

The Perception of Truth:
Army Officers, the Press, and Military Decision-Making
In the Early Years of the Vietnam War

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On the basis of this thesis
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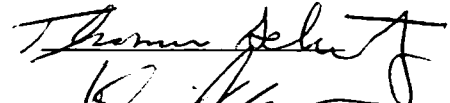
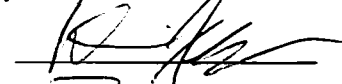
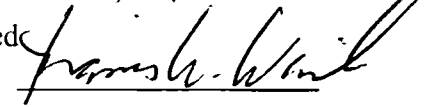




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Glossary of Abbreviations

AAR	-	After-Action Report
APC	-	Armored Personnel Carrier
ARVN	-	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
CPT	-	Captain
COL	-	Colonel
FRUS	-	Foreign Relations of the United States
GVN	-	Government of the Republic of Vietnam, South Vietnam
JCS	-	Joint Chiefs of Staff
LTC	-	Lieutenant Colonel
MACV	-	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
MAJ	-	Major
USIS	-	United States Information Service
VC	-	Viet Cong

Introduction

Seldom in a war can a person, either during the war itself or even after it, point to a single incident and say with any degree of certainty that such and such a moment was a decisive moment, that after a particular incident the face of a war was changed forever. In modern history one such incident...took place near a small Vietnamese village named Ap Bac on January 2, 1963, when Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann, an American adviser with the South Vietnamese Army, watched helplessly as the Viet Cong for the first time stood their ground against overwhelming South Vietnamese ground forces and destroyed in quick succession three American helicopters and repelled a mounted attack by a Vietnamese mechanized infantry unit.¹

Harold Coyle

Ap Bac was a minor battle that pales in size and scope to later battles of the Vietnam War. The total number of soldiers involved on both sides was less than 2,000. Less than 100 Americans took part in the battle, and yet Harold Coyle imparts great importance to the battle. Likewise historian David Kaiser describes Ap Bac as a “dramatic event” that “highlighted some of the enormous political and military difficulties that the Diem regime still faced.”² Daniel Hallin calls it “a major South Vietnamese defeat.”³ Clarence Wyatt puts it somewhat less pointedly when he comments, “Ap Bac stirred concern at the top of the American political and military leadership.”⁴ Michael Hunt gives less importance to the battle as he writes, “Ap Bac was no Dien Bien Phu,” although he comments that the battle taught us “important lessons.”⁵ H.R. McMaster only mentions the battle in passing as he called it a “costly defeat.”⁶ Finally, John Mecklin, the head of the U.S. Information Service (USIS), which was in

¹ Harold Coyle, *Code of Honor* (New York: Pocket Books, 1994), 64.

² David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2002), 177.

³ Daniel C. Hallin, *The “Uncensored War”: The Media and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 41.

⁴ Clarence Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers: The American Press and the Vietnam War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), 108.

⁵ Michael Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson’s War: America’s Cold War Crusade in Vietnam, 1945-1965: A Critical Issue* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 33, 38.

⁶ H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), 45.

charge of press relations in Vietnam, did not even mention the battle in his memoirs.⁷ All of these different perceptions of the battle point to one simple fact. The actual events of Ap Bac became irrelevant after the battle took place.

On January 2, 1963, more than 1,000 South Vietnamese soldiers, supported by American advisors, helicopters, and equipment, sought to capture a Viet Cong radio transmitter, and perhaps a few guerrillas. Instead they found 300 VC who not only stood up against superior numbers and technology, but also escaped after inflicting over 150 casualties on the attacking South Vietnamese. Five American helicopters were shot down and three American advisors lost their lives during the operation. The senior American advisor at the battle, Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann, called it “a miserable damn performance.” His superior, Colonel Daniel Porter wrote of the battle, “The conduct of this operation revealed many glaring weaknesses.”⁸ However their superiors disagreed. General Paul Harkins, the commander of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam said, “I consider it a victory. We took the objective.”⁹ Admiral Harry Felt, the Commander-in-Chief-Pacific and Harkin’s superior, concurred.¹⁰ The advisors in the field saw Ap Bac very differently from their superiors in Saigon.

This disagreement was not limited to the military. Government officials in Washington D.C. agreed with General Harkins and Admiral Felt, primarily because they obtained their information from the military in Saigon. A memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) to the President read, “It appears that the initial press reports have

⁷ John Mecklin, *Mission in Torment: An Intimate Account of the U.S. Role in Vietnam* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965).

⁸ Colonel Daniel Porter’s Cover Letter for Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann’s After-Action Report (hereinafter referred to as LTC Vann AAR) January 9, 1963, *Library of Congress: Manuscript Division, Vann-Sheehan Collection*.

⁹ Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 283.

¹⁰ *Pacific Stars and Stripes Five-Star Edition*, “Harkins Raps Criticism of Viet Troops,” January 12, 1963.

distorted both the importance of the action and the damage suffered by the US/GVN forces...the operation is being continued."¹¹ However, the JCS, with President Kennedy's approval, were disturbed enough to send the Army Chief of Staff, General Earle Wheeler to Vietnam to investigate "conflicting reports" on the situation."¹² They were perturbed because the reports of the press differed greatly from the reports from the Saigon officials. One newspaper headline, which was indicative of the tone of the vast majority of the press reports, read "Vietnamese Reds Win Major Clash."¹³ The *Los Angeles Times* read on January 4, "Vietnamese stunned by Red ambush."¹⁴ The *New York Times* asked rhetorically in another headline, "What's wrong in Vietnam?"¹⁵ Just as the advisors and the Saigon officials disagreed, so to did the press and the government in Washington over their perception of the battle and the war in Vietnam.

