

The General Offensive, General Uprising:
How the Tet Offensive Turned the Tide of the Vietnam War

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January 30, 1968. It was the Vietnamese equivalent of New Year's Eve in the United States. The beginning of the lunar new year festivities known in Vietnam as Tet. Three years into the Vietnam War, the two sides of Vietnam - the Communist North and anti-Communist South - were as separated as ever. Taking advantage of the annual cease-fire -- in anticipation of the week-long celebrations associated with Tet -- citizens from all across South Vietnam streamed into its large cities, bringing with them carts full of food and fireworks to celebrate their new year. At the same time, many funeral processions were held for war victims, containing in its midst the traditional firecrackers, flutes, and coffins.¹

Some of those villagers, however, who had cascaded upon those cities so vehemently throughout the course of the day, were instead Vietnamese communist agents, known as the Viet Cong. Those carts, brought in by vendors across South Vietnam, were full, not of food and fireworks, but of deadly weapons, and those coffins, carried in by the many funeral processions held throughout the day, contained both bodies -- and automatic machine guns. That night, around 2 A.M., the crackle of celebratory fireworks gave way to the incessant pounding of machine guns in over a 100 towns and cities across South Vietnam, taking both its inhabitants and its defenders, including its allies in America, by surprise.²

These nearly simultaneous attacks marked the beginning of the Tet Offensive, known by the Vietnamese as the "General Offensive: General Uprising,"³ an attempt by the North Vietnamese Communists and the Vietcong to gain control of South Vietnam. The Tet Offensive

¹ Hallin, Daniel C. "The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam" *University of California Press*, 14 April 1989

² Arnett, Peter. "What Happened in the Tet Offensives' First 36 Hours." *The Associated Press*, 31 January 2018. www.militarytimes.com/news/2018/01/31/what-happened-in-the-tet-offensives-first-36-hours/

³ Guan, Ang Cheng. "Decision-Making Leading to the Tet Offensive (1968) - The Vietnamese Communist Perspective." *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 33, no. 3, 1998, pp. 341-353.

was one of the largest military campaigns of the Vietnam War, lasting over a month with two more offenses occurring over the next 18 months, and is seen by many as the last attempts by Communist opponents to break the stalemate imminent during this period of the Vietnam War.

Although the initial attacks stunned both the U.S and South Vietnamese armies, causing them to lose control of several cities temporarily, they were able to regroup very quickly, gaining a decisive victory over the North Vietnamese and Vietcong armies. However, despite the Tet Offensive being a militaristic and tactical triumph for South Vietnam, and its principal ally, the United States, it was inversely an enormous political and psychological defeat, primarily on the American people and their men in service, as it convinced to them, regardless of the seemingly overwhelming success of the Tet Offensive, that the war in Vietnam was neither under control nor close to over.

History of the Vietnam War

Following the conclusion of the First Indochina War in 1954, with France forced to surrender despite massive United States economic aid, a treaty was signed at a Geneva Conference in July of 1954, splitting the country of Vietnam along the 17th parallel, with Ho Chi Minh, a Communist revolutionary leader, in control of the North, and Ngo Dinh Diem, an anti-communist nationalist, in control of the South.⁴ Due to the corrupt and oppressive government created in the South, a communist opposition group, deemed the Vietcong, rose in prominence in areas of South Vietnam. By 1957, they had begun attacks on the Diem government, and, with the support and supply of arms by Ho Chi Minh in North Vietnam, South Vietnam began to become more unstable.

⁴ Llewellyn, Jennifer, Jim Southey, and Steve Thompson. "The First Indochina War." *Alpha History*, 2018. alphahistory.com/vietnamwar/first-indochina-war/

It is seen by many that the Vietnam War began on November 1, 1963, when Diem, his popularity plummeting in recent years due to ongoing corruption, was assassinated. The ensuing political instability as well as the ever-growing communist influence in South Vietnam lead the United States government to increase their military and economic support, reaching a breaking point when in March 1965, U.S. combat forces were sent to Vietnam.

