the U.S. Embassy or the military's own Kabul headquarters. "You people always think it's big, big news when you can hear it from your desks," an angry military public-affairs officer once told me and a television correspondent after an early-morning suicide bombing a short distance from the base's main gate.) But accounts of the embassy attack in Saigon correctly pointed out the inherent symbolism of a damaging attack on the seat of U.S. power in the South Vietnamese capital. Moreover, the military tactic of ridiculing reporters who ascribe significance to an attack in an area where many of them live and work might have had more validity if these journalists were not routinely travelling to other parts of the country, including some of the most hazardous ones. The *TIME*, CBS and *New York Times* correspondents who covered of the embassy attack and subsequent fighting in Saigon all had many by-lines and sign-offs from outside the capital in the months before and after the beginning of Tet, and all had spent considerable time with field units. (The *Times* reporter who covered the embassy attack, Charles Mohr, had been wounded by shrapnel three years earlier, and returned to coverage duties soon afterward.)<sup>24</sup>

In my content analysis (detailed in Part One of the Appendix), I examined a representative sample of coverage of the early weeks of the Tet offensive by *TIME*, CBS and the *Times*. For purposes of the study, I compared the number of references in news articles that could be characterized as either positive or negative in relation to the stated military position. An example of a positive element would be a quote from a military official characterizing the success of a particular operation, with no qualifying observations to the contrary from the reporter, or a passage describing the courage of American forces under fire. A negative element would be, for example, a reporter's description of the deteriorating sense of security among South Vietnamese civilians living in urban areas as a result of the North's offensive, or the correspondent voicing open scepticism of the U.S. military's estimate of the number of casualties suffered by North Vietnamese forces.

Somewhat surprisingly, I found that the positive and negative elements in the sampling were nearly equal. The overall 'score' for the *New York Times* was almost evenly divided: 13 positive references and 12 negative ones. CBS News scored 5 positive and 6 negative references. *TIME*'s score skewed slightly more negative, with 12 positive references and 15 negative ones. While its editorial tone more openly reflected doubts and reservations about the U.S. military's characterization of events, the writer or writers also accepted as fact many of the U.S. administration's underlying generalizations concerning the overwhelming strength of American forces and their South Vietnamese allies (suggesting that the conflict was still winnable), and appeared to support the military's forceful contention that the

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<sup>24</sup> "Charles Mohr, A Times Reporter Who Covered War, Is Dead At 60," *New York Times*, June 18, 1989



North Vietnamese could not continue to absorb such heavy combat casualties (which they were, in fact, able to do). TIME's somewhat more critical stance is perhaps not surprising since the newsweeklies customarily presented an analytical take on events that had taken place some days earlier (and often one meant to be provocative.) But the spot news coverage generated by CBS and the *Times*, while unsparing in its descriptions of violence, cannot be described as particularly negative in either tone and content; while there were some strongly critical elements, these were generally balanced by ample representation of the military viewpoint.

Some of the most negative commentary was just that: editorial commentary, which was labelled as such. One of the most famous summations of the initial phase of the Tet offensive - and of the war to date - came from respected CBS News anchor Walter Cronkite, in the form of an on-air editorial delivered on Feb. 27, 1968, after he returned from a reporting trip to Hue. The most oft-quoted excerpt features him declaring: "For now it seems more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate." But Cronkite's view of the offensive itself was a more nuanced one: "Who won and who lost in the great Tet offensive against the cities? I'm not sure."<sup>25</sup>

#### **iv. Tet in Retrospect: Losing while you win**

Recent years have seen a resurgence in the 'revisionist' view of Tet, asserting that the military leadership was correct all along in dismissing the military significance of the offensive, and that negative news coverage precipitated a dramatic erosion of public support for the war, which in turn led to political decisions that left the military hamstrung, thus rendering the war unwinnable. Peter Braestrup, who covered Vietnam for the *Washington Post*, makes the case that the "crisis journalism" of the Tet era represented a major failure on the part of the news media.<sup>26</sup> That view has found its way into debate over the current conflict in Afghanistan: conservative commentator James S. Robbins asserts that "the Tet storyline is always lurking when U.S. forces engage weak, unconventional enemies that lash out in limited and exceptional circumstances, and briefly capture the attention of the media," adding that "the current crop of terrorists well understands the Tet dynamic."<sup>27</sup> But Karnow, who died earlier this year, pointed out in his magisterial Vietnam history that public backing for the war had been "slipping steadily for two years prior to Tet - a trend

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<sup>25</sup> "Vietnam Commentary," Walter Cronkite, CBS News, Feb. 27, 1968, via National Public Radio, July 18, 2009

<sup>26</sup> Braestrup, p. 4

<sup>27</sup> Robbins, James S., *This Time We Win: Revisiting the Tet Offensive*, Encounter Books, New York, 2010, p. 3

influenced by the mounting casualties, rising taxes and, especially, the feeling that there was no end in view.”<sup>28</sup> Essentially, Karnow argues, it was *events* surrounding the war’s course - not Tet alone, and not news coverage of the offensive - that led to the political decision by the U.S. administration to seek a negotiated settlement and at last bring the long war to an end.