The first scholar to look at this disagreement over Ap Bac was David Halberstam. Halberstam was the *New York Times* correspondent assigned to Vietnam who was later to win a Pulitzer Prize in 1963 for his reporting on the conflict in Vietnam. John Mecklin, originally a reporter in Vietnam before becoming the director of USIS, and Malcolm Browne, the Associate Press reporter in Vietnam, also wrote works in 1965 describing their experiences and analyses of Vietnam. The fact that reporters were some of the first scholars of the Vietnam War is an important point in and of itself. The press played an important role in the development of the Vietnam War. The reporters not only wrote the stories that shaped public opinion, but they also wrote the analytical works on the subject.

¹¹ U.S. Department of State, "Editorial Note," *Foreign Relations of the United States (hereinafter FRUS): Kennedy Administration, vol. III, Vietnam, January-August, 1963*. U.S. Department of State. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/c1716.htm>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ David Halberstam, "Vietnamese Reds Win Major Clash." *New York Times*, January 4, 1963.

¹⁴ *Los Angeles Times*, "Vietnamese Stunned by Red Ambush," January 4, 1963, part 1.

¹⁵ *New York Times*, "What's Wrong in Vietnam," January 15, 1963.

The reporters were less likely to closely analyze their own role in the development of the war as they were too closely linked to look at the war objectively. They were studying events which they took part in.

In his 1965 Pulitzer Prize winning work, *The Making of a Quagmire*, Halberstam wrote that Ap Bac “was to become a notorious name in Vietnam, and the event was to be scrutinized, debated, reviewed, investigated.”¹⁶ Beyond his view of the battle itself, Halberstam went on to describe the effect of the battle on the Kennedy administration, claiming that, “The battle was followed by a second battle—a press battle.”¹⁷ This observation is important. Along with the press battle, Halberstam made another important observation that would frame the scholarship on Ap Bac. In his later work *The Best and the Brightest*, he wrote, “Since mid-1962 the American military had been turning to the handful of American journalists in Saigon, using them as an outlet for their complaints.”¹⁸ Halberstam’s two works provided an important framework for the study of the battle. He recognized the existence of the press battle as well as the close relationship between the advisors and the reporters. Of course these two facts were easy for him to see, as he was one of those reporters taking part in the press conflict and befriending the advisors, but his observations hold true nonetheless.

Following in Halberstam’s footsteps as a reporter who later won a Pulitzer Prize for his work on Vietnam was Neil Sheehan. His experience and analysis of Vietnam culminated in the biography, *One Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*. Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann was the senior American advisor present at the battle, and this work gave new importance to Vann and the battle, refocusing

¹⁶ David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire* (New York: Random House, 1965), 147.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹⁸ David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1969), 205.

scholarship of the Vietnam War onto this early battle. Sheehan made it clear that the officials in Vietnam, and in particular General Harkins, refused to listen to the complaints of their subordinates in the aftermath of the battle. According to Sheehan, the presentation of Vann's after-action report to Harkins "merely angered the commanding general."¹⁹ Vann and his fellow advisors tried again and again, both before and after Ap Bac, to inform their superiors of the problems they saw with American policy. They were ignored. Accordingly they turned to the reporters, including Sheehan himself, who began to write history in which they play a leading role.

More recent works by authors who did not take part in Vietnam focuses on the strategic picture of American involvement. David Kaiser's work, *An American Tragedy*, covers the entirety of the Vietnam War in its analyses, including the press. Kaiser agrees with the ideas of Sheehan and Halberstam that the battle was significant and ignored. Kaiser however also talks about the relationship between the press and the government. He contends that the government attempted to keep Vietnam out of the public's purview. Back in November 1961, President Kennedy knew that he would have to deal with the press and the American people to justify American involvement.²⁰ It was not until early 1962 that the government first had to respond to the press's questions concerning Vietnam.²¹ Ap Bac was an instance where the press coverage increased to such a point that the Kennedy administration had to respond. Kaiser fails to analyze the effect of this relationship on policy making. He merely observes that it existed.

As Kaiser hints at, the press was a major player at Ap Bac. Sheehan and Halberstam did not dwell on the press partly because they were the press. They were the

¹⁹ Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 291.

²⁰ Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 121

²¹ *Ibid.*, 128.

ones who wrote the articles in the newspapers. Thus they do not analyze their own impact and significance in relation to the battle. Conversely, David Toczek comments on the press issue: "Throughout the summer, the Kennedy administration worried far more about how the media portrayed events in Vietnam than why the ARVN suffered such casualties at Ap Bac."²² His point is that the Kennedy administration was not concerned with the differences in the information presented by the press and the information presented to the cabinet. Instead it was concerned with the negative portrayals the press kept writing. This point is important. The Kennedy administration paid attention to the press, which made them a major player in Vietnam.

The reason this issue was so prominent in the discussions of the Washington bureaucracy points to the nature of the war in Vietnam. William Hammond claims that the Washington bureaucracy recognized, "that the news media had a profound influence on public opinion."²³ Managing the press became important because the reporters shaped American opinion on Vietnam. David Halberstam wrote, "Vietnamese realities did not matter, but the *appearances* of Vietnamese realities mattered because they could affect American realities."²⁴ The perception of reality mattered, not truth. American realities were important because as an elected government, the Kennedy administration had to be concerned with public support of the war. Clarence Wyatt points out that too much public attention to Vietnam would raise the fear of another Asian war.²⁵ The risks of such a war were clear. The commitment of American soldiers in Vietnam raised "the

²² David Toczek, *The Battle of Ap Bac: They Did Everything But Learn From It* (Westport: Greenwood, 2001), 156.

²³ William Hammond, *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1962-1968* (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History United States Army, 1988), ix.

²⁴ Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 236.

²⁵ Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers*, 90.

specter of high U.S. casualties, and fomenting congressional and public debate over administration policy."²⁶ If President Kennedy wanted to maintain support for his policies, if he wanted to get his "New Frontier" legislation passed, and if he wanted to be re-elected, then both he and his administration had to concern itself with domestic opinion, and domestic opinion was heavily influenced by the media. It was through the media that the American public got its news and formed its perceptions. This fact was why the officials in Saigon and Washington were so worried about press coverage.

