

Photography and Visual Representations of the American War in Viet Nam

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Abstract

“A picture says a thousand words”, as the aphorism goes. This certainly applies to the realm of photography. Yet, do photographs speak for themselves, or does the backdrop of photographs matter in underscoring the deeper underlying issues in wartime? As this manuscript shall examine, iconic photographs taken during conflict can have a deeply powerful symbolic impact in seizing the imagination and attention of the public. In so doing, and depending on the context of the conflict being fought, such iconic imagery of war may impact not only on the decision-making process of that conflict, but also be adopted by other observers in the post-conflict to underscore underlying metaphorical themes in warfare. The authors propose to examine this in the form of five particularly iconic photographs from the Viet Nam War (known in Vietnam as “The American War”).

Keywords: war, photography, iconic imagery, dissent, public opinion

Introduction

“The weight of words, the shock of photos.”
(Advertising slogan for *MATCH*, Paris, 1949)

“A picture says a thousand words”, as the aphorism goes. This certainly applies to the realm of photography. Yet, do photographs speak for themselves, or does the backdrop of photographs matter in underscoring the deeper underlying issues in wartime?

With the international community set to face the continuation of war in the foreseeable future, it is necessary to ponder how wartime photographs reflect the deeper themes that frame the conduct of warfare in human history. The authors propose to examine how iconic photographs of the Viet Nam War (commonly referred to in Viet Nam as “the American War”) capture the various controversies in that conflict. The authors propose to do this in the following four sections, beginning with a discussion of the characteristics of what makes an iconic photograph during wartime. The second section of this manuscript examines the geopolitical backdrop of the American War in Viet Nam and why these factors render iconic photographs from this conflict a particularly interesting case study for visual representations of war.¹ The authors will then proceed with a third section that delves deeper into five particularly iconic images from the American War, and how they represent that conflict. This manuscript will then conclude by considering the implications of photography as visual representations of conflict in contemporary international relations.

Photography as a visual representation of war

Although iconic images have been associated with various conflicts in human history since ancient times, it is only recently that any attempt has been made to undertake a particular in-depth analysis of the characteristics of particularly iconic images of warfare. A recent contribution to this field comes in the form of *War/Photography: Images of Armed Conflict and its Aftermath*, by Anne Wilkes Tucker, Will Michels and Natalie Zelt. Reviewing this manuscript in 2014, H.R. McMaster (then a IISS Consulting Senior Fellow who has since been appointed National Security Advisor in the Trump Administration) remarked that,

photography’s ability to evoke the human and psychological experience of war gives the genre its unique value ... photographs contradict the notion that armed conflicts might be waged without profound human consequences, both for combatants and the civilians among whom wars are fought, as well as non-combatants who are often targeted deliberately by terrorist or military forces. (McMaster, 2014, n.p.)

Further underscoring how particularly gripping photographs of conflict underscore the human tragedy of warfare was another article, published in 2014, in which Kenneth Jarecke reflected on a particularly gripping image of a corpse of an Iraqi soldier who had been burnt alive on the “Highway of Death” during the 1991 Gulf War. *Time Magazine* initially declined to

¹ The authors refer to the American War in Viet Nam in recognition of the US-initiated political conflict through President Johnson’s 7 August 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. In Vietnam, the conflict is referred to as “The American War”, holding responsible the invading country. Furthermore, in seeking to emphasise that Viet Nam is a country and not a war, the authors spell the country as “Viet Nam”, without diacritical marks, throughout the article. See also Ted Engelmann, personal interview with photojournalist, Philip Jones Griffith, NYC, 8 September 2008.

publish Jarecke's photograph, "Incinerated Iraqi, Gulf War" (26 February 1991), due to its graphic content.



