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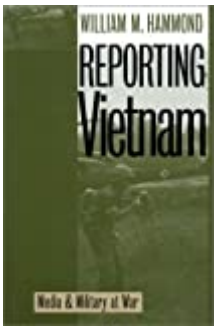

William M. Hammond. *Reporting Vietnam: Media and Military at War.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998. xi + 362 pp. $34.95. (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0911-6.

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Vietnam continues to live just below the surface of the American consciousness, a dyspeptic troll waiting for the opportunity to emerge and disrupt a happy picnic. The lessons of Vietnam are cited by current leaders, from Colin Powell to Tommy Franks, as new enemies are defined. Psychological damage from the horrors of Vietnam is becoming a project for the Veteran's Administration as the Baby Boomers who went to Vietnam grow into senior citizens and still need help in coping with their demons.

The prism of Vietnam is multifaceted, with images that range from the burning of draft cards to young men and women being sent off to an unpopular war and coming back in body bags to student protestors to Forest Gump. Bookstores continue to stock shelf after shelf of books about the American experience, the effects on society and the military tactics, operations and activities. Francis Ford Coppola issued an a new version of "Apocalypse Now" in 2001 and Mel Gibson starred in another combat-realism, soldier-celebrating film last year, showing the continuing fascination and dissatisfaction with the unresolved questions of Vietnam and the fact that there are no easy answers as to why it happened, what went wrong and what it meant and means.

(By way of disclosure, I have to say I am a Vietnam veteran, having served with the Army in an office editing and writing information for troops in the waning years of the war–I was there when there were more than 500,000 soldiers there and left with the Nixon/Kissinger disengagement of 1971.)

I worked in some of the organizations described by William M. Hammond in *Reporting Vietnam: Media and Military at War*, one of a series about the military from the University Press of Kansas based at the University of Kansas. But I was far down the command structure and not involved with the press. I read this large undertaking by Hammond with great anticipation. I hoped that Hammond, a senior historian with the Army's Center of Military History and a lecturer in University Honors at the University of Maryland, could finally define with insight and a clear storyline the issues that separated the press and the military in Vietnam.

And he has turned in a valuable book, which is designed as a consumer version of his two earlier works that come to more than 1,000 pages in total. He has taken a much larger, more ambitious work and edited it into what is supposed to be a work for people who do not want or need exhausting detail. The work is impressive and should be on the reference shelf of anyone working or researching the era. It is like a gigantic, extended reference list. The prodigious research from Department of Defense files is reflected in the fact that endnotes consume 48 pages and come with their own glossary for ab-

breviations. A sample note: "Msg. Saigon 726 to State, 5 Feb 63, U.S. Department of State, Foreign Affairs Information and Management, Bureau of Intelligence and Research (FAIM/IR)."

Hammond casts a wide net, discussing everything from tactical approaches to the strategic geopolitics of anticommunism to the inner workings of the various Vietnamese regimes. His observations range across U.S. public opinion to the machinations of the Johnson White House and valuably, the inclinations and desires of the Pentagon and State Department when it came to taming reporters whose investigations and questioning of American policy were not popular in Washington. In same cases, Hammond seems to accept a DoD point of view that would find it acceptable to ask reporters to clear their copy through a central office as happened during World War II. Fortunately, saner points of view prevailed, chastened by the fact that there were too many opportunities for reporters to get stories out of the country to try such controls.

His is a rich fruitcake of a book, crammed with fruits and nuts of astonishing variety. The eclectic mix, however, lacks a central point of view. In the preface, he suggests his purpose is to ask the question, "What went wrong with the news media and the military in Vietnam?" That, simply stated, is a worthy goal and would be a valuable exercise in understanding this important era in American history and its continuing influence on the thinking of the U.S. military, government and press.

Ultimately, Hammond presents a work that is too full of details and too light on contextualization and synthesis. Reading this book is a little like taking a hunting dog for a walk in a street full of ethnic restaurants. Every new idea is an opportunity to pull in another direction to explore another scent. In addition, Hammond's writing style strays across topic areas, tipping his hand and showing that he knows what is coming. He tends to polish conclusions to fit the facts at hand.

Here's a sample from a segment describing the White House decision to allow the Army to use tear gas during combat operations early in the war. "In the end, if the controversy over the use of tear gas came out well for the government, it nonetheless augured ill for the future. For if the public consensus on the war was so fragile that Johnson and his advisers felt constrained to share the course of action they would take according to whether the press agreed or disagreed, what would happen in the future when truly difficult choices has to be made?" (p. 65).

Hammond also jumps forward and back in time, talking about events that happen in relation to a topic and then providing flashbacks of events that had some connection to the event or trend from years earlier. When talking about the My Lai massacre, he goes through some of the background of the case, then describes previous reports of atrocities, finally comes back to describe the courts martial that resulted from the massacre.

In the final analysis, it may be that the answer is not so complicated. Military and political press agents were out of synch with the aggressive, intelligent reporters such as David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan. Press briefings were simplistic, dissembling and incomplete and were highly influenced by politicians who were concerned about their polls and their perceived popularity or the impact of unpopular stories on political fortunes. The simple lack of credibility and a foreign policy based on unproven assumptions and the support of an unpopular regime also contributed to the divide between the military and the media in Vietnam.

While *Reporting Vietnam* falls short of its goal of defining the disconnect between the military and the news media, it provides a valuable research tool which gives other researchers a wealth of source materials and pointers to primary documents which can be used in exploring more manageable topics.

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