Although these scholars understand the importance of the press, they fail to develop the relationship between the press and the government in relation to Ap Bac and quickly pass on to other issues. Toczek concentrates on analyzing the battle of Ap Bac itself and so focuses on what actually happened and what that entails for U.S. policy. He is concerned with the military aspects of the battle, not its subsequent effect on U.S. policy-making in Washington. Kaiser wants to learn about American involvement. Kaiser calls America's involvement in Vietnam a "logical, but not essential, consequence" of American foreign policy during the Cold War.²⁷ Vietnam was a logical but avoidable event in American history and the more we learn from Vietnam, the less chance there will be of repeating it. Ap Bac was merely another consequence of U.S. foreign policy. The government's response to the press was the logical consequence of the same policy.

Notwithstanding the omissions of Toczek and Kaiser, the interplay between the press and the government during the Vietnam War has been closely analyzed. Recently scholars have argued that, "Given its strong dependence on official sources, the press did

²⁶ McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 37.

²⁷ Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 9

little more than report growing criticisms that existed at various levels of the U.S. government.”²⁸ Clarence Wyatt observes that the press usually reported official information without dissenting from it.²⁹ If there was criticism in the reports, then it came from criticism within the government itself. Daniel Hallin finds that the press did not initiate most of the major stories that criticized American involvement.³⁰ Instead the press was repeating the criticisms it heard from elsewhere. This view of the press expounded by Wyatt and Hallin tries to counteract the historical idea that the press caused the U.S. to lose the war and the public to lower its opinion of the government.³¹ Because Wyatt and Hallin were trying to prove that the press was not the cause of American defeat, they do not analyze the effect the press did have, they just analyze the fact the press was reporting the same information as the advisors.

William Hammond provides the most comprehensive analysis of the press in Vietnam. The primary concern of his work, *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*, is on the interplay between the press in Vietnam and the American military mission in Vietnam. Hammond writes that the battle “presented the Saigon correspondents with the *cause celebre* they were seeking.”³² The correspondents in Vietnam were upset with the Diem government for deporting several American reporters and contended that Diem was inept and that the United States should have more freedom in running the war.³³ Of course Diem was more than inept. He was so incompetent that in October of 1963 he would be deposed by a coup that the U.S. tacitly approved.

²⁸ Michael Curtin, review of *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1968-1973*, by William Hammond. *The American Historical Review*. 103, no. 4 (October 1998): 1353

²⁹ Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers*, 7.

³⁰ Daniel C. Hallin, “The Media, the War in Vietnam, and Political Support: A Critique of the Thesis of an Oppositional Media,” *The Journal of Politics* 46, no. 1 (February 1984): 12.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

³² Hammond, *Public Affairs*, 31.

³³ *Ibid.*, 30.

However before the coup, the press's attempt to prove their point clashed with the officials. One of these clashes was over Ap Bac. Unfortunately Hammond's work delves only into the relationship between the military mission in Vietnam and the press. His analysis considers the Kennedy administration only in the context that it gave directives to the mission in Vietnam. He fails to look at the impact of the press on foreign policy decisions.

This paper will show that the debate between the government and the press, which started as soon as the battle ended, is the crux of the significance of the battle. Scholars agree that the battle was ignored by the Kennedy administration. The battle itself, insignificant or not, was not important. Instead the government concentrated on the press reaction. I will prove that the battle's significance lies not in what it says about U.S. policy, which is what most scholarship has focused on, but in what it says about the relationship between the press and the government. Ap Bac did not cause the press to become negative of Vietnam. The press was reporting the criticisms of the advisors. However, the battle did bring the government and the press into a very sharp conflict. The negative reporting of the press dominated government thinking of Vietnam to a degree never before seen. The effect of this debate had far reaching consequences as Secretary of State Dean Rusk later asserted that the press hindered U.S. efforts to achieve victory in Vietnam.³⁴ Ap Bac allows us to look at the interplay of the military, the press, and the government through one episode. The focus of the press was on its perception of the truth. while the military and government officials focused on why the press's perception differed so greatly from their own.

³⁴ Michael Curtin. review of *Public Affairs*, 1353.

The arena was set. In one corner, the government officials in Washington and the military leaders in Saigon, in the other corner, the reporters and the advisers. In the middle lay the truth. This paper will show that neither side would recognize it as such. Neither side would understand it. Neither side would grasp it. The truth was lost in the fight as the facts did not matter, and the truth did not matter. All that was left was perception. However the government should make policy based on facts, not on perceptions. As will be shown, foreign policy making within the U. S. government faces the problem of maintaining public support for those policies. At the same time, the media's role is as the oppositional institution to government, in order to balance the government's power. However I will show that the media failed at Ap Bac, not because of anything it did, but because it actually made the situation worse. In trying to bring the truth in Vietnam to the forefront, the media made the government react to the news coverage instead of the truth. This was the tragedy of Ap Bac. The government, the media, and the advisors were so wrapped up in perception that they ignored the truth.

Chapter 1: “Optimistic Predictions:” Vietnam in the End of 1962

By definition a debate must have more than one side. At Ap Bac the debate centered on whether the battle was a victory or not. Those who claimed it was a victory saw no need for a major change in American tactics, while those who saw Ap Bac as a failure pointed out the changes that should be made. This debate did not spring up spontaneously. Rather it had its origins in the years leading up to the battle. One side of the debate embraced both the military and civilian officials in Saigon and Washington D.C. Optimism best described their view, which as David Halberstam defined it was “a slow inevitable tide running and...running in our direction.”³⁵ This optimistic view believed that American tactics were effective and would lead to the successful conclusion of American intervention. On the other side of the debate lay the reporters and the field advisors in Vietnam. They shared a common view about the war, a view which made them partners in the ensuing debate and that differed from the official stance. They believed that American tactics were not working and needed to be changed. This debate, nascent before January 2, 1963, would explode after Ap Bac.