In the following years, the United States became more and more directly involved in the Vietnam conflicts, however, although the American military was more technologically advanced and larger in number, the North Vietnamese and Vietcong had the “home advantage,” able to use their knowledge of the jungles, as well as their unique guerilla tactics to sustain American attacks. As a result, a stalemate became ever increasingly close to fruition. In May of 1967, a proposal was made to the Communist leaders of the North by the Political Commissar and Commander-in-Chief of the communist forces in the South, General Nguyen Chi Thanh, of a General Offensive meant to “destroy and expel”⁵ the American and South Vietnamese armies, winning the war in a short-time. Over the next 6 months, planning was conducted in secret for the eventual Offensive, with preparation and mobilization of forces occurring as well, eventually being carried out in January through February of 1968.

The Triumphs of the Battlefield

In a 48-hour period starting on January 30, 1968, “Communist forces launched military attacks on five of South Vietnam’s six major cities, on 36 of its 44 provincial capitals, on at least 64 district capitals, and on more than 50 villages.”⁶ Fought across the length and breadth of

⁵ Guan, Ang Cheng. “Decision-Making Leading to the Tet Offensive (1968) - The Vietnamese Communist Perspective.” *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 33, no. 3, 1998, pp. 341–353. *JSTOR*,

⁶ Falk, Richard. “Appropriating Tet.” *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 29, no. 3, 1988, pp. 391–420. *JSTOR*

South Vietnam, the attacks were at first overwhelming for the American and South Vietnamese armies⁷, but the vicious offensive was quickly beat back, allowing the Communist aggressors to hold territory for no more than one to two days, acquiring no land despite heavy casualties.

It is not known exactly how many losses were attained during this short but brutal month of fighting, but western experts accept these figures for the period: 3895 U.S. soldiers were killed, plus 214 Australian, New Zealand, South Korean, and Thais, and 4954 Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). On the opposing side, 58,373 forces of the NLF/DRV (Democratic of Vietnam) were killed. In addition, at least 14,300 Vietnamese civilians were killed.⁸ It is reasonable to view the almost 4,000 American casualties as a tragedy, as it very well is, however, militaristically, “the attacking side suffered seven times as many fatalities, including a large proportion of its overall strength and many of its most experienced cadres.”⁹ **(Over 58,000 casualties in a month, despite our losses, the other side lost more)**

Overall, the Tet Offensive was a clear American and South Vietnamese victory, the golden opportunity to gain a decisive advantage in the war, as their Communist opponents lost a majority of its army and strength as well as any of the territory they had captured in the first two days of the offensive, however this opportunity never materialized due to the wavering of American public support for the war, made exponentially worse after the news of the Tet Offensive reached the United States.

The Media and Public Opinion

⁷ Wilkins, Warren. “Myth-Busting the Tet Offensive.” *Vietnam*, vol. 30, no. 5, Feb. 2018, pp. 56–58. *EBSCOhost*

⁸ Falk, Richard. “Appropriating Tet.” *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 29, no. 3, 1988, pp. 391–420. *JSTOR*

⁹ Falk, Richard. “Appropriating Tet.” *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 29, no. 3, 1988, pp. 391–420. *JSTOR*

Journalism, television, and all other forms of visual and written media are undeniably linked to war, and have been ever since the former's invention. In the United States, whether it is used as a truthful informative method or as the more common and effective propaganda technique, the practice of informing the public is well established and used often. In the case of the Vietnam War, all forms of visual and written media were pushed into their prime, as citizens began to depend on them in order to become informed on the happenings of the Vietnam War.

Prior to the Tet Offensive in 1968, both the government and military released statements regarding the Vietnam War and its progress towards victory, all remaining falsely optimistic. One of the most prominent of these statements was on November 21, 1947, when General William Westmoreland addressed the National Press Club, saying in so many words that the war would soon be over, a victory for the Americans.¹⁰ The statements attempted to assure the public on the control the American military had over the Vietnam War as well as their forceable victory, but the reports and visuals coming out of Vietnam showed a stark difference from what was being said.