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<sup>28</sup> Karnow, p. 558

## Chapter 3 'TO BE MURDERED' - THE INSIDER-SHOOTING PHENOMENON

### i. The 'good war'

In the spring of 2012, a political cartoon appeared in a number of American newspapers, a panel strip from the venerable satire "Doonesbury" - G.B. Trudeau's invariably biting take on the American way of life and war. One of the characters, a soldier deployed in Afghanistan, is reconnecting by phone with a relative, who asks where she's calling from. When she tells him, he answers: "Wait - we're still there?"<sup>29</sup>

Nearly a dozen years after the Sept. 11 attacks galvanized the American-led invasion of this vast, poor and remote Central Asian country, the United States was searching for a way out of a war that had gone on far longer than anyone had expected, and one with constantly shifting goalposts of success. Senior military posts changed hands again and again, with overall command of the U.S.-led International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF, turning over 15 times to date, with more than one general forced out or departing under a cloud.<sup>30</sup> The killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011 by U.S. special forces left many Americans feeling that the Afghan conflict had run its course. American politicians gradually stopped speaking publicly of grand goals such as nation-building and the laying of solid democratic foundations in a country that many had come to consider ungovernable. The NATO nations and their coalition allies were increasingly strapped for cash as the worldwide recession took hold. The Taliban insurgency had again and again shown its resilience, and Western commanders were well aware that in large swaths of Afghanistan, their troops were less an instrument of pacification and more of a lightning rod for insurgent attacks and local unrest. By May 2012, President Barack Obama was signalling clear readiness to wind down the conflict. The war in Afghanistan "as we understand it" would soon be over, he told a NATO summit in Chicago.<sup>31</sup>

So it was time to go, but how? The key prerequisite to the withdrawal of nearly all Western combat troops was thought to lie with the training of Afghanistan's police and army. Turn them into a professional force that could fight the insurgents as necessarily while

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<sup>29</sup> Trudeau, G.B., *Doonesbury*, Universal Press Syndicate, April 15, 2012

<sup>30</sup> Successive generals commanding generals in recent years included David McKiernan, fired in 2009; Stanley McChrystal, forced out in 2010; David Petraeus, who became head of the CIA but resigned in 2012 after an extramarital affair became public; John Allen, exonerated in a Pentagon investigation arising from the Petraeus affair, a scheduled promotion to NATO commander in Europe did not go forward.

<sup>31</sup> "Obama and the NATO General: Different Views on Afghanistan," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 20, 2012

maintaining law and order, the thinking went, and U.S. and other troops would be able to gradually withdraw without leaving chaos in their wake.

But first, the Afghan police and army would have to be trained. And such an effort, it was decided early on, meant that Afghans would need to work in close proximity with Western mentors – foreign troops whom in the ranks of the Afghan security forces had come to see not as liberators, but occupiers. The training program faced daunting obstacles, with annual Pentagon assessments repeatedly describing Afghan forces’ capabilities as extremely limited.<sup>4</sup> Then came an onslaught of what Marine Corps Gen. John Allen, the commander of Western forces in Afghanistan, would eventually describe as the “signature” threat faced by U.S. troops and their NATO allies.<sup>32</sup> He was not speaking of some form of battlefield confrontation with the Taliban, but rather of something closer to home.

## ii. An attack in search of a name

Up until 2010, deliberate attacks against Western troops by their Afghan counterparts were a relative rarity – so much so that the terminology describing them was itself fluid. For a time, the military described such killings as ‘fratricidal,’ or as ‘green-on-blue’ incidents (for the military’s respective ‘colour codes’ for Afghan troops and ISAF.)<sup>33</sup> Occasionally such an attack was referred to as ‘friendly fire’ by military spokespersons, but that was dropped when it was pointed out that that even that unfortunate term carried more the connotation of an accidental strike against comrades. Eventually, the phrase ‘insider attack’ or ‘insider threat’ took hold, as it was a more inclusive phrase, taking into account that the assailant might be a member of the Afghan police or army, or someone who belonged to a U.S.-supported village militia, or a civilian base worker, or an Afghan government employee, usually in one of the security agencies. And the victim might be a member of the NATO force, or part of the separate American special-forces contingent, or a civilian trainer, or a security contractor. All of these permutations eventually occurred.

The broadening of the nomenclature reflected soaring numbers of such attacks over a five-year period. In 2008, just two allied deaths recorded as resulting from them; in 2012 there were 61 deaths, 51 of them Americans. In percentage terms, these incidents went from accounting for less than 1 percent of ISAF fatalities in 2008 to a full 15 percent in 2012.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> JMTTC Public Affairs, “NATO Employ Tactics Against Inside Threats,” [www.isaf.nato.int](http://www.isaf.nato.int), Sept. 16, 2012

<sup>33</sup> “Green-on-Blue Attacks in Afghanistan,” *Long War Journal*, Aug. 23, 2012

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

These killings tended to have political repercussions far out of proportion to their numbers. Particularly when the casualties were from smaller troop-contributing nations, such as the Netherlands or Australia, they dominated the headlines at home in a way that ordinary combat deaths did not, resonating like a shock wave. Why, politicians and the public would ask, are our soldiers serving in a faraway land where the people who are supposed to be our allies are trying to kill us? Bereaved families, even those who had accepted that losing a loved one in fighting was a possibility, would sometimes express the view that the circumstances rendered meaningless this sacrifice. ‘Insider’ attacks began to be widely interpreted as having a direct policy impact, even when any explicit link was denied by the government in question. France, for example, announced it would move up the departure date of its combat troops, soon after five of its troops were gunned down by Afghan allies in Kapisa province in January of 2012.<sup>35</sup>

Still, an uneasy equilibrium prevailed even as the killings intensified. The attacks were infrequent enough that with more than 150,000 NATO troops in the country, and the Afghan police and military having grown to nearly 350,000 in number, the military routinely explained the assaults away as an anomaly in an otherwise respectful and harmonious relationship; the training effort itself was given a Dari-language military slogan of ‘shohna ba’ shohna,’ or shoulder to shoulder.<sup>36</sup> “We have almost 500,000 police and soldiers working together, every day, side by side, enhancing their trust and enhancing their cooperation in order to fight together for a better future for this country,” ISAF’s chief spokesman, Brig. Gen. Gunter Katz, told journalists in Kabul in March 2012. He was to employ nearly identical language over the coming months, in briefings and interviews following virtually every such attack.<sup>37</sup>