The Official View

“Optimism dominated official thinking.”³⁶ This description comes from the Defense Department’s own history of Vietnam, known as *The Pentagon Papers*. According to this outlook, American involvement was going well and was on track. This optimism was why Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara ordered General Paul Harkins, the head of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam to develop a plan that

³⁵ Halberstam, *Quagmire*, 72.

³⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, “The Advisory Build-Up, 1961-1967 Summary.” *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam*, vol. 2. Senator Gravel ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).

would end American involvement in Vietnam by the end of 1965. The counter-guerrilla war was going so well that American advisors would no longer be needed by that date. Harkins embraced this positive view, and in an interview the previous May he embodied it: "I am an optimist, and I am not going to allow my staff to be pessimistic."³⁷ He was true to his word. His staff was just as optimistic as he was. In a briefing given to visitors and newcomers to MACV in December 1962, reason after reason was given to be optimistic on the outlook of the war.³⁸ The staff of MACV, just like their commander, was glowingly optimistic.

The military officials were not the only confident men in Saigon. General Harkins's civilian counterpart, Ambassador Nolting, was also positive about the war. In a telegram to the State Department, Nolting concluded, "In general, I am optimist."³⁹ Nolting's subordinates confirmed and conformed to this view. In a meeting in September 1962, William Trueheart, the number two civilian official in Vietnam, observed that he was "tremendously encouraged" by how well the war was going.⁴⁰ The view of the ambassador and his staff was clear to visitors. After meeting with Nolting and Trueheart, Roger Hilsman of the State Department, described them as "both very optimistic."⁴¹ The civilian officials in Saigon were every bit as positive as their military brethren. The American effort was succeeding.

³⁷ *Time*, "South Viet Nam 'To Liberate from Oppression.'" May 11, 1962, 28.

³⁸ Briefing Given at Military Assistance Command, Vietnam Headquarters in December 1962, *Library of Congress: Manuscript Division, Vann-Sheehan Collection*.

³⁹ U.S. Department of State, "Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, July 14, 1961," *FRUS: Kennedy Administration, vol. I, Vietnam, 1961*, U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/c1716.htm>, doc. 9.

⁴⁰ U.S. Department of State, "Minutes of the Eighth Meeting of the Southeast Asia Task Force, September 19, 1962," *FRUS: Kennedy Administration, vol. II, Vietnam, 1962*, U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/c1716.htm>, doc. 286.

⁴¹ U.S. Department of State, "Memorandum for the Record by Hilsman, January 2, 1963," *FRUS: Kennedy Administration, vol. III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/c1716.htm>, doc. 3.

The officials in Saigon reported to their superiors in Washington. At the top of the Washington bureaucracy was, of course, President Kennedy. He made the decisions on Vietnam. He was the one who asked Senator Mike Mansfield to make a trip to Vietnam in December. He increased U.S. military presence in Vietnam starting in November 1961.⁴² He sent 6 helicopter companies to Vietnam. He allowed U.S. advisors to accompany Vietnamese troops into combat. He allowed air force pilots to fly combat missions. At the start of his term, there were 685 U.S. military advisors in Vietnam. By December 1962, as a result of President Kennedy's effort, 11,300 American servicemen were in Vietnam, with 6,000 more by the end of 1963.⁴³ Vietnam was important enough to Kennedy that during his state of the union address on January 14, 1963, he stated, "We have maintained the frontiers of freedom from Vietnam to West Berlin."⁴⁴ Vietnam was just as important in foreign policy as the city of Berlin, the symbol of the Cold War.

In Washington, the war in Vietnam involved many government agencies, most notably the Department of Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the State Department. As William Bundy described the situation in 1962, there was no one figure who dominated discussions among these agencies.⁴⁵ Instead, certain members of the Kennedy Administration stood out from their contemporaries. As the Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara figured heavily in discussions of Vietnam and would become the most prominent figure on Vietnam under the Johnson Administration. Although not as

⁴² U.S. Department of State. "National Security Action Memorandum No. 111." *FRUS: Kennedy Administration, vol. I, Vietnam, 1961*. U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/c1716.htm>, doc. 272.

⁴³ James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell: America and Vietnam 1945-1995* (St. James, NY: Brandywine Press, 1999), 301.

⁴⁴ John F. Kennedy, State of the Union Address, January 14, 1963.

⁴⁵ McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 58.

dominant as McNamara. Secretary of State Dean Rusk was also very conspicuously linked with Vietnam. Finally McGeorge Bundy, President Kennedy's National Security Advisor, was another important player who had an important role in determining policy. These three men, Rusk, McNamara, and Bundy, all parroted the optimistic official view. The South Vietnamese, with American assistance, were defeating the guerrillas.

Despite the prominence of these men, their subordinates and assistants played the larger part in the controversy over Ap Bac. Averell Harriman served as the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs from 1961 to 1963. Chester Bowles was the President's Special Representative and Advisor on African, Asian, and Latin American Affairs. The Director of the State Department Vietnam Working Group was Chalmers Wood, while Michael Forrestal, a White House Assistant, worked for the National Security Council. Roger Hilsman, the Director of Intelligence and Research at the State Department, was in many ways the point man for Washington officialdom. He took several trips to the troubled region, including one at the end of December. During his trip, he dictated several memoranda before Ap Bac occurred, and on January 2 he wrote, "I have the impression that things are going much better than they were a year ago."⁴⁶ Hilsman, tempered his optimism with caution, believing that the war was not going quite as well as the official reports would believe, but even he remained confident of the direction of American policy.⁴⁷ His restrained optimism was more representative of the lower level officials like Forrestal and Woods. However this restraint was minimal. They agreed with the official optimism. America's strategy in Vietnam was working.