Through visual media, the American public lost much of their confidence during and after the Tet Offensive, because, as opposed to the reports coming out of Washington, according to historian Steve Michael Barkin: "The unrelenting, nightly scenes of suffering both caused and sustained by Americans: an almost-naked child running from the fighting, her eyes a mirror of unspeakable terror; the brutal and seemingly instantaneous on-street assassination of a suspected Vietcong officer of the South Vietnamese army; correspondents in Saigon under fire themselves

¹⁰ O'Connell, Chuck. "The Significance of the Tet Offensive" 2 November 2018.
www.counterpunch.org/2018/11/02/the-significance-of-the-tet-offensive/

in a war that was said to be not only winnable but ‘under control.’”¹¹ The Vietnam War revealed the power of television news, as it proved its effect on the public, helping to fuel the anti-war movement.

A major development regarding the Vietnam War’s portrayal in the public eye came from Walter Cronkite, a prominent American journalist and TV reporter, in his famous anti-war opinion during a CBS Broadcast in February 27, 1968, saying:

“For it seems now more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate. To say that we are closer to victory today is to believe, in the face of the evidence, the optimists who have been wrong in the past. To suggest we are on the edge of defeat is to yield to unreasonable pessimism. To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic, yet unsatisfactory, conclusion. But it is increasingly clear to his reporter that the only rational way out then will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy, and did the best they could.”¹²

Cronkite, hailed as the “most trusted man in America”¹³, had just returned from Vietnam during the Tet Offensive, calling witness to the disaster and despair, and, as a respected and trusted man, was overwhelmingly agreed with, showing the effects Television news personalities had on the American public. Immediately after his statement was released, the opinion over American involvement in the war became predominantly negative, causing many to call for the withdrawal of troops, believing that the war could not be won.

¹¹ Pierson, David. (2005). American Television News: The Media Marketplace and the Public Interest. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 38.4

¹² Cronkite, Walter. “Report From Vietnam (1968)” *Youtube*

¹³ Hallin, Daniel C. “The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam” *University of California Press*, 14 April 1989

In a poll produced by the National Opinion Research center in April of 1968, two months after the first Tet Offensive had ended, 36% of people thought the United States should withdraw from the Vietnam War, with another 37% believing that the United States should increase their strength.¹⁴ One month later in May of 1968, a poll by the Gallup Organization, showed the vast majority of Americans interviewed, 77%, believed that the war would end in a compromise compared to only 10% believing in an all-out victory.¹⁵ In just over a month, public opinion, in response to reports and statements made by trusted individuals such as Walter Cronkite, began to move in a downward spiral as the majority of Americans believed the military should be withdrawn, a compromise in the near future rather than the all out victory that had been continuously assured by the government.

Television coverage of the war was also altered after the Tet Offensive. Typical American troops pre-Tet were shown to be “macho” and infallible, whereas after Tet, they were seen in a whole new light, viewed as “imperfect and generally weaker than the public’s ideal image.”¹⁶ The Vietnam War, previously known as a national endeavour, “our” war, began to be reported as “the” war, signifying the distancing of support for the war effort by journalists and reporters, and television coverage focused more on the costs of the war, casualty numbers becoming more than just statistics. After Tet, casualty figure reports became more sympathetic, sometimes showing wounded soldiers or nation flags next to statistics, or, as David Brinkley did in his June 26, 1969 report, lead with a comment before introducing the numbers. As Brinkley said, “Today in Saigon, they announced the casualty figures for the week, and through they came

¹⁴ See Appendix C

¹⁵ See Appendix B

¹⁶ Hadyniak, Kyle. “How Journalism Influenced American Public Opinion During the Vietnam War: A Case Study of the Battle of the Ap Bac, The Gulf of Tonkin Incident, The Tet Offensive, and the My Lai Massacre.” *University of Maine*, 2015, pp. 38-49

out in the form of numbers, each one of them was a man, most of them quite young, each with hopes he will never realize, each with family and friends who will never see him again. Anyway, here are the numbers.”