Photograph: Kenneth Jarecke, "Burnt Iraqi Soldier", Highway of Death, Iraq, February 1991, <http://rockcitynews.com/photos4c/iraqwarphotos/images/jarecke-nasiriyah.jpg>

As a result, the image in question did not reach public eyes until well after the conflict was over. Yet, the impact of Jarecke's image in capturing the human cost of war must be emphasized; as Tony McGrath, the *Observer's* pictures editor noted, "There were 1,400 [Iraqi soldiers] in that convoy, and every picture transmitted until [Jarecke's picture] came, two days after the event, was of debris, bits of equipment ... No human involvement in it at all; it could have been a scrapyard" (McGrath, cited in Rose, 2014, n.p.). Set against this backdrop, in capturing the last horrific moments of a man's life in conflict, Jarecke's image reflected the tone of General Sherman's observation that "war is hell" insofar as the human impact of warfare is concerned. (Sherman, 1879)

In this sense, Jarecke's iconic image strikingly underscored what warfare is all about: a period of mass-organized, politically-motivated violence during which people perish. Yet, it is not enough that an iconic photograph of war capture an image of sheer carnage; if anything, a photograph whose entire frame is filled with carnage is rather more likely to induce "corpse-fatigue" on the part of a viewer. Rather, it is more important for such iconic photographs to stand apart in a category by themselves in projecting into the popular consciousness a symbolic representation of the human impact of war. Such an ability to capture the popular imagination is further reflected in how certain iconic portrayals of war have a pivotal impact on decision-making during the conflict itself, as well as how such iconic images are borrowed or referred to by later commentators.

Backdrop of the American War in Viet Nam

Several characteristics of the American War in Viet Nam make it an ideal case study for this manuscript. The most iconic photographs of US involvement during the Second World War were consistent with the then-prevailing historical narrative of American exceptionalism as part of the wider struggle against the militarism and ultra-nationalism represented by the Axis Powers. The most iconic photographs from the Second World War were images such as the

devastation inflicted by the Japanese air raid on Pearl Harbor, of troops storming ashore at Normandy, of six US marines raising the “Stars and Stripes” at Mount Suribachi during the battle of Iwo Jima, and the mushroom cloud forming after the atomic bombing of Nagasaki.

The connotations commonly associated with these images invoke sentiments of patriotism in justifying the US entry into World War Two. Such a perspective was reflected in the beliefs held by the World War Two correspondent Ernie Pyle, who saw the press as acting as a “cheerleader” for the military in encouraging Americans in military and civilian sectors alike to support the war effort (Tobin, 1997).



US battleship sinking at Pearl Harbor, December 1941
<https://media1.britannica.com/eb-media/81/71381-004-534732C4.jpg>