⁴⁶ U.S. Department of State. "Memorandum for the Record by Roger Hilsman, January 2, 1963." *FRUS: Kennedy Administration, vol. III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*. U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/c1716.htm>, doc. 2.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

The Unofficial View

The official view of Saigon and Washington was not the only view of the situation in Vietnam. As the officials in both Vietnam and Washington were trumpeting their optimism, the media dutifully reported it. However, they did not limit themselves to only repeating official reports. They provided their own analysis of the conflict of Vietnam, an analysis that was often at odds with the official line. At the meeting of the Southeast Asia Task Force in September of 1962, Trueheart, Nolting's deputy, observed of an otherwise rosy situation in Vietnam, "The one gloomy spot in the picture...was the mission's relations with the U.S. press corps."⁴⁸

This press corps was not large. In fact it was not even a corps at all. Only three full time reporters were stationed in Vietnam during the early 1960s: Malcolm Browne of the Associated Press, David Halberstam of the *New York Times*, and Neil Sheehan of United Press International. Halberstam would share the Pulitzer Prize with Browne for their reporting of Vietnam in 1963, while both Sheehan and Halberstam would receive Pulitzers for their books on the Vietnam War. Although other reporters in Vietnam and columnists in the United States would play a role in the conflict between the press and the government after Ap Bac, these three men were always at the forefront.

The media's voice was not the only one that contradicted the official view. The American advisors in the field did not always go along with the officials in Saigon and Washington. In fact, the media developed very close ties to the American advisors in the field precisely because the advisors disagreed with their superiors. Many reports from Vietnam quoted unnamed American sources, which in practice meant advisors. Daniel

⁴⁸ U.S. Department of State. "Minutes of the Eighth Meeting of the Southeast Asia Task Force, September 19, 1962."

Hallin describes this intimacy: "From 1962 on *New York Times* reporting from South Vietnam reflected very closely the views of Americans in the field."⁴⁹ The *Times* journalist who provided that reporting was Halberstam, who became a close personal friend of not only LTC Vann but also many other advisors. The friendship between reporters and advisors was utilized after Ap Bac, when article after article with quotes from Americans in the field appeared in the United States.

These advisors disagreed with their superiors because they had evidence that they felt contradicted the official view. Even before the battle occurred, the advisory unit with the South Vietnamese Seventh Division had run into problems with MACV headquarters. Captain Richard Ziegler, the G-3 advisor who specialized in intelligence, wrote of this conflict with MACV in his personal notebook.⁵⁰ The advisors' view of the situation was less encouraging than that of MACV, and MACV simply concluded that the advisors' reports were wrong. The Seventh Division was winning battles, and therefore things were going well according to Saigon. This conflict was not limited to reports. LTC Vann was one of four advisors invited to a dinner on September 11, 1962 with General Maxwell Taylor, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and General Harkins. The purpose of the dinner was for Taylor to learn of the situation on the ground from the men who were there. Instead, Vann described what happened on the back of his invitation: "Lasted 1 hr 15 min. General tenor of conversation was such that Gen. Harkins presented views and/or overrode key points I tried to present."⁵¹

⁴⁹ Hallin, *The "Uncensored" War*, 39.

⁵⁰ Captain Richard Ziegler Notebook 150, Seventh Division Advisory Detachment, *Library of Congress: Manuscript Division, Vann-Sheehan Collection*.

⁵¹ Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann Dinner Invitation, September 11, 1962, *Library of Congress, Manuscript Division: Vann-Sheehan Collection*.

This pattern of conflict continued, but it never reached a climax until Ap Bac. Before the battle, a major event never took place that the advisors felt compelled to bring to the attention of their superiors. After the battle, the ties the advisors had forged with the media were about to bear fruit. Ap Bac became a major event not just for the advisors but also for the people in the United States. Sheehan writes, "Ap Bac was putting Vietnam on the front pages and on the television evening news shows with a drama that no other event had yet achieved."⁵² In Vietnam, the advisors would continue doing their duty while reporting on the failure at Ap Bac. At the same time, the battle would become the spark that brought to a head the conflict between the advisors, with the media as their allies and mouthpiece, and the officials in Saigon, who had the support of their superiors in Washington.

Not only was Ap Bac a catalyst for the advisors to vent their frustration, but it was also a microcosm of the war in Vietnam. The American advisors in Vietnam were the cream of the U.S. Army. As General Wheeler described them, "*The performance of United States military personnel in South Vietnam*, whatever their task, is of a uniformly high quality (emphasis in original)."⁵³ Roger Hilsman reported that during his conversation with Major General Ed Rowney, Rowney commented, "What is really saving us out here is the high quality of the sergeants, lieutenants and captains."⁵⁴ The advisors with the ARVN at Ap Bac were typical of the high quality of advisors. LTC Vann headed the advisory unit with the Seventh Division. Vann was considered to be one of

⁵² Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 277.

⁵³ U.S. Department of State, "Report by investigative team led by Wheeler to the JCS, January 1963," *FRUS: Kennedy Administration, vol. III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/c1716.htm>, doc. 26.

⁵⁴ U.S. Department of State, "Memorandum for the Record by Hilsman, January 2, 1963," *FRUS: Kennedy Administration, vol. III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/c1716.htm>, doc. 4.

the best advisors in Vietnam, and indeed one of the best soldiers in the United States Army. In his officer efficiency report for his tour of duty in Vietnam, his rating officer wrote, "Vann is unquestionably one of the most outstanding officers in the U.S. Army." Out of a possible 240 points in the rating system, Vann scored a 239.7.⁵⁵ His performance was the reason he was picked by General Harkins to be one of the four officers to have lunch with General Taylor on September 11, 1962. Vann's subordinates within his advisory detachment were also of the highest quality. It was these men, like CPT Ziegler and Captain Kenneth Good who would be on the ground at Ap Bac.