2012 got off to a very bad start for U.S. forces in Afghanistan, with a series of highly damaging events that Allen, the commander, would later call “meteor strikes”<sup>38</sup> - suggesting that they collectively represented a set of bizarre happenstances rather than an indication of systemic problems. In January, a video of U.S. Marines urinating on dead Taliban fighters triggered a public outcry in Afghanistan, where disrespect of dead bodies is an extreme taboo; February brought deadly countrywide riots after American troops at a military base outside Kabul mistakenly burned copies of the Koran, and in March, a U.S. Army staff

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<sup>35</sup> “France Ends Final Afghan Combat Mission,” *France 24*, Nov. 20, 2012

<sup>36</sup> “Shohna ba Shohna,” [www.isaf.nato.int/news/3.html](http://www.isaf.nato.int/news/3.html), Aug. 11, 2012

<sup>37</sup> “Cooperation Unaffected by Insider Attacks,” *blip.tv/.../isaf-cooperation-unaffected-by*, Aug. 13, 2012

<sup>38</sup> “The Triage Commander,” *Washington Post*, May 12, 2012

sergeant was accused in the methodical house-to-house slaughter of 16 civilians, most of them women and children, in the Panjwayi district of Kandahar province.<sup>39</sup>

Through much of the year, even as the pace of ‘insider’ killings accelerated, U.S. military officials insisted that the attacks were militarily insignificant, often expressing thinly veiled impatience whenever the latest incident became a topic at news briefings. But the deaths began to have important policy repercussions. By late August, following a two-week span during which 10 U.S. service members died in ‘insider’ attacks, the problem was considered sufficiently acute that Gen. Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, made an unusual visit to Kabul, specifically to talk with commanders about how to stem the bloodshed.<sup>40</sup>

Compounding reporters’ difficulty in getting military spokesmen to address the full ramifications of ‘insider’ attacks, the Taliban movement - which had long displayed an aptitude for media savvy – began to capitalize on these incidents, recognizing their extraordinary propaganda value. On Twitter, in texts to journalists, and on its Web site, the movement routinely hailed each such shooting. It made videos depicting triumphal celebrations greeting shooters who managed to escape.<sup>41</sup> Unsurprisingly, American military officials found these gleeful displays galling, and it was not uncommon for conversations with military spokesmen about insider attacks to deteriorate into reporters being labeled Taliban dupes for ascribing any significance to them. “The mujahideen...have managed to create mistrust among the enemy forces,” Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid told journalists in September 2012, employing typically triumphal rhetoric in commentary about the attacks. “God willing, this is the start of their overall defeat in Afghanistan.”<sup>42</sup>

Initially, the insurgents would claim direct responsibility for nearly all ‘insider’ shootings, but eventually they stopped doing that, and merely offered praise for them. “If our brothers act on our behalf, even without being asked to do so by us, that is enough,” a Taliban commander told the LA Times in July 2012.<sup>43</sup> Appearing flummoxed by the Taliban shift in tactics, military officials began offering up contradictory estimates of how many attacks

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<sup>39</sup> “Details Emerge on Panjwai Base Where Bales Served, *New York Times*, March 28, 2012

<sup>40</sup> “Dempsey in Kabul for Talks on Insider Attacks,” *Pajhwok Afghan News*, Aug. 20, 2012

<sup>41</sup> “Mullah Omar Addresses Green-on-Blue Attacks,” *Long War Journal*, Aug. 16, 2012

<sup>42</sup> *ibid*

<sup>43</sup> Interview with *Los Angeles Times*, July 14, 2012

were directly Taliban-ordered, initially declaring that only a tiny fraction of the attacks came at the insurgents' behest, then saying up to one-quarter of them were Taliban-inspired.<sup>44</sup>

Somewhat belatedly, too, the notion that cultural sensitivities could play a role in the 'insider' attacks began to be raised not only by journalists, but by the military. News accounts quoted rogue Afghan soldiers who described simply becoming enraged by a perceived insult or show of disrespect and deciding on the spot to shoot foreign troops. NATO and Afghan troops were eventually issued handbooks of basic cultural 'do's and don't's' to help the two sides better understand one another – but the step came months into the intense spate of attacks.<sup>45</sup>

At one news briefing, after an ISAF spokesman scoffed at the suggestion that the insurgents could possibly be seeding the ranks of the police and army with enough turncoats to carry out each and every shooting, an American radio reporter asked: "So, if the Taliban aren't specifically orchestrating these attacks ... and if what we're seeing means that Afghan police and soldiers are just spontaneously assigning themselves suicide missions to kill Western troops – well, how is that *better*?" There was a long pause, and the spokesman said: "I'm going to have to come back to you on that one."<sup>46</sup>

### iii. To the barricades

Throughout 2012, as the tempo of 'insider' killings accelerated, Western commanders instituted an escalating series of precautions, few of them publicized until reporters learned of them and made official inquiries to the military. Those included such steps as a general order in August that all NATO soldiers begin carrying loaded weapons on base, even in secure locales such as ISAF headquarters in Kabul – anywhere they would interact with Afghan allies. Also in this time frame came the designation of 'guardian angels' – soldiers whose sole duty it was to guard against 'insider' attacks while their compatriots ate, slept, bathed or exercised. After an order in mid-September to drastically reduce routine activities such as joint patrols, bases where NATO and Afghan troops served began to be physically divided into distinct areas – a far cry from the previous and deliberate practice of 24-hour togetherness. One such encampment, Forward Operating Base Frontenac in Kandahar province, was characterized early in 2013 by the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* as essentially segregated between Afghan and U.S. troops. The reporter described a heavily fortified entry

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<sup>44</sup> "Taliban Behind a Quarter of Afghan Insider Attacks: General," *Reuters*, Aug. 23, 2012

<sup>45</sup> "Afghans create 'Western Culture' Manual to Help Counter Insider Attacks," *Stars and Stripes*, Sept. 6, 2012

<sup>46</sup> Exchange at ISAF news briefing, Kabul, Aug. 25, 2012

control point between the two sides of the base that was referred to by the American soldiers as the “Wizard of Oz” door, through which almost no one was allowed to pass.<sup>47</sup> (In my own experience, this was by year’s end a typical arrangement at jointly run outposts.)