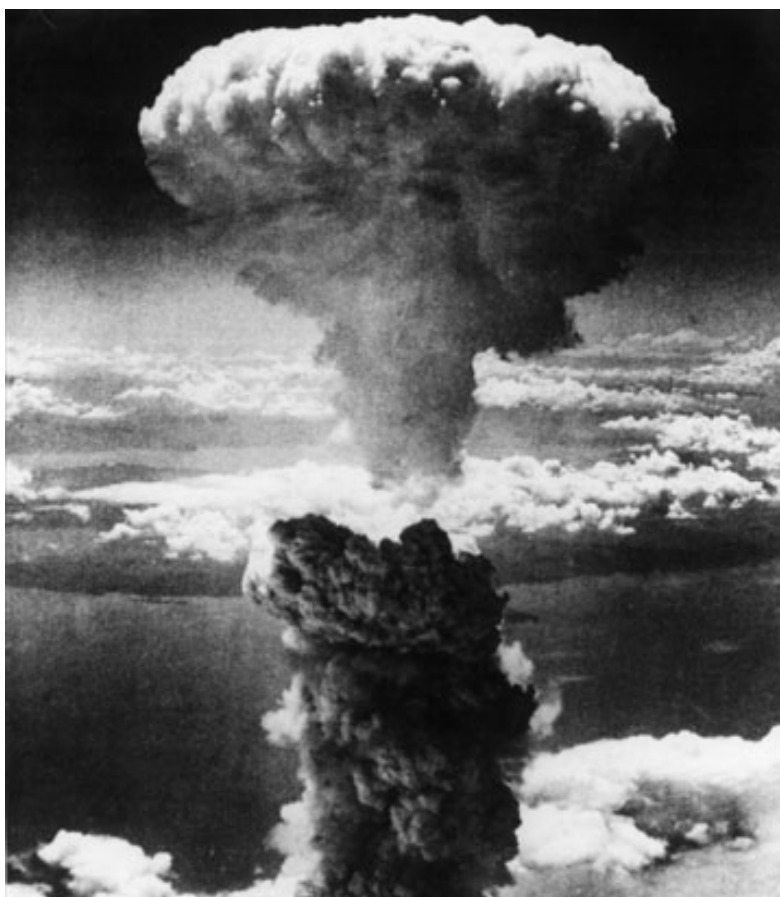


Robert Capa, “US troops landing in Normandy, France, June 1944
<http://warfarehistorynetwork.com/wp-content/uploads/The-Battle-for-Omaha-Beach-The-Men-of-the-D-Day-Invasion-2.jpg>)

The bombing of Pearl Harbor, for instance, was cast by US media as a sneak attack (without mentioning the US imposition of sanctions on Japan that had convinced Tokyo that it faced geostrategic encirclement in the first place). In a similar light, whilst Robert Capa's image of US troops landing in Normandy stands as a highly symbolic representation of the US involvement in the liberation of Europe from Nazism, such a historical perspective is outweighed by the extent of the Soviet war effort on the Eastern Front. Joe Rosenthal's 23 February 1945, "Raising the Stars and Stripes at Iwo Jima," captured the public imagination due to its symbolic summary of the hard-fought efforts by the US Marines during the island-hopping campaign in the Pacific, as well as the symbolic impact of the national flag being raised on newly-captured enemy soil. What that image did not mention, however, was the fact that this was the second American flag raised at this location, and the battle for Iwo Jima raged on for several more weeks. Yet, the role of photographers as cheerleaders for the war effort trumped accuracy in the depiction of warfare. Finally, whilst the image of the mushroom cloud forming after the atomic bombing of Nagasaki marked the event that led to Japan's surrender as well as symbolizing the start of the nuclear age, the same image said nothing of the impact of the atomic bomb on the civilian population of Nagasaki. Taken in sum, the aforementioned iconic images of World War Two provide a historical image of participation in war as part of a Manichean struggle against Nazi Germany and militarist Japan.



Joe Rosenthal, 'Raising the Stars and Stripes Over Iwo Jima', February 1945
https://www.strikes.com/polopoly_fs/1.407519.1466700592!/image/image.jpg_gen/derivatives/landscape_900/image.jpg



Mushroom cloud forming over Nagasaki, August 1945

<http://www.atomicarchive.com/History/twocities/nagasaki/images/H21.jpg>

In contrast, the American War in Viet Nam marked a distinct disruption to the then-prevailing historical narrative of American exceptionalism.² Although the Johnson Administration had authorized the US intervention to prop up the collapsing South Vietnamese Government as part of the wider American strategy of strengthening the “Free World” by containing Communism, the reality was that Washington’s successive clients in Sai Gon were neither democratic nor politically enlightened. Rather, the French colonial cultivation of a ruling class of Catholics had contributed to significant stratification of Vietnamese society, with privilege, wealth and influence concentrated in the hands of a corrupt, incompetent Catholic minority that was largely alienated from the Buddhist-majority nation. If anything, the heavy-handed nature of the counter-insurgency campaign undertaken by President Ngo Dinh Diem and his successors, by involving the forced displacement of rural communities, delegitimized the Sai Gon regime in the eyes of the Vietnamese peasantry.

² The authors choose not to use iconic photographs from the Korean War for their case study for a number of reasons. The outright nature of the North Korean invasion of South Korea in June 1950 made it easy for the US to characterize its intervention as being on behalf of a victim of armed invasion. Furthermore, although the government in Seoul in 1950 was an authoritarian one, the ROK’s more recent transition to democracy (as opposed to the continued existence of the authoritarian state in Pyongyang) marks the US-led intervention in Korea as a poster child for a justifiable war. As our case study indicates, the *American War in Viet Nam* was one where the US rationale for its military intervention was far murkier, as well as a conflict that ended in the ignominy of US military withdrawal and the collapse of Washington’s client state (and one which never got to shed its authoritarian nature).