The division that Vann advised was the showpiece of the South Vietnamese Army. The Mekong Delta area where the Seventh Division was stationed was only 40 miles down the road from Saigon (see appendix). In a stretch from August to September 1962, in six straight operations, the Seventh Division killed 100 or more guerillas, including an operation on September 18th in which a mechanized infantry company equipped with M-113 armored personnel carriers killed 158 VC and captured 60 more. David Halberstam, wrote that the northern Delta and the unit assigned to it, the Seventh Division, struck him "as being a good litmus paper of the war as any: the problems were all there."⁵⁶ Vann had been with the Seventh Division since May 1 and had worked closely with the Vietnamese commander, Colonel Huynh Van Cao. It was Colonel Cao's Seventh Division, the ARVN's premier unit, which on January 2, 1963 embarked on Operation Duc Thang 1 [Victory 1], and it was LTC Vann, the premier American advisor, who flew overhead in an observation plane as the ARVN troops advanced towards their objective, the village of Ap Bac.

⁵⁵ Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann's Officer Efficiency Report from 1 May 1962 to 12 February 1963, *Library of Congress: Manuscript Division, Vann-Sheehan Collection*.

⁵⁶ Halberstam, *Quagmire*, 80.

Chapter 2: “This was the day all hell broke loose:”

What happened at Ap Bac⁵⁷

At the outset of the operation, Captain Richard Zeigler, who, as the Operations Advisor for the Seventh Division, kept the official logs and diaries for the unit, wrote, “The plan looked good.”⁵⁸ The village of Ap Bac was the center of a trap as the South Vietnamese encircled it. However, plans seldom hold up as the battle commences, and Ap Bac was no different. As it turned out, everything went wrong for the South Vietnamese and right for the Viet Cong. The ARVN to the south were pinned down, while those to the north were ambushed. Attempting to come to the rescue of the reserve company, which was being massacred, the mechanized infantry to the west were repulsed. Finally, the last act in the calamity occurred when the paratroopers were dropped in the wrong place. Helicopters were shot down. Commanders failed to act. The soldiers were afraid to fight. American advisors became casualties as they tried to restore order to the situation. As the day progressed, CPT. Ziegler stopped keeping a detailed log of the action and instead wrote one word, “HELL.”⁵⁹

The plan was simple. The South Vietnamese would entrap the VC in a box with the hamlet of Ap Bac as the objective (see appendix). At the southern end of the box, a battalion of the local provincial regiment would approach the village in two separate groups. A battalion of regular ARVN infantry, the 2nd Battalion of the 11th Infantry Regiment (2/11), would be airlifted into a position north of the village and then advance

⁵⁷ Captain Richard Ziegler, Operations Diary for Seventh Division Advisory Detachment, *Library of Congress: Manuscript Division, Vann-Sheehan Collection*.

⁵⁸ CPT Ziegler, Operations Diary.

⁵⁹ Captain Richard Ziegler Personal Notebook, Seventh Division Advisory Detachment, *Library of Congress: Manuscript Division, Vann-Sheehan Collection*.

towards the hamlet. For one side of the box, a company of infantry would close in on the village from the west. This was the same mechanized infantry company equipped with M-113s that had killed or captured over 200 VC in an operation on September 18, 1962. To complete the box, a naval task force would destroy the bridges over the river to the east, while a company of ARVN Rangers would close off the remaining escape routes. In reserve for the operation waited another company of ARVN infantry and an airborne battalion. All told, some 1,200 South Vietnamese soldiers were to take part in the operation.

South Vietnamese intelligence expected to find a radio transmitter and possibly a few VC guerrillas. In fact the Viet Cong had assembled slightly over 300 men. These were not just local villagers fighting for the VC. For the most part they were members of three different guerrilla companies who had been in training on new tactics that would offset the South Vietnamese advantage in technology. Moreover, the Viet Cong expected an attack in this area. In late November and December of 1962, they had observed the ARVN making preparations for a large-scale operation, including moving 71 truckloads of ammunition to the base at My Tho.⁶⁰ Thus the VC were prepared. They had the men, the training, the equipment, and the plan to defeat the coming attack. The South Vietnamese and their American advisors did not know this fact, but their ignorance was irrelevant. All along they had said that they could destroy the Viet Cong if only the guerrillas would stand and fight. The VC did stand, they did fight, and they won.

⁶⁰ Report on April 20, 1963 by Colonel James Winterbottom on Viet Cong After-Action Report captured on February 27, 1963, *Library of Congress: Manuscript Division, Vann-Sheehan Collection*.

January 2nd

The combat started to the south of Ap Bac. A VC platoon of forty men opened fire on the attackers, who outnumbered them over 8 to 1. Despite repeated efforts and orders to make them move, the South Vietnamese, while suffering only light casualties, remained pinned down for the entirety of the operation. The American advisor, Major Jack Macslarrow, described the situation in his after-action report: "Despite all attempts made by Advisory personnel, the Sector Commander refused to close with the enemy."⁶¹ Another advisor, Major Harold Dill, described the same failure to attack. The South Vietnamese simply refused to move.⁶² Afterwards, in a letter to the commander, MAJ Macslarrow expressed his displeasure as diplomatically as possible, "I had occasion to note with some displeasure several phases of your portion of the operation concerning the employment and control of friendly forces."⁶³ This inability to move was the first mistake made by South Vietnamese forces during the battle. It would not be the last.

The next phase of the operation also started out as planned. Two lifts of the 2/11 Infantry landed north of the hamlet, forming the lid of the box. It was not until the third wave of South Vietnamese landed that the VC initiated their ambush. The ARVN battalion, like the battalion to the South, outnumbered the VC facing them, but they were unable to establish fire superiority or maneuver past the enemy. In an effort to break the deadlock, "Forces constantly shifted to attain [fire superiority], but a large number of the

⁶¹ Major Jack Macslarrow Field Advisor Analysis as Submitted with LTC Vann AAR, *Library of Congress: Manuscript Division, Vann-Sheehan Collection*.

⁶² Major Harold Dill After-Action Report as Submitted with LTC Vann AAR, *Library of Congress: Manuscript Division, Vann-Sheehan Collection*.