Defeat Despite the Victory

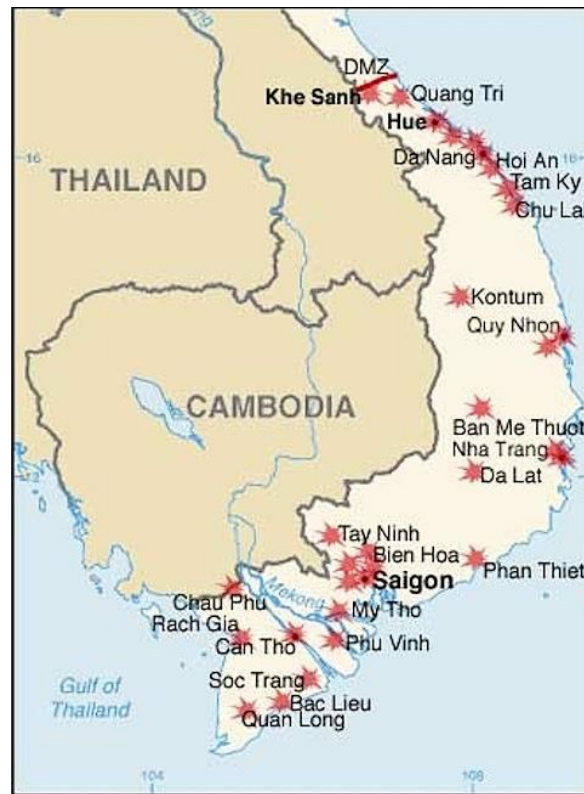
Despite the decisive victory that was Tet and despite the positive government and military assurances, the United States withdrew from Vietnam, illustrating what is now seen as an American defeat during the Vietnam. In actuality, the war in Vietnam was lost on the propaganda front, in great measure due to the “press’ pervasive misreporting of the clear US victory at Tet as a defeat.”¹⁷

According to a prominent Vietnamese Communist politician, Le Duan, in his “Letters to the South,” addressed to a fellow communist friend, the Tet Offensive had many goals, many that were not achieved, and many that were. One of the goals found to be the most successful after Tet was halting the Americans in a “strategic stalemate.”¹⁸ The American advance was in fact halted, though not due to any militaristic defeat, but by public backlash and decreased support for the war, lead with the helping hand of the media, reporters, and journalists. In conclusion, the Tet Offensive was both a triumph, as it ended in a militaristic victory over North Vietnam for the United States and South Vietnam, and a tragedy, as it produced an almost immediate decrease in public support for the war, eventually leading to the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam and the loss of the war for South Vietnam.

¹⁷ Hammond, William M. “The Tet Offensive and the News Media: Some Thoughts on the Effects of News Reporting.” *Army History*, no. 70, 2009, pp. 6–16. *JSTOR*

¹⁸ Duan, Le. “Letters to the South.” 1965

Appendix A



The map shown above depicts the major targets of the Tet Offensive in South Vietnam - also shown is Khe Sanh, an assault that predated Tet. This map shows how widespread the coordinated attacks were, spread out over around a large piece of land, proving how truly remarkable and surprising the strikes were to the South Vietnamese and American people.