Further grounding the American War in Viet Nam as an ideal case study of the importance of photography as visual representations of war was the nature in which US involvement in that conflict was increasingly marked by polarization and discord within the United States. Overall US public opinion during the initial stages of that conflict remained largely optimistic, in line with the then-prevailing, post-1945 patriotic sentiment that saw American exceptionalism as an important component in affirming US leadership of the anti-Communist world. Yet, as Susan Sontag noted, “the war America waged in Vietnam, the first to be witnessed day after day by television cameras, introduced the home front to the new tele-intimacy with death and destruction.” (Sontag, 2003, p. 21) Although dissent began to grow, particularly within liberal circles and university campuses within the US, 1967 ended with the overall assumption by most Americans that US military firepower had the Vietnamese National Liberation Front (also known as the “Viet Cong”) on the run, as reflected by MACV Commander General William Westmoreland’s November 1967 Congressional testimony that the US was winning the war. The shock effect of the 31 January 1968 Tet Offensive, however, brought the reality of the War into stark relief. Not only was the Viet Cong still very much in the fight, it held the initiative over the Sai Gon regime, as reflected in its ability to launch large-scale insurgent attacks throughout the country at short notice. In so highlighting the ongoing stalemate of the war, the 1968 Tet Offensive and mounting US casualties convinced increasing sections of American society that the only way to victory lay in further escalation, beyond a level that US public opinion was willing to accept. Such growing dissent was reflected in the events that followed the 1968 Tet Offensive. Nixon’s escalation of the war with the secret invasion of Cambodia and bombing of Laos in an attempt to sever the Ho Chi Minh Trail was greeted by growing domestic dissent within the US, most tragically reflected when, on 4 May 1970, the Ohio National Guard opened fire on anti-war demonstrators at Kent State University, killing four students and injuring thirteen.

Five iconic photographs of the Viet Nam War

Given the sheer number of photographs that were made during the American War, it fell upon the authors to address the challenge of selecting the most iconic images of this conflict. Our selection of the following images for our case study is based on how they characterized various dynamics of this conflict. We believe that the following five iconic photographs of the American War in Viet Nam are particularly noteworthy of further discussion:

- 1) Malcolm Browne’s (AP) photograph of the self-immolation of Buddhist monk, Thích Quảng Đức, in Sai Gon, 11 June 1963;
- 2) Eddie Adams’ (AP) photograph of South Vietnamese Police General, Nguyen Ngoc Loan, executing a Viet Cong Prisoner in Sai Gon, 1 February 1968;
- 3) Ronald L. Haeberle’s photographic coverage of The My Lai Massacre, 16 March 1968;
- 4) John Filo’s photograph of 14 year-old runaway, Mary Ann Vecchio, kneeling over the body of 20 year-old, Jeffery Miller, fatally shot by the Ohio National Guard on the campus of Kent State University, 4 May 1970;
- 5) Hubert van Es’s (UPI) photograph of an Air America (CIA) helicopter evacuating Vietnamese from 22 Gia Long St., residence of the CIA deputy chief of station, Sai Gon, 29 April 1975.

The self-immolation of Buddhist monk, Thích Quảng Đức, in Sai Gon, 11 June 1963

On 10 June 1963, two Western journalists (David Halberstam of the *New York Times* and Malcolm Browne, Sai Gon AP Bureau Chief), attended a Buddhist demonstration against the

Sai Gon regime. During the event, Browne photographed a Buddhist monk, Thích Quảng Đức, setting himself ablaze in protest of Ngo Dinh Diem's oppression of Buddhists. Browne questioned what might have happened if he had not made his Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph, reflecting