Even with the precautions that were in place at this time (and which were credited with a sharp drop off in fatal attacks by the beginning of 2013), troops and commanders alike remained wary around Afghan counterparts. Maj. Gen. Charles “Mark” Gurganus, commanding the U.S. Marine contingent in Helmand province, used franker language in February 2013 than would have been conceivable a year earlier, telling a reporter: “I don’t think that is a threat that ever goes away.”<sup>48</sup>

Soon before I left Afghanistan, in the fall of 2012, I asked a member of the Ohio National Guard (a U.S. force made up mainly of reservists, whose members leave behind workaday jobs such as sales or teaching in order to serve tours of combat duty) if he and fellow soldiers – together with their friends and families, prior to his deployment - had discussed the danger posed by insider attacks.

“You’re joking, right?” he said. “It’s *all* we talk about.”

#### **iv. Three news outlets: charting the military’s evolving stance**

For purposes of content analysis, I chose three major U.S. news organizations with full-time bureaus in Kabul: the Associated Press, CNN and the *Washington Post*, and compared clusters of stories surrounding two ‘insider’ attacks, one in February 2012, and one in August, so as to compare the military’s stated views not only with those voiced by journalists, but to track how the military’s own characterizations changed over time. Early in the year, the significance of such attacks was consistently played down by ISAF spokespeople, with insistence that the shootings were having no impact on the training mission – even as the correspondents consistently raised the issue of the attacks’ implications on troop morale, public opinion at home and the ultimate feasibility of using foreign forces to conduct hands-on training of Afghan police and soldiers. As the year progressed and senior American policymakers and commanders began describing ‘insider’ attacks as a significant threat, that view filtered down through the ranks to the military PAOs in Kabul – although well into the autumn, they remained resistant to publicly

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<sup>47</sup> “A Divided Base Threatens a United Effort to Secure Afghanistan,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Feb. 10, 2013

<sup>48</sup> “Allied Troops in Afghanistan See Fewer Insider Attacks,” *USA TODAY*, Feb. 24, 2013



acknowledging concrete steps that had been taken to prevent the problem from growing worse, and bristling at any suggestion that the training mission had gone awry.

For purposes of content analysis (see Appendix, Part Two), I chose three major U.S. news organizations with full-time bureaus in Kabul: the Associated Press, CNN and the *Washington Post*, and examined clusters of their stories surrounding two 'insider' attacks, one relatively early in 2012 (February-March), and the other in the year's second half (August-September). The time periods covered by the analysis were chosen in order to compare the military's views not only with those voiced in contemporaneous news accounts, but also to track how the military's own characterizations changed over time.

Early in the year, the analysis shows, the significance of such attacks was consistently played down by ISAF spokespeople, with insistence that the shootings were having no impact on the training mission – even as the correspondents consistently raised the issue of the attacks' widening implications for troop morale, public opinion at home and the ultimate feasibility of using foreign forces to conduct hands-on training of Afghan police and soldiers.

In the first set of news stories examined, I used three separate categories to 'grade' the degree of divergence – small, medium, medium-high and high - between the military's publicly stated position and the depiction in the respective organizations' news stories. Under this method, AP ranked medium, CNN medium-high and the *Washington Post* high. In the first batch of stories, AP (perhaps reflecting a tradition of studious neutrality in its reporting) used language that tended not to explicitly challenge the military's characterization of the attacks as a blip in the scene of daily military activity, yet embarked on what would become standard practice among most news organizations – that of expressing coalition deaths due to insider assaults as a percentage of the overall NATO fatality toll (it would remain in double digits for the year's entirety). During that same time frame, CNN was accusing the military of employing euphemism in describing the attacks. And the *Washington Post* was explicitly linking insider assaults to growing doubts about the feasibility of the mission to train Afghan forces.

As the year progressed and senior American policymakers and commanders began describing 'insider' attacks as a significant threat, that view filtered down through the ranks to the military PAOs in Kabul – although well into the autumn, they remained resistant to publicly acknowledging concrete steps that had been taken to prevent the problem from growing worse, and bristling at any suggestion that the training mission had gone awry. The content analysis suggests that the clash between media reports and military statements diminished as the year went on and the number of such attacks mounted.

By the time frame of August-September, the degree of divergence between the military and the media in describing the seriousness of the attacks measured 'low' for all three news outlets in question. In mid-September, AP (echoing what had by then become standard language in its reports on 'insider' attacks), referred to "fracturing trust between Afghan forces and their international partners." CNN, for its part, uncovered the case of a U.S. Marine who had told family members before his shooting death that he believed he would be attacked by a member of the Afghan security forces. And the *Post* declared that the attacks and their growing frequency "touched the core of the U.S.-led war's problems." By now, however, senior officials, too, were voicing open alarm.