⁶³ Letter from Major Jack Macslarrow, Seventh Division Advisory Detachment, to Major Lam Quang Tho, Commander Dinh Tuong Regiment, 3 January 1963, *Library of Congress: Manuscript Division, Vann-Sheehan Collection*.

friendly force was pinned down.”⁶⁴ The American advisor with the unit, Captain Kenneth Good, tried to get the ARVN soldiers to advance, but as another advisor later recounted in an interview, one of the Vietnamese officers lost the ability to speak English whenever he was given a command to attack the VC. He would claim not to understand CPT Good’s orders even though he spoke perfectly fluent English at all other times.⁶⁵ This phenomenon was repeated as Major James Scanlon recounted, “The 2nd LT understood English very well except when I asked him to attack. Then he replied that he did not understand.”⁶⁶ In both cases, to the north and to the south, the ARVN soldiers remained where they were.

Because of the inability of the 2/11 to extricate itself from its exposed position, CPT Good recommended that the reserve infantry company should be sent into the battle. LTC Vann requested that they be inserted into a position several hundred meters west of Ap Bac, from which they could flank the enemy forces pinning down the infantry north of the village and yet remain outside of the range of any VC forces in the tree line near the village. However, due to their positions as advisors, neither LTC Vann nor CPT Good could actually give an order to the helicopter pilots landing the reserve company. The pilots chose to land in an open field close to the village. Less than one hundred meters from the chopper’s landing zone sat a company of VC, dug in at the tree line and waiting for their chance to join the battle.

As soon as the helicopters approached the landing field the VC opened up. Letting loose a barrage of small arms fire, the VC hit five helicopters, one of which was

⁶⁴ Captain George Feliciano After-Action Report as Submitted with LTC Vann AAR, *Library of Congress: Manuscript Division, Vann-Sheehan Collection*.

⁶⁵ Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*. 215.

⁶⁶ Major James Scanlon After-Action Report as Submitted with LTC Vann AAR, *Library of Congress: Manuscript Division, Vann-Sheehan Collection*.

so severely damaged that it was unable to take off again. The American helicopters, as per standing operating procedures, sent in another helicopter to rescue the crew of the downed chopper. This second helicopter was immediately hit, followed by a third sent in to rescue the crews of the first two. Afterwards, the air liaison officer for the 7th Division would report that the helicopter casualties would have been prevented if they had not attempted to rescue the aircrews.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, two of the other damaged helicopters were unable to make it back to their base, instead landing in open fields. By the end of the day, the Duty Officer's Log for MACV recorded the damage, "4 H21s and 1 UH1B down in operation area. UH1B destroyed by crash. Additionally 3 H21s damaged severely but limped to Tan Heip air strip. Hel's encountered 50 cal MG fire."⁶⁸

Now, not only were both infantry battalions to the north and south pinned down by enemy fire, but also the reserve company was being decimated as it lay in the shadow of the three downed helicopters, unable to find shelter. "The entire unit minus one squad was pinned down before it had moved 15 meters from the downed helicopters."⁶⁹ At this point, the last unengaged force, the M-113 armored personnel carriers (APC), were ordered to redouble its efforts to close with the enemy. Despite the fact that their fellow soldiers were under attack, it took the mechanized company over four hours to travel the one-mile separating it from the battle, a trip that LTC Vann described as "intolerably slow."⁷⁰ After the fighting was over, the company would make the same trip in 15

⁶⁷ Major Herb Provost After-Action Report as Submitted with LTC Vann AAR. *Library of Congress: Manuscript Division, Vann-Sheehan Collection.*

⁶⁸ Duty Officer's Log for MACV Headquarters, January 2, 1963. *Library of Congress: Manuscript Division, Vann-Sheehan Collection.*

⁶⁹ Sergeant First Class Arnold C. Bowers After-Action Report as Submitted with LTC Vann AAR, *Library of Congress: Manuscript Division, Vann-Sheehan Collection.*

⁷⁰ LTC Vann AAR.

minutes.⁷¹ Nevertheless, despite their sluggishness, the M-113s did eventually arrive at the scene of the battle. Captain Robert Mays, the advisor with the M-113s believed that there was no way that the Viet Cong could withstand an assault by the APCs.⁷² The battle would soon be over. The ARVN technology would win.

In prior engagements, the appearance of the M-113s had never failed to turn the tide of the battle. This M-113 company in particular, under the command of Captain Ba, had killed and captured more guerrillas than any other unit in the Seventh Division.⁷³ Unlike previous encounters however, the VC were prepared for the APCs. The sight of the armored behemoths did not cause the VC to panic and run, as they instead followed their training and concentrated their firing on one vehicle at a time. Captain Mays observed the piecemeal assaults made by the M-113s fail.⁷⁴ The M-113s did attempt one coordinated assault, which made it to within 50 meters of the tree line before three VC, with grenades held in their hands, jumped onto the closest M-113. These three VC became martyrs and a monument to their bravery marks the site of the battle. Despite the fact that the grenades had done no damage to their vehicles, the ARVN in the M-113s withdrew. CPT Mays reported with military succinctness, "The company was not aggressive in its movements."⁷⁵ The battle slowly died down as the VC withdrew from their positions, not because they were being pressured by the South Vietnamese, but because they were running low on ammunition.

⁷¹ Halberstam, *Quagmire*, 150.