I've had this searing feeling of perhaps having in some way contributed to the death of a kind old man who probably would not have done what he did - nor would the monks in general have done what they did - if they had not been assured of the presence of a newsman who could convey the images and experiences to the outer world. Because that was the whole point - to produce theatre of the horrible so striking that the reasons for the demonstrations would become apparent to everyone.' (Browne, 2003)³



Malcolm Browne, "Buddhist monk sets himself ablaze", Sai Gon, June 1963
<https://vietcongonline.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/210.jpg>

The graphic death of Thích Quảng Đức marked a watershed moment in the US involvement in Viet Nam. From the establishment of Ngo Dinh Diem's anti-Communist regime in 1955, the US had largely sought to downplay the less savory aspects of Ngo's rule. Touring Southeast Asia in 1961, then Vice-President Lyndon Baines Johnson hailed Diem as the 'Winston Churchill of Asia', as an attempt to cloak the South Vietnamese leader in the overtones of a heroic US ally resisting foreign aggression. (Johnson, 1961, cited in Karnow, 1997) Public press coverage of the monk's death, however, forced US viewers to begin

³ Ironically, there is no known photograph of Norman Morrison, a 31 year-old Baltimore Quaker, immolating himself under the office window of Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, at the Pentagon, 2 November 1965, in protest against McNamara's escalation of the war.

questioning the nature of the regime in Sai Gon that their military was propping up. As President John F Kennedy reflected, “No news picture in history has generated so much emotion around the world as that one” (Kennedy, 1963, cited in Smith, 2010).

This was reflected in the aftermath of the self-immolation of Thích Quảng Đức. Diem’s sister-in-law, Madame Nhu, further illustrated the ruling Catholic indifference to the feelings of the Buddhist majority nation by referring to the monk’s death as a “barbecue . . . Let them burn and we shall clap our hands”, even going so far as to offer to provide matches for the next would-be self-immolator (Nhu, cited in Cosgrove, 2014). Furthermore, swelling South Vietnamese anger against the Ngo Dinh Diem regime culminated in a coup that toppled and assassinated Diem in November 1963, leading to a succession of short-lived regimes that culminated in the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu’s ascending to the office in 1967.⁴

Growing US disillusionment with the war in Viet Nam was reflected during and after the Tet Offensive in early 1968. Following the passing of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in August 1964 (granting President Johnson discretionary powers to authorise the direct involvement of US forces in combat operations in Viet Nam), Johnson and General William Westmoreland, Commander of Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), undertook a combination of strategic bombing of North Viet Nam (Operation Rolling Thunder), search-and-destroy operations in an effort to root out suspected Viet Cong strongholds in the countryside, and the ‘Strategic Hamlets’ program (that sought to cut off the Viet Cong from their supporters and sympathisers in the villages). By November 1967, it appeared that this combination of strategies was winning, to the extent that Westmoreland felt confident enough to return to Washington to testify to Congress that “we have reached an important point where the end [of the war] begins to come into view” (Westmoreland, cited in Willbanks, 2008). Westmoreland’s optimism was misplaced; presumably reflecting his experience in waging conventional warfare, he took the “body count” ratio of US to Viet Cong casualties as equating to progress in defeating the Communists. Yet, his opposite number, Commander in chief of the People’s Army of Vietnam General Võ Nguyên Giáp, had no intention of fighting a conventional war. Acknowledging the firepower superiority of the US in Viet Nam, Giáp knew that he stood no chance of waging a successful conventional war against Westmoreland. Instead, Giáp had responded by turning to Viet Nam’s time-honoured doctrine of guerrilla strategy, in seeking to sap US political will through small raids and ambushes whilst eschewing set-piece battles.

In January 1968, believing that a series of nation-wide raids on major urban centers would lead to a general uprising against the Sai Gon regime, Giáp launched the Tet Offensive (so-named as Giáp took advantage of the element of surprise by attacking during the Tet Lunar New Year truce). Although Giáp’s hopes for a general uprising were not borne out, the Tet Offensive had a significant impact on US confidence in the war. The fact that the Viet Cong had been able to launch a spectacular series of attacks across the entire country despite supposedly being on the brink brought home to US public opinion the extent of North Viet Nam’s resolve to continue the conflict.