In mid-2012, ISAF was still employing its standard argument that in both numerical and military terms, the attacks were not significant. In the late summer, however, senior figures like U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta began speaking far more candidly of the attacks, calling them a cause for serious concern. By September, Allen, the ISAF commander, was employing his starkest language to date regarding the attacks, telling the CBS newsmagazine *60 Minutes* in September: "I'm mad as hell about them...We're willing to sacrifice a lot for this campaign, but we're not willing to be murdered for it."<sup>49</sup>

Even prior to Allen's declaration, Western diplomats and their respective governments had long been worried by the 'insider' phenomenon, according to Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, the former British Ambassador in Kabul. "From what I observed...there was a great deal of variance between private conversation and public characterization," he said.<sup>50</sup> Financial concerns mounted about the \$33 billion effort to build the Afghan military and police over the past decade, with NATO allies increasingly balking at American urging to remain committed to an Afghan force that would cost at least \$4 billion annually to maintain. And participation in the training mission – which, early in the war, was regarded by nations such as Germany and Italy as more palatable than taking part in active combat – was becoming a task that fewer and fewer troop-contributing countries were willing to accept.<sup>51</sup> Insider attacks and their consequences, then, had become a wedge within the alliance. But after many months of resistance, the American military establishment, together with civilian counterparts, had finally concluded that the phenomenon had simply become too visible to ignore or minimize.

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<sup>49</sup> "Gen. Allen: 'Mad as hell' over insider attacks," *60 Minutes*, CBS News, Sept. 28, 2012

<sup>50</sup> Telephone interview with Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, Nov. 14, 2012

<sup>51</sup> "NATO Training Mission for Afghanistan Behind Schedule," *Spiegel* (English site), Feb. 22, 2013

## Chapter 4 CONCLUSIONS: COLLECTIVE AMNESIA, OR LESSONS LEARNED?

### i. War's-end narratives and the cultural consciousness

The conclusion of any armed conflict is a story a nation tells to both itself and the larger world, and each of these narratives in turn shapes future ones. For Americans, Vietnam loomed large long afterward: "Words such as... 'quagmire' or 'Vietnam syndrome' have become instant shorthand for the popular image of the United States getting trapped in another long, costly and unwinnable war," wrote Marvin Kalb, a preeminent television correspondent of that era.<sup>52</sup> Although the Afghanistan endgame is still in progress, many key players are already looking back with regret. Stanley McChrystal, the commanding general in Afghanistan who was fired in 2010 by President Obama, suggests that the vague but overarching goal of remaking Afghan society had in all likelihood been unattainable all along. "We raised expectations for 15 million Afghan females that they might have a different future," he told the *New York Times* in an unusually candid interview following his return to civilian life. "We raised expectations of Afghan children that they'd be able to go to school... They may have been unrealistic expectations, but we raised them."<sup>53</sup> Even the existence of a commonly accepted war's-end narrative, however, does not guarantee that greater wisdom will spill over into decision-making surrounding the next conflict. "Lessons from previous wars can serve as cognitive blinders, narrowing the way officials think about situations they face, and power can be a trap, underwriting hubris and folly," writes Gideon Rose, a classical scholar turned foreign policy analyst. "But lessons can also guide and power can create opportunities."<sup>54</sup>

### ii. Greater scepticism, or business as usual?

In Vietnam and Afghanistan, the dynamic between the military and the media was in many ways similar. Generals wanted the conflict's course depicted in a certain way, and grew frustrated when it was not. Reporters sought access to the fighting with fewer strings attached, and disdained battlefield assessments by the military that were carefully tailored to present an optimistic scenario of the achievability of war aims. Neither side was satisfied with the other's performance.

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<sup>52</sup> Kalb, Marvin and Kalb, Deborah, *Haunting Legacy: Vietnam and the American Presidency from Ford to Obama*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington DC, 2011

<sup>53</sup> "Q. and A. With Gen. Stanley McChrystal, *New York Times*, Jan. 8, 2013

<sup>54</sup> Rose, Gideon, *How Wars End: Why We Always Fight The Last Battle*, Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, New York, 2010

Both carried out their tasks imperfectly, and each formed lasting impressions based on what were sometimes fundamental misperceptions. In the case of Tet, my content analysis suggests that at least in the early days of the offensive, media coverage was not nearly as negative as military recollection tends to hold (and, as noted in Chapter 3, I do agree with Stanley Karnow's assessment that the coverage, whatever its quality, was not all that important in driving broad sentiment about the war.) Nonetheless, a powerful impression remained. "The military, toward the end of the war and later, blamed the media in Vietnam for helping to change American public opinion in the States, increasing opposition to the war," Alvin Shuster, the former *New York Times* bureau chief in Saigon, told me. "The kind of thing we saw in Vietnam, the military cooperating with the press, flying them here and there, etc., evolved into an intense distrust of the press as evident in the way the military dealt with the media in subsequent conflicts. You've seen that for yourself."<sup>55</sup>

Overall, I think the news coverage in Afghanistan largely reflected an appropriate degree of scepticism about the war's course beginning in about 2006 (though the correspondent ranks had been seriously thinned in previous years by the Iraq war.) But in the case of the 'insider' attacks of 2012, journalists in Kabul, including me, perhaps did not perceive the full extent to which the military leadership calibrated its position over a period of months in response to unfolding events – both in terms of measures they chose to take in the field and in their public statements about the phenomenon. I am also not sure that media coverage alone accounted for the way in which (as documented in my content analysis), the military's viewpoint shifted to something remarkably close to reporters' initial interpretation, when the 'insider' deaths first spiked, that they were indicative of a serious dysfunction that held wide implications for the Western strategy for getting out of Afghanistan. I suspect that what ultimately might have been more important was the way in which each such shooting instantly became known to and discussed by troops in the field - and lit up blogs and websites maintained and visited by military families, making them hyper-aware of the phenomenon. A retired lieutenant general, David Barno, put his finger on the prevailing sentiment in an essay earlier this year in the influential journal *Foreign Policy*. "If popular tolerance for battlefield deaths was tenuous," he wrote, "there is near zero patience with attacks from the very Afghan forces the allies have been working with over the last 11 years."<sup>56</sup>

### iii. 'Hearts and minds'

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<sup>55</sup> Telephone interview with Alvin Shuster, Feb. 16, 2013