Citation:

Royal Air Force Museum, National Cold War Exhibit, 2013. Accessed 1 March 2019.

www.nationalcoldwarshow.org/schools-colleges/national-curriculum/far-east-conflict-vietnam/consequences.aspx

Appendix B

HOW DO YOU THINK THE WAR IN VIETNAM WILL END--IN AN ALL-OUT VICTORY FOR THE UNITED STATES AND THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE, IN A COMPROMISE PEACE SETTLEMENT, OR IN A DEFEAT FOR THE UNITED STATES AND THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE? (Source: Gallup Poll (AIPO), May, 1968)

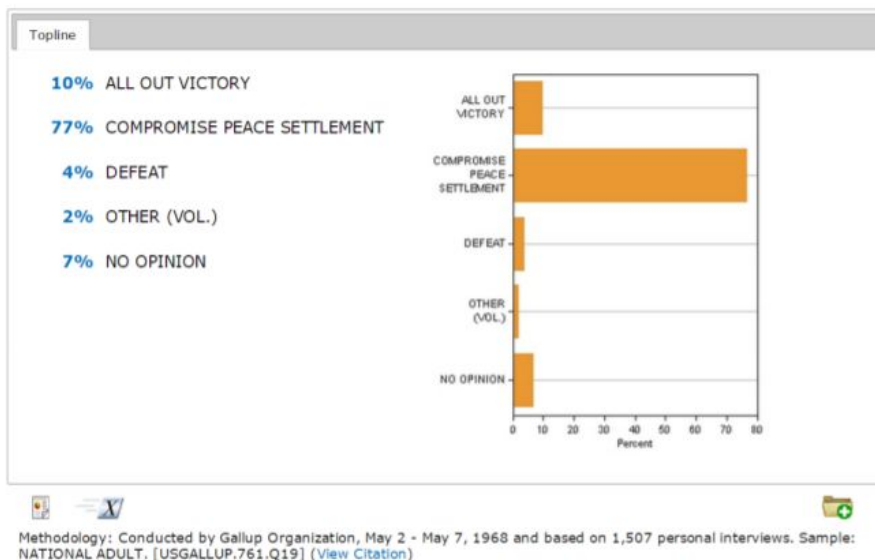


Figure 6

A poll conducted by the Gallup Organization in May of 1968, based on 1,507 personal interviews, shows that the vast majority believed the war in Vietnam would end in a compromise rather than an all-out victory, a clear testament to the effects of the Tet Offensive on public opinion, as it contrasted greatly from the confidence results from previous years.

Citation:

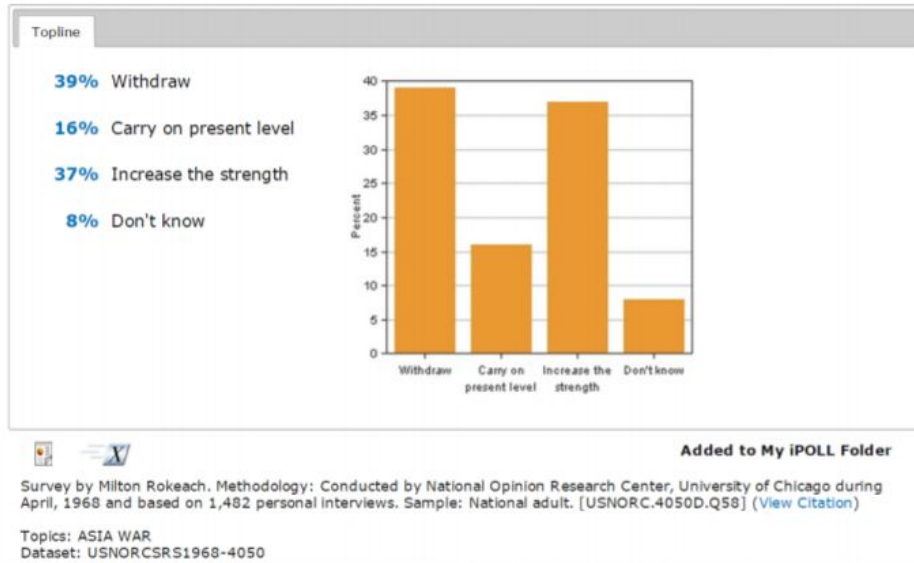
Hadyniak, Kyle. "How Journalism Influenced American Public Opinion During the Vietnam