South Vietnamese Police General, Nguyen Ngoc Loan, executing a Viet Cong prisoner in Sai Gon, 1 February 1968

Amidst the Tet Offensive, one particular iconic photograph, by Eddie Adams, showed the

⁴ Kennedy himself was assassinated three weeks later, with his successor, Lyndon Baines Johnson, overseeing the escalation of the “American War”.

Chief of the South Vietnamese National Police, Brigadier General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan, executing a Viet Cong operative, Nguyễn Văn Lém, with a single pistol bullet to the head. This photograph is noteworthy for several reasons. The fact that a member of the South Vietnamese Government executed a surrendered enemy combatant in cold blood was taken by the media and US public opinion as further confirmation of the unsavory nature of the regime that the US military was fighting to support. Yet, such a portrayal was one-sided; it is known that the Viet Cong operative had murdered the families of South Vietnamese officers that his unit had captured. Adams himself regretted how his photograph had painted an unfair image of Loan, going so far as to apologise to the general for not portraying the full background of the event. In 1998, Adams reflected that,

two people died in that photograph: the recipient of the bullet and General Nguyen Ngoc Loan. The general killed the Viet Cong; I killed the general with my camera. Still photographs are the most powerful weapons in the world. People believe them; but photographs do lie, even without manipulation. They are only half-truths. (Adams, 1998)



Eddie Adams, “General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan executing a Vietcong prisoner, Sai Gon, February 1968

https://3.bp.blogspot.com/-TOTyNF8KUZM/V2SCSItpyCI/AAAAAAAAKY0/-deXpZZt__AjtgAtrzldezoVusDglHOMwCLcB/s1600/Saigon%2Bexecution%2BMurder%2Bof%2Ba%2BVietcong%2Bby%2BSaigon%2BPolice%2BChief%252C%2B1968.jpg

Be that as it may, the damage to the US will to continue the war (not only from this photograph, but also the Tet Offensive) was done. Westmoreland's credibility as a commander providing honest battlefield assessments was undermined, as reflected in his being “kicked upstairs” to the position of Chief of Staff of the US Army. Moreover, the celebrated journalist Walter Cronkite responded to the Tet Offensive by observing that “it seems now more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a

stalemate” (Cronkite, 1968). Johnson, aware of the growing anti-war sentiment in the country, and aggrieved at the extent to which his adventure in Viet Nam had diverted his attention on his hopes for bringing wide-ranging social reform under his “Great Society” vision, chose not to run for re-election in 1968, well aware of the likelihood of being humiliated at the polls.

Photographic coverage of The My Lai Massacre

The third iconic photograph in our study was taken during the My Lai Massacre in March 1968, when a search and destroy patrol by the 20th Infantry Regiment murdered an estimated 500 Vietnamese villagers in the Son Tinh District. Army Photographer Ronald Haeberle’s coverage of the massacre included a particularly gripping image of a group of persons that comprised an elderly woman, a female teenager, and a number of younger children, moments before they were killed by the US troops. In a recent re-evaluation of this photograph, Valerie Wieskamp directs our attention to what initially appears an anomalous detail in the photograph: “you can see that the teenager . . . is buttoning up her blouse . . . Why would she be preoccupied with a button while the other people in the photograph were terrified of being killed? Why was the button undone to begin with? (Wieskamp, 2013).



Ronald Haeberle, “Vietnamese villagers at the My Lai Massacre”.
<http://www.readingthepictures.org/files/2013/10/my-lai-black-blouse-girl.jpg>

Probing deeper into the background of the photograph, Wieskamp found eyewitness testimony by Haeberle that confirmed that, at the time of the photograph, the female teenager had just been sexually assaulted, which accounts for her attempting to rebutton her blouse. Yet, as Wieskamp noted, then-contemporary coverage of the massacre downplayed the element of sexual assault during the massacre. This is no isolated trend, given the growing numbers of US servicewomen who have testified to receiving sexual assault, as well as the crude sexual acts that occurred during the Abu Ghraib scandal in Iraq in 2004. Such under-reporting of sexual violence in warfare presumably reflects the masculine culture that has traditionally dominated the military establishment; it has enabled sundry miscarriages of justice, as demonstrated by the fact that none of the US soldiers involved in the My Lai Massacre faced prosecution for sexual assault.