<sup>56</sup> "A Zero Option for Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, Jan. 7, 2013

What can help war correspondents perceive complicated wartime events more clearly? I believe the most important step would be diminished dependence on the military. ‘Unilateral’ coverage – that which is not tied to reporters travelling with military units – is, as previously noted, difficult, dangerous and expensive. ‘Embeds’ – occasionally and judiciously undertaken – will probably remain a necessary but limited part of the reporting mix. But unless the preponderance of news coverage arises from sustained and meaningful contacts with the local population, yielding at least a modicum of cultural understanding, we are always going to get the story wrong. (That goes for the military as well; McChrystal, in his uncharacteristically candid post-deployment assessment of the war effort to the *New York Times*, was asked what should have been done differently. “People ask me... and I say, ‘On Sept. 12, 2001, we should have sent 10,000 people to language school,’” he said.)<sup>57</sup>

In the case of the ‘insider’ attacks, a greater grasp of the deep cultural divide as an impetus for the attacks could have benefited both journalists and generals – and indeed, the military had brushed aside an internally commissioned 2011 report, subsequently classified, which warned of more attacks, argued that those occurring did not represent “rare and isolated events,” and called for urgent cultural training of both U.S. and Afghan troops to counter the growing threat.<sup>58</sup>

Many Afghans, even those who supported the war’s fundamental aims, say many of the ‘insider’ attacks could have been pre-empted. “Greater respect for local culture and improved treatment of Afghan forces would categorically minimize the odds of Afghan forces becoming willing to kill their U.S. and NATO partners,” Javed Hamdard, a Kabul native and former journalist who now works for the German Marshall Fund, a Washington-based policy institute, wrote in an op-ed published in the *Washington Post*.<sup>59</sup>

In Vietnam, the Tet offensive was preceded by a two-year American campaign in the Vietnamese countryside – a ‘soft-persuasion’ program incorporating inspirational slogans and wistful folk songs, which was meant to win over villagers and get them to resist the presence of North Vietnamese fighters. It came to be viewed as a resounding failure, and the military’s descriptive catchphrase of the time - ‘hearts and minds’ - remains closely associated, for the U.S. public, with catastrophic miscalculation.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> “Q. and A. With Gen. Stanley McChrystal, *New York Times*, Jan. 8, 2013

<sup>58</sup> “A Crisis of Trust and Cultural Incompatibility,” *N2KL Red Team Study*, Department of Defense, May 12, 2011

<sup>59</sup> “Cultural Gaps, Deadly Consequences,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 12, 2012

<sup>60</sup> “Winning Hearts and Minds in Vietnam,” commentary by Martin Bell on compilation of U.S.-produced tapes recorded in Saigon in the 1960s, *BBC News*, Oct. 30, 2008

Not long before I left Afghanistan, I had a long and thoughtful discussion with a U.S. Army colonel who was somewhat unusual in his habit of soliciting reporters' impressions after they'd spent time in the field. I was just back from a restive district in Kandahar province, where villagers, speaking to me and my Afghan interpreter, had voiced fury over what they described as expensive Western aid projects that had failed to improve their lives, and spoke of how their fear of the insurgents was far outweighed by having U.S. troops in close proximity to their homes, constantly drawing attacks. The colonel, who had recently visited the same district in the company of the provincial governor, protected by a heavily armed convoy, posited that the Americans were winning 'hearts and minds' in Kandahar. I must have looked startled, because he stopped and asked me if I agreed. "No, not from what I heard when I was there," I told him. "And... I'm a little surprised to hear you use that phrase - you know, the one that's from Vietnam."

He leaned back in his chair. "That's right, it is," he said. "I forgot."

## APPENDIX

### CONTENT ANALYSIS, PART ONE: COVERAGE OF TET OFFENSIVE

*NEW YORK TIMES*: Overall score 13 positive, 12 negative

1. Mohr, Charles, *New York Times*, Jan. 31, 1968: "U.S. Aide in Embassy Villa Kills Guerrilla With Pistol"  
Score: 5 positive, 4 negative

#### POSITIVE:

- First four paragraphs devoted to embassy aide George Jacobson's shooting of an armed North Vietnamese attacker.
- Interview with 20-year-old Army private Paul Healy about his role in leading a rescue assault, with a sympathetic description of him afterward ("His grim face was twitching with emotion...a major gently put his arm around the youth's shoulders.")
- Quotes Jacobson describing the "raw courage" of Marines and military police who fought off the attackers.
- American death toll not mentioned until fifth paragraph.
- Characterized as "Vietcong terrorist" attack.

#### NEGATIVE:

- Describes "wild" night of fighting during which attackers "overran and then held" part of the embassy grounds (the military emphasized the raiders' inability to penetrate the main building).
- Fighting elsewhere in Saigon described
- Graphic description of aftermath: "...two young American soldiers lay dead, one of them shot in the face by a machine gun."
- Vietnamese civilian "riddled by American machine-gun fire...when he failed to stop" after a U.S. command to halt.

2. Buckley, Tom, *New York Times*, Feb. 2., 1968: "Offensive Is Said to Pinpoint Enemy's Strengths"  
Score: 3 positive, 5 negative

#### POSITIVE:

- Leads with a general poring over Viet Cong casualty tolls of 700 per day and remarking: "They can't stand many more days like that."
- Military police defending the embassy "performed well."
- US military official quoted as describing the embassy attack as "obviously just a propaganda thing."

#### NEGATIVE:

- Describing the offensive: "In almost every case, attackers appeared to have reached the centers of the cities and to have remained there, repulsing American and South Vietnamese troops for hours or days."
- Overview: "Despite official statistics to the contrary, no part of the country is secure either from terrorist bombs or from organized military operations."
- Prognosis: "Many people in scores of cities and towns are less certain now than they were two days ago that the allies are winning the war."
- Viet Cong have "highly efficient communications, leadership and coordination" while South Vietnamese paratroops "seemed slow to react."
- Attack was "attempt at humiliation" and "succeeded" in inflicting that.