War: A Case Study of the Battle of the Ap Bac, The Gulf of Tonkin Incident, The Tet Offensive, and the My Lai Massacre." *University of Maine*, pg. 46, 2015.

digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1218&context=honors

Appendix C

Just from what you have heard or read, which one of the statements on the card comes closest to the way you, yourself, feel about the war in Vietnam?...A. The U.S. (United States) should begin to withdraw its troops. B. The U.S. should carry on its present level of fighting. C. The U.S. should increase the strength of its attacks against North Vietnam.
(Source: NORC SRS Amalgam--Vietnam And Political Preference, Apr, 1968)



A poll conducted by the National Opinion Research Center in April of 1968, based on 1,482 personal interviews, shows that 36% of those interviewed believe the U.S. should withdraw its troops from Vietnam, while another 37% believed they should have increased their strength of attacks. They believed the current level of attacks were not sufficient enough.

Citation:

Hadyniak, Kyle. "How Journalism Influenced American Public Opinion During the Vietnam

War: A Case Study of the Battle of the Ap Bac, The Gulf of Tonkin Incident, The Tet Offensive, and the My Lai Massacre." *University of Maine*, pg. 47, 2015.

digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1218&context=honors

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Arnett, Peter. "What Happened in the Tet Offensive's First 36 Hours." *The Associated Press*, 31 January 2018. www.militarytimes.com/news/2018/01/31/what-happened-in-the-tet-offensives-first-36-hours/

This first-hand account of an Associated Press reporter, Peter Arnett, during the Tet Offensive, details the experiences of the first 36-hours of the attacks in the city of Saigon, one of the places hit particularly hard. Is a very detailed report of his every action, then concluded with the effects of the attacks.

Cronkite, Walter. "Report From Vietnam (1968)" *Youtube*, uploaded by tpleines, 22 May 2010. www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nn4w-ud-TyE

Walter Cronkite, a prominent American journalist and TV reporter, explains, after just arriving back from the Vietnam during the Tet Offensive, his views on the war and how it should be handled. This report greatly impacted public opinion, and made many lose support for the Vietnam War after the Tet Offensive.

Duan, Le. "Letters to the South." 1965, Original Source: Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Su That, pages 119-162, Trans: Robert K. Brigham and Le Phuong Anh. Online version: Le Duan

Reference Archive, 2003, www.marxists.org/reference/archive/le-duan/works/1965/10/x01.htm. Accessed 29 February 2019.

Le Duan, a prominent Vietnamese communist politician, writes to a fellow communist in these letters in 1965, detailing the goals and hopes of a potential offensive in the future, eventually culminating into what we know as the Tet Offensive. Some of the goals listed were achieved while others were not, but the goals achieved proved to be the most impactful for the United States, including succeeding in halting the Americans in the Vietnam War.

Secondary Sources

Elliot, Mai and James A. Thomson. "The Tet Offensive." *RAND in Southeast Asia: A History of the Vietnam War Era*, RAND Corporation, 2010, pp. 291–298, www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/cp564rc.16. Accessed 16 March 2019.

Uses a second-hand account of a reporter stationed in Vietnam during the Tet Offensive, explaining exactly what that person experienced. Provides to me the basic knowledge needed to understand what happened in during the Tet Offensive as well as afterwards.

Falk, Richard. "Appropriating Tet." *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 29, no. 3, 1988, pp. 391–420. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25090001. Accessed 17 March 2019.

Richard Falk, writing for the *Massachusetts Review* in 1988, argues on the actions of both sides in the Tet Offensive. This essay is an attempt to explore the Tet as a symbolic event and to

describe its political and militaristic impact on the Vietnam War, an attempt that is done very well.

Guan, Ang Cheng. "Decision-Making Leading to the Tet Offensive (1968) - The Vietnamese Communist Perspective." *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 33, no. 3, 1998, pp. 341–353. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/261120. Accessed 14 February 2019.

