



James Landers. *The Weekly War: Newsmagazines and Vietnam.* Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004. 298 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8262-1534-5.



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Published on H-War (December, 2005)

The Glossy Versions of Vietnam

James Landers' *The Weekly War: Newsmagazines and Vietnam*, addresses how America's three most prominent newsmagazines, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report*, reported the Vietnam War. Touching on every aspect of the journals' coverage of the conflict from combat to technology, race relations, the soldier, the war at home, and America's Vietnamese ally, the book focuses intently on how they constructed the news they delivered. Although the author clearly favors *Newsweek* over the other two because its coverage most clearly prefigured the outcome of the war, he contends that the three as a group "arguably delivered a more comprehensive representation of the war than either newspapers or television" (p. 278).

"Arguably" is the operative word here, because the thrust of Landers' work tends to throw that conclusion into question. Right from the start the author indicates that the commercial interests of the three (i.e., survival in the media marketplace) dictated that each differentiate itself from the others by appealing to a distinct audience within the American political spectrum. This affected the quality of the final product each produced.

The first on the scene, *Time* oriented itself toward America's largest media market, the more or less conservative, largely anti-Communist middle class. Framing its message within the prevailing Cold War consensus, particularly prior to 1967, the magazine backed the war and the claims of the American military that they were making progress, despite mounting evidence to the contrary. *U.S. News & World Report* cast its fortunes with the nation's far right, arguing that the conflict was largely a military problem and that only Americans could solve it. Coming late to the game, *Newsweek* attempted to eat its way into *Time*'s clientele by targeting the more liberal, left-leaning edge of that magazine's market. Although it sought to appear no less anti-Communist than its competitors, it became the most unconvinced of the three where the war was concerned.

The differences between the magazines were well established by the beginning of 1967, when American offensive operations in South Vietnam shifted into high gear. While *Time* described the Communists as desperate and on the run, *Newsweek* deplored the U.S. strategy of attrition as a failure, and *U.S. News & World Report*

argued that if there were problems with the way the war was going they were the result of the civilian leadership's indecision (p. 172).

Given the commercial imperatives, the magazines tended to follow rather than to mold public opinion. As the war progressed, they thus mirrored in their coverage the same turn toward the negative as the American people, switching gradually from support to regret as the war lengthened and losses mounted. "Senior editors had the final authority to omit material, assign material prominent placement, and approve commentary," the author observes. "They based their decisions upon the dominant ideology at the news magazine, the opinions of news sources, and an expectation of the reaction by readers. The process was not secretive. Everyone in the newsroom and bureaus understood it" (p.72).

Of the three, *U.S. News* changed the least. It upheld the views of its loyal, ultra-conservative clientele by asserting the value of the U.S. intervention in Vietnam and blaming Lyndon Johnson for the failure to win. *Time*, however, had little choice but to adapt. Recognizing that its pro-war tone had alienated a segment of its readership (turning *Newsweek* into a "hot" outlet for advertisers in the process), the magazine followed its mainstream audience from support to a final stance ardently critical of the Nixon administration's policies on the war. Recognizing that nothing succeeds like success, *Newsweek*, for its part, abandoned whatever enthusiasm it had earlier shown for the conflict to adopt a tone of outright skepticism (pp. 69-72). Both *Time* and *Newsweek* took pains, however, particularly toward the end, to avoid blatantly ideological rhetoric. Quoting sociologist Herbert Gans, Landers explains that economics was once more the reason: "Such news might attract other ideologists, but they constitute only a tiny part of the audience" (p. 73).

In the end, Landers shows clearly that the big losers in the process were the magazines' readers. Discussing the journals' coverage of the war's technology, for example, he notes that, depending on which news journal one read, "American ways of war symbolized genius and determination or arrogance and ignorance.... Somehow as public disaffection [with the war] grew year by year *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News & World Report* favored certain factions and viewpoints to the exclusion of others, which prevented readers of any one periodical from obtaining the breadth of the debate occurring within the military hierarchy and the policy making establishment" (pp. 154-56).

However comprehensive the coverage may have

been, then as now, news consumers who hoped to deepen their knowledge of what was happening had to draw upon more than one media source, not only the news magazines but also newspapers, magazines of opinion, and television.

The Weekly War has a lot going for it. The author has based it on a thorough, far-reaching survey of available secondary sources; a broad reading in all three journals' coverage of the war; sometimes revealing archival research at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and the Nixon Materials Project of the National Archives; and a number of telling interviews with senior editors and correspondents and several presidential press secretaries.

The devil, however, is in the details. The author decided very logically to take a topical approach to his subject. This works very well where big themes are concerned. The first chapter on the Cold War environment and how the newsmagazines worked is first rate, as is the second, which covers the combat story. After that, however, the story of the war becomes so complicated and the coverage so diffuse that the details begin to crowd in. The author has to deal with subtopics such as morale problems in the field and at home, American fire power, The Vietnamese army, technology—everything the news magazines covered, which means virtually all aspects of the war. Each time he opens a new topic he has to open up a new chronology. Just between pages 135 and 137 he jumps from 1967 to 1965 to 1972. This is a minor nuisance to the experienced researcher, who expects to plow in order to reap. For the student, however, it can be lethal. One told me that she just couldn't get through it. She had to take it in bits and pieces, and she inevitably lost much of the context. If instructors wish to assign the book as a course reading, they should do so, but they should probably parcel it out by topic, some twenty or so pages at a time.

There is a second problem akin to the first. The author has to cover so much ground that he can rarely go into depth where the events of the war are concerned. This hardly matters much of the time, but sometimes it leaves the reader with only part of the story.

The Army's destruction of the village of Ben Suc is a case in point. Were the people of the place merely innocent, unoffending civilians, as Jonathan Schell's article and the author imply, or was there more to Ben Suc than what met the eye? In fact, the villagers' homes were sitting on top of a massive hive of Viet Cong caves running many levels deep into the earth. It housed not only a major hospital but also a supply entrepot and a com-

mand center that contained documentation so high level it would give U.S. intelligence analysts some of their best insights into the enemy's operations prior to the event and his plans for future. I hold no book for the "free fire zones" that the author condemns or the shabby way the village's people were treated after being resettled, but if Ben Suc had been an American base, the Viet Cong would have done much the same to it and would have made little attempt at all to move its inhabitants out of the line of fire.

Yet again, can we really conclude that the U.S. 9th Division killed off huge numbers of civilians during Operation "Speedy Express" in the Mekong Delta just on the basis of the unit's claim to have killed 11,000 enemy soldiers while capturing only 700 weapons? Granted that a ratio of three or four enemy killed to one weapon captured was more the norm for the war, but we learned somewhere long ago that U.S. forces lied consistently and pathetically about the enemy "body count" and that even

the ratio of three or four to one could be suspect. Some references to the opinions of State Department operatives working in the Delta would have nailed the point much better, and those references are all readily available in some of the very books the author cites in his notes and bibliography.

Over all, this is a fine book on an important subject. The author attempts to achieve too much in too short a space, but the subject really does require his topical approach and his broad view. Those of us who teach the war will have to fill in the holes where they occur, but isn't that what teaching is all about?

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Citation: William Hammond. Review of Landers, James, *The Weekly War: Newsmagazines and Vietnam*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. December, 2005.

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