3. Roberts, Gene, *New York Times*, Feb. 5, 1968: "US Marines in Hue Drive Wedge into Enemy Units"  
Score: 5 positive, 3 negative

POSITIVE:

- Leads with American tactical gains, including the securing of a municipal airstrip
- 2<sup>nd</sup>-graf quote from Marines commander S.S. Hughes saying "We are making progress" and a captain saying "It is looking good."
- North Vietnamese losses described as heavy.
- Army private quoted as saying of arriving reinforcements: "Man, were those Marines a sight for sore eyes."
- Photo showing Marine carrying wounded child.
- Wounded Marine jokes to stretcher-bearers: "Don't you bastards drop me."

NEGATIVE:

- "The South Vietnamese Army describes its own casualties as light, but this does not seem likely...Everyone here is suffering casualties."
- "The battle for the city could be a long one. Almost every house must be taken individually."
- "Death and destruction widespread in the city."
- 25 Marines wounded in one small sector alone.

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CBS News: Overall score 5 positive, 6 negative

1. Robert Schakne, CBS News, Jan. 31, 1968, reporting on attack on U.S. Embassy  
Score 3 positive, 0 negative

POSITIVE:

- Interview with George Jacobson, embassy mission coordinator and retired colonel, about fighting off an attacker inside his villa, shooting him dead with a pistol.



-Clip of Gen. Westmoreland, asked how he assessed the attack, saying that the Viet Cong “very deceitfully...took advantage of the truce.”

-Attack failed: “Their purpose was apparently to destroy the embassy, and in that they did not succeed... None of the invaders lived to tell of their exploit.”

NEGATIVE:

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2. Don Webster, CBS News, Feb. 1, 1968, reporting on siege of radio station captured by North Vietnamese fighters

Score 1 positive, 1 negative

POSITIVE:

-Emphasis on the attackers’ inability to broadcast their message as intended

NEGATIVE:

-South Vietnamese troops “unceremoniously” dragging bodies of enemy dead.

3. George Severson, CBS News, Feb. 5, 1968, reporting from in a slum in Saigon’s Cholon district

Score 0 positive, 4 negative

POSITIVE:

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NEGATIVE:

-“This was the first time heavy fighting has taken place in Saigon proper.

-“The VC were difficult to dislodge. They obviously knew the section well and had built barricades in key spots.”

-Civilian casualties: “Hardly a day has passed in this war without the death or wounding of innocent civilians.”

-Military officer at the scene acknowledging difficulty of urban combat: “You can’t find ‘em around here...in the field you can call in airstrikes or something.”

4. John Laurence, CBS News, Feb. 10, 1968, covering fighting in Hue

Score 1 positive, 1 negative

POSITIVE:

-Colonel commanding U.S. forces expresses optimism that the Viet Cong can be dislodged

NEGATIVE:

-Description of bloody house-to-house fighting

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TIME: Overall score 12 positive, 15 negative

1. "The General's Gamble," TIME, Feb. 9, 1968, Vol. 91, No. 6  
Score: 5 positive, 8 negative

POSITIVE:

- Incorporates Gen. Westmoreland's view that the urban attacks are a "diversion" meant to draw attention and resources away from U.S. Marine base at Khe Sanh.
- North Vietnamese death toll represents "huge bloodletting of the enemy's forces."
- North Vietnamese tactics of striking on a holiday in heavily populated civilian areas alienated South Vietnamese.
- Westmoreland calls truce-breaking "deceitful."
- Attacks followed "nearly three years of steady allied progress."

NEGATIVE:

- Offensive was "an extraordinary tour de force, unprecedented in modern military annals."
- Element of surprise: "the spectacle of an enemy force...suddenly materializing to strike simultaneously in a hundred places throughout the country."
- 1968 viewed as "grimly inauspicious year" in the lunar cycle.
- With "fierceness and bloody destructiveness that Vietnam has not seen even in three decades of continuous warfare....some psychological success could hardly be denied the attackers."
- Doubt expressed over U.S. estimates of North Korean combatant fatalities.
- For Viet Cong, holding out in Saigon for five days was "victory of sorts."
- Aide to Westmoreland calls offensive "surprisingly well coordinated, surprisingly intensive and launched with a surprising amount of audacity."
- "Communist commandos can...strike at will virtually everywhere in the country."

2. "Picking up the Pieces," TIME, Feb. 16, 1968, Vol. 91, No. 7  
Score: 4 positive, 5 negative

POSITIVE:

- Stated that unless the Marine base at Khe Sanh fell, the “full significance” of the offensive would not be clear.
- Offensive failed to spark popular pro-Communist uprising among South Vietnamese.
- In Hue, South Vietnamese troops fought “bravely and well.”
- Viet Cong atrocities in Hue, use of human shields.

NEGATIVE:

- Northern forces “undeniably succeeded in devastating a large part of Vietnam.”
- Ascribed “considerable inflation” to U.S. military’s estimated Viet Cong death toll.
- “Whatever the harsh military facts of the campaign’s outcome, the attacks enhanced the mystique of the Viet Cong as a stealthy, dedicated foe, unmindful of death.”
- Attacks “took the initiative away from the allies and, temporarily at least, reversed the image of allied momentum in the war.”
- Saigon a city “rimmed by fear.”