This essay is an attempt to describe the Communist perspective of the Tet Offensive and to explain the planning, execution, and strategy that went into the attacks. It is a discussion of the communist decision-making leading up to the Tet Offensive, drawing heavily on the communist sources that have been made available in recent years.

Hadyniak, Kyle. "How Journalism Influenced American Public Opinion During the Vietnam War: A Case Study of the Battle of the Ap Bac, The Gulf of Tonkin Incident, The Tet Offensive, and the My Lai Massacre." *University of Maine*, 2015, pp. 38-49.

digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1218&context=honors. Accessed 19 December 2018.

This essay, written by Kyle Hadyniak at the University of Maine, uses four pivotal Vietnam War events as case studies in examining how journalism affected the outcome of the Vietnam War by influencing public opinion. Shows that journalism provided a more pragmatic approach to talking about the war, against the government's misleading optimism and sometimes, outright

deception, and why the reporters and the journalists were believed, effectively changing public opinion as a result.

Hallin, Daniel C. "The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam" *University of California Press*, 14 April 1989. Accessed 1 March 2019.

David Hallin, a professor, has written here a provocative study of the effects of U.S. media on the Vietnam War in which he focuses on what he regards as the myth that print and television reporters helped lose the war. He concludes that the media supported the early days of the war effort up until February 1968, but was forever altered after the Tet Offensive.

Hammond, William M. "The Tet Offensive and the News Media: Some Thoughts on the Effects of News Reporting." *Army History*, no. 70, 2009, pp. 6–16. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/26373973. Accessed 17 March 2019.

Dr. William Hammond, a historian at the Center of Military History, previews the effects of media and news reporting on public opinion before, during, and after the Tet Offensive. He covers not just the media during the Tet Offensive, but the effects leading up to it, as he believes it is important to see the difference.

Llewellyn, Jennifer, Jim Southey, and Steve Thompson. "The First Indochina War." *Alpha History*, 2018. alphahistory.com/vietnamwar/first-indochina-war/. Accessed 17 December 2019.

This article offers a basic understanding of the First Indochina War, a conflict between the newly minted Vietnamese country and their past ruler, France. Explains the details of the conflict as well as its subsequent effects, including leading into the Vietnam War, which is what I used this source for.

O'Connell, Chuck. "The Significance of the Tet Offensive" 2 November 2018.

www.counterpunch.org/2018/11/02/the-significance-of-the-tet-offensive/. Accessed 14

February 2019.

This article, written by Chuck O'Connell, reviews the significance of the Tet Offensive as well as its short-term and long-term effects in a local as well as a global setting. Offers also a look at the contradictions the military and the U.S. government made in an attempt to prove to the American people of the positive outlook of the Vietnam War.

Schmitz, David. "The Tet Offensive: Politics, War, and Public Opinion. *Rowman and Littlefield*,

2005, pp. 88-118. Accessed 18 January 2019.

This book, written by David Schmitz, explains in depth what happened in the Tet Offensive, proving it was a turning point for the Vietnam War because of its effects on Public Opinion, and the loss of the War, as it led to the withdrawal of the United States and the eventual downfall of South Vietnam as a result.

Willbanks, James H. "Winning the Battle, Losing the War." *The New York Times*, 5 March 2008.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/05/opinion/05willbanks.html>

This article, written in the *New York Times*, offers an opinion over how the Tet Offensive, and overall decisive victory for the United States, led to the loss of the Vietnam War. It was written very close to the 40th anniversary of the Tet Offensive and explains the basic facts as well as a modern opinion over why the war was lost.

Wilkins, Warren. "Myth-Busting the Tet Offensive." *Vietnam*, vol. 30, no. 5, Feb. 2018, pp.

56–58. *EBSCOhost*,

search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=khh&AN=126448456&site=ehost-live

Accessed 1 March 2019.

This short article, written by Warren Wilkins in 2018, provides a correction to the mistruths, falsehoods, and lies surrounding the Tet Offensive, those that were fed to the American public in an attempt to raise support for the war, as well as after the Vietnam war was finished.