Girl kneeling over body of student shot by Ohio National Guard

The fourth iconic photograph we highlight shows 14 year old Mary Ann Vecchio kneeling over the body of Jeffery Glenn Miller, one of four students slain by members of the Ohio National Guard attempting to suppress an anti-war demonstration on the campus of Kent State University in Ohio.⁵ Upon assuming the Presidency in 1969, Richard Nixon had begun covert escalation of the war into neighbouring, neutral Cambodia, with the launching of airstrikes in a bid to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail that North Viet Nam had been using to infiltrate personnel and weapons to support the insurgency in the South. This was followed by Nixon's decision to launch a ground invasion of Cambodia in April-May 1970.

Already outraged by the growing publicity surrounding the My Lai Massacre, and fearing that Nixon's escalation of the war would only prolong an increasingly bloody stalemate, anti-war sentiment erupted into growing demonstrations against Nixon. On 4 May, 1970, student photographer John Filo was observing one such demonstration on his campus, Kent State University, when the Ohio National Guard indiscriminately opened fire on students, leaving four students dead and thirteen wounded.



John Filo, 'Mary Ann Vecchio kneeling over the body of Jeffery Glenn Miller', Kent State University, May 1970

<http://sites.psu.edu/hannahirossblog/wp-content/uploads/sites/31795/2015/10/BUZRQ6Ph.jpg>

⁵ Only two of the slain students were actually involved in the demonstration, with the other two students merely passing in the area.

Filo's image of Vecchio kneeling over Miller's body brought home to the public the tragic reality of war: Vecchio's open arms of despair, the open mouth in mid-scream, her kneeling posture indicating there was nothing she could do for the slain Miller were visual symbols of anguish and hopelessness. The image carried a visceral message beyond any caption. On a further level, the Kent State shooting brought further revulsion to American society, with the realization that the American military was killing American college students. Protesting the war in Viet Nam had become a potential death sentence.

Helicopter evacuating Vietnamese from Sai Gon

The last iconic photograph of this study is Hubert van Es's image of an Air America UH-1 Huey helicopter evacuating Vietnamese from the collapsing South Viet Nam, using the rooftop of the residence of the CIA Deputy Chief of Station as an improvised helipad.

By the end of 1974, US appetite to continue support for the Sai Gon regime had collapsed, as reflected in the withdrawal of all US combat forces from South Viet Nam in 1972-1973.⁶ With the growing chaos resulting from the Watergate Scandal and Nixon's resignation from the White House, North Vietnam undertook a probing attack against a series of isolated South Vietnamese outposts. The complete absence of a US response was taken by Giáp as a sign that the US had no remaining will to expend resources to prop up the Sai Gon regime. If anything, the weak-willed response of Thiệu and his coterie of (mostly) incompetent military subordinates led to further incursions during the early months of 1975. On March 1975, with one South Vietnamese province after another falling without any effective riposte by Sai Gon or US intervention, Giáp ordered the launching of the "Ho Chi Minh" Campaign to unify the country under Ha Noi before the onset of the 1975 rainy season. These developments underscored the extent to which US attempts to prop up an effective, militarily self-reliant South Viet Nam had failed. Endemic corruption, nepotism and a non-existent professional civil-military relationship between Thiệu and his commanders meant the complete disintegration of the South Vietnamese military in the face of Giáp's Ho Chi Minh Campaign.