3. “Khe Sanh: Ready to Fight,” and “Bunker’s Bunker” (both short sidebars), TIME, Feb. 16, 1968, Vol. 91, No. 7  
Score: 3 positive, 2 negative

POSITIVE:

- Marines at Khe Sanh “taking their ordeal with considerable composure. Only their unwelcome bunkermates – the rats – become frantic under fire.
- Base commander Col. David Lownds described as a man who “seldom rests, night or day.” Replies “Hell, no” when asked if worried about enemy forces massed around the base.
- Heroic actions of embassy defenders described.

NEGATIVE:

- “Bunker’s Bunker” is mocking reference to the U.S. Ambassador, Ellsworth Bunker” having overseen embassy fortifications, which proved inadequate.
- Points out that Khe Sanh could not be defended without heavy use of US airpower.

## CONTENT ANALYSIS, PART TWO: COVERAGE OF 'INSIDER' ATTACKS

### 1. March 2012

Divergence between military view and media outlets: AP, medium; CNN medium-high; *Washington Post* high.

Stated military position:

-“It’s very tragic and very upsetting when these things happen, but they are a tiny, tiny, tiny fraction of the percentage of the overall interactions that are happening” \_ Michele Flournoy, shortly after stepping down in February 2012 as Pentagon’s undersecretary of defense for policy to join the Obama re-election campaign.

-“We must not forget that we have almost 500,000 soldiers and police who work together, as we speak right now, actually, in order to crush the insurgency and fight for more stability and security here in this country.” – Chief ISAF spokesman Brig. Gen. Gunter Katz, to reporters in Kabul, March 26, 2012

Contemporaneous news stories:

-AP, “Afghan Security Forces Kill Three More NATO troops,” March 26, 2012:

“Afghan security forces shot and killed three international troops Monday, one of them an American, in two attacks. They were the latest in a rising number of attacks in which Afghan forces have turned their weapons on their foreign partners. ...The killings reflect a spike in tensions between Afghan and international forces...as foreign troops prepare to pull out.”

“Sixteen NATO service members – 18 percent of the foreign troops killed so far this year – have been shot and killed by Afghan soldiers and policemen...”

-CNN, “Third NATO Service Member Killed in ‘Green-on-Blue’ Attack,” March 26, 2012:

“A man alleged to be a local Afghan policeman killed an American service member in eastern Afghanistan on Monday, while two British troops were shot and killed by an Afghan soldier in the southern province of Helmand...To date, 16 {NATO service members} have been killed in what are euphemistically called ‘green on blue’ attacks, meaning Afghan

troops who have turned their weapons on allied forces....The incidents have fuelled mutual mistrust at a critical juncture of the long-running conflict.”

-*Washington Post*, “U.S. Seeks More Money For Afghan Force,” March 27, 2012:

“The request for indefinite commitments {for funding the Afghan army and police} comes as the United States and its partners in Afghanistan are under pressure to cut costs and end an increasingly unpopular war. The administration hopes to secure the pledges before a NATO summit in Chicago in May. So far, however, there have been no specific replies to funding appeals...”

“...as the Obama administration seeks more support for the force that is its ticket to exit the war, it has begun a steady drumbeat of praise for the Afghans’ improvements and achievements. But that effort has been undercut in recent weeks by a spate of attacks in which 16 NATO service members, including nine Americans, have been killed by Afghan troops or police officers.”

## 2. September 2012

Divergence between military view and media outlets: AP low; CNN low; *Washington Post* low.

Stated military position:

-“You can’t whitewash it. We can’t convince ourselves that we just have to work harder to get through it. Something has to change...We have got to get on top of this. It is a very serious threat to the campaign.” - U.S. Army Gen. Martin Dempsey, to American Forces Press Service, Sept. 16, 2012

-“Well, I’m mad as hell about them {‘insider’ attacks}, to be honest with you...It reverberates everywhere across the United States. You know, we’re willing to sacrifice a lot for this campaign. But we’re not willing to be murdered for it.” – Gen. John Allen, then commander of ISAF troops in Afghanistan, interviews on CBS’ *60 Minutes*, Sept. 30, 2012

Contemporaneous news stories:

-AP, "Two More Killed in Insider Attack," Sept. 15, 2012

"A gunman in an Afghan police uniform killed two British soldiers in southern Afghanistan on Saturday...They were the latest deaths in a surge of insider attacks that are fracturing trust between Afghan forces and their international partners."

-CNN, "Slain Marine Sensed Insider Attack Was Coming," Sept. 17, 2012

"Deployed to a volatile outpost in southern Afghanistan...Greg Buckley Jr. sensed that an attack was imminent. And he knew that it would come from within. The 21-year-old Marine was posted to Garmsir in Helmand province, where he was training local security forces...It was during a static-filled phone call to his father that {Buckley} mentioned a run-in he had had with an Afghan trainee...The gunman involved in {Buckley's} death attacked from inside his outpost and killed two other Marines. {Buckley Sr.} said his son had informed superiors that "one day they are going to turn around and use those weapons on us...The killings have prompted suspensions of training of new recruits while eroding the trust between NATO and its Afghan allies."

-*Washington Post*, "4 Troops Killed in Southern Afghanistan Insider Attack," Sept. 16, 2012

"Four U.S. troops were killed Sunday at a remote checkpoint in southern Afghanistan when a member of the Afghan security forces opened fire on them, military officials said. The attack brought to 51 the number of international troops shot dead by their Afghan partners this year...."

..."The weekend's events touched the core of the U.S.-led war's problems. The escalating insider attacks...deepen mistrust and alienate NATO forces from the people they are supposed to be protecting, undermining an already fragile partnership."

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Analogical comparisons between the American experience in Vietnam and in Afghanistan are rife in the media, but it remains unclear how effective analogical reasoning is in understanding the. Does it mean that U.S. military leadership today is fighting the wrong war like General William Westmoreland did in Vietnam? Does it mean that U.S. soldiers today are drugged out of their minds and fragging officers as they did in Vietnam?