Such chaos is reflected in van Es's image. With the collapsing Sai Gon regime, South Vietnamese who had supported Thiệu and/or the US military effort began fleeing the country. Van Es's image reflects how the unexpectedly rapid collapse of the South Vietnamese military forced the hastiness of the US evacuation from Sai Gon. Although a somewhat more orderly process of evacuation was simultaneously underway with chartered airliners and Chinook helicopters at Tan Son Nhut Airport and the grounds of the US Embassy respectively, what was underscored by the image was the sheer number of Vietnamese on the ladder to the rooftop seeking evacuation. Van Es counted no less than 30 persons on the roof seeking access to the helicopter; yet, as he noted, "there was no possibility that all the people on the roof could get into the helicopter, and it took off with 12 or 14 on board"⁷ (van Es, 2005).

⁶ Although US ground combat forces were withdrawn by the beginning of 1972, Nixon continued to commit air and naval support to South Viet Nam, most notably during Nixon's launching of Operation Linebacker I (In May 1972 in response to the North Vietnamese Spring Offensive), and Linebacker II (in December 1972 to coerce North Vietnam to the negotiating table).

⁷ The UH-1 Huey was itself designed to carry only eight passengers.



Hubert van Es, “Helicopter evacuation from Sai Gon, April 1975”
<https://static01.nyt.com/images/2009/05/17/arts/15vanesobit.jpg>

On a further ironic note, van Es’s image further reflected how US military strength had failed to subdue the Viet Cong. The UH-1 Huey helicopter had been the workhorse of the US Army and Marines during search and destroy operations against the Viet Cong, with the US losing a total of more than 3,000 UH-1s of various sub-models. During the war, the UH-1 represented the heyday of search-and-destroy operations in the counter-insurgency effort against the Viet Cong – on the war’s last day, it represented the rapidity with which the Sai Gon regime had collapsed into chaos, and the failure of Washington’s attempt to prop up its client state in South Viet Nam.

The cultural impact of van Es’s photograph also made its presence felt in the post-1975 entertainment scene. In an evocative scene in the Broadway musical “Miss Saigon” that depicts the evacuation, a Marine posted to the US Embassy is forced onto the last helicopter leaving the roof of the Embassy building,⁸ leaving behind his Vietnamese wife and unborn child amidst the chaos of South Viet Nam’s collapse.

⁸ It should be noted that van Es’s iconic photograph was taken several blocks away from the Embassy itself.



Evacuation from Sai Gon, as depicted in the musical Miss Saigon.

<https://qph.ec.quoracdn.net/main-qimg-e547e6f4a01521bc65132713cdad3def-c>

More recently, the iconic image of rooftops being used as makeshift helipads has become a more general metaphor for ignominious US military withdrawals from ill-defined quagmires and military adventures overseas. The Bush Administration's controversial invasion of Iraq in 2003 over a non-existent Weapons of Mass Destruction program was followed by a prolonged stalemate that many compared to the desert equivalent of the American War in Viet Nam. Amidst the growing dissent, cartoonist Michael Ramirez published a cartoon that saw "Iraq" added to the wall of a building whose roof was similarly being used as a makeshift helipad to evacuate Bush from Iraq.



Michael Ramírez

<http://www.ncobrief.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Iraq-Embassy-Evac.gif>

Conclusion

Photographs have a special place in history, even though they can lie. According to Susan Sontag, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, “history based only upon images is fiction. General understanding of history is more important than images pertaining to one historical event” (Sontag, 2003). Since its withdrawal from Viet Nam, conservative circles in the US have pointed the finger at the role of the media in undermining public support for its involvement in that conflict. Presumably acknowledging the potentially pivotal role of highly iconic photographs during wartime, since the Persian Gulf War in early 1991, the US military has increased control over the access of photographers and reporters in the war zone. This has included increasing rules for journalists wishing to embed themselves with the US military. Yet, such recent attempts to limit the media’s ability to capture the unsavory aspects of warfare have not changed the fact that war remains the business of human carnage and the dehumanization of the enemy. Whilst Pentagon attempts to regulate media access to the battlefield, coverage of the human impact of warfare will continue to characterize humanity’s continued involvement in organized, politically-motivated acts of violence in international relations.

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