⁷² Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 247.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁷⁴ Captain Robert May's After-Action Report as Submitted with LTC Vann AAR, *Library of Congress: Manuscript Division, Vann-Sheehan Collection*.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

While watching the action from his observation plane, LTC Vann recommended to Colonel Cao, the ARVN commander of the operation, that he should drop the airborne battalion east of the village, preventing the VC from escaping in the darkness. COL Cao assured Vann that the paratroopers would be dropped at 1600, when there was still enough daylight for the paratroopers to land safely and organize themselves. Instead they dropped at 1800 on top of the village itself. In the ensuing confusion the ARVN soldiers fired on the paratroopers, killing 19 and wounding another 33. The confusion was so complete that the American advisors, who were supposed to give the South Vietnamese the advantage of their experience and training, had no idea where they were going or what they would find when they got there.⁷⁶ The helicopter pilots involved in the operation composed a song about their experience. One of the verses referred to the paratroopers: "The paratroops landed/ A magnificent sight/ There was hand-to-hand combat/ But no VC's in sight."⁷⁷ Because the paratroopers were dropped on the village, the guerrillas still had an escape route to the east. During the night they withdrew, and on the next day the ARVN entered the village, only to find that the VC had avoided the trap

At the close of the day, the MACV Duty Officer's Log read, "3 KIA - CPT Kenneth Good, SP5 Bramen (93rd Helo), SGT Deal (LITT), 4 US WIA, 4 CH-21 downed, 1 UH-1B down (destroyed on impact), 5 CH-21 damaged." Back at the 7th Division Advisory unit, CPT Zielger would record the following casualties in his notebook: "3 US KIA, 4 US WIA, 52 VN KIA, 99 VN WIA, 26 VC KIA, and 4 POW."⁷⁸ Captain Good, a member of the advisory team, had been killed with the 2/11 while trying to organize an attack. The other two American dead, Sergeant William Deal and

⁷⁶ MAJ Provost AAR.

⁷⁷ Halberstam, *Quagmire*, 153.

⁷⁸ CPT Ziegler Personal Notebook.

Specialist Donald Braman, were helicopter crewmen killed when their helicopter crash-landed.

Although the VC had withdrawn, the battle was not yet finished. The mistakes were still to come. On January 3rd, Brigadier General Robert York, the commander of the Combat Development and Test Center, visited the battlefield to assess the results of the clash. Accompanying him were several reporters, including Neil Sheehan. While they were there, artillery, under the orders of COL Cao, who was nowhere near the village, opened fire on the village. The ARVN lost four dead and twelve wounded to friendly fire, while BG York jumped into a ditch with Sheehan to avoid the shrapnel.

Additionally, even as the ARVN was pursuing the VC after the battle, a force of American soldiers, mostly cooks and communication specialists, went into the field to support an American officer who was waiting for ARVN soldiers that never arrived. Instead this makeshift group captured 32 VC who had participated in the battle. In the words of David Halberstam, "Americans now feel a bit better because the Communists paid a higher price for their victory."⁷⁹ The operation, which had started out with a simple plan only to turn into a vicious engagement, finally came to a close at 10:30 pm on January 6th, when the last ARVN unit returned to its base. The consequences of the battle were only just beginning to be realized and would echo for months.

⁷⁹ David Halberstam, "Motley U.S. Force Blocks Vietcong," *New York Times*, January 5, 1963.

Chapter 3: “A Miserable Damn Performance:”

The After-Action Report and the Press

On January 9, LTC Vann submitted his official after-action report on the battle to his superiors. Vann's commanding officer, Colonel Daniel Porter, who was the senior advisor for IV Corps, forwarded the after-action report with the comment, “The subject after action report is possibly the best documented, most comprehensive, most valuable, and most revealing of any of the reports submitted by III or IV Corps.”⁸⁰ At the same time as the after-action report, the press coverage of Vietnam dramatically increased in the U.S. as a result of Ap Bac. The coverage mirrored the observations of the advisors. Before, during, and after the battle, reporters talked to the American advisors and helicopter pilots to gain information on what happened. The reporters obtained their information from the advisors. Both the advisors' after-action reports and the reporters' stories noted the South Vietnamese disobeying of orders, the unwillingness of the South Vietnamese to fight, the use of helicopters, the lack of coordination between units, the role of advisors in Vietnam, etc. Ap Bac provided a great deal of information.

Nowhere is the closeness of the advisors and the reporters more prevalent than in the phrase, “A miserable damn performance.” LTC Vann, upset over the course of the battle, spoke these words to the group of reporters who had traveled down to the Seventh Division headquarters when news of the battle reached Saigon. The press invariably reported LTC Vann's description of the battle as an anonymous quote. One paper read.

⁸⁰ COL Porter Cover Letter.

“One American military man,”⁸¹ another read, “One officer,”⁸² while a third said, “One American.”⁸³ The press wanted to protect their sources, thus the anonymity. Sheehan said, “Like the other reporters. I tried to shield Vann and his advisors and the pilots by quoting them anonymously.”⁸⁴ Regardless of the attempts to conceal the closeness of the relationship between the two parties, the press and the advisors in Vietnam were saying the same thing, and “a miserable damn performance” was only the beginning.

What happened and why? These were the questions the reporters asked of the advisors. The correspondents in Saigon, including Sheehan, had driven down to Tan Hiep, where the headquarters of the operation was located. As Sheehan described it, “The news we had received in Saigon of five helicopters lost and an airborne battalion dropped in the midst of a battle, all so extraordinary, had made us decide that we had to get to Tan Hiep.”⁸⁵ The reporters talked to any and everyone who took part in the battle. What they did not learn that day, they learned the next as they went back to Tan Hiep and talked freely to LTC Vann, the other advisors, and the helicopters pilots.⁸⁶ LTC Vann’s quote, “It was a miserable damn performance,” came directly from one of these conversations. Other than the exaggerated reports of the South Vietnamese, the press had no other source of information besides these advisors, and so they used their conversations with the advisors as sources. They reported what they knew and what the advisors said. They did not leap to conclusions on their own.

⁸¹ *Democrat and Chronicle 131st Year Rochester 14, N.Y.*. “A Miserable Damn Performance,” January 7, 1963.

⁸² Hanson W. Baldwin, “Copters No Substitute for Men,” *New York Times*, January 5, 1963.

⁸³ *National Observer*, “Vulnerability in Vietnam: Reds’ Tactical Switch Surprises Americans,” January 7, 1963.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 277.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 264.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 277.

The reports of the battle reached the United States that next day. The *New York Times* article on January 3 read, "The defeat was the worst that the Government troops had suffered in more than a year."⁸⁷ The *Chicago News* called it a "shellacking"⁸⁸ while the *Los Angeles Times* proclaimed that the South Vietnamese were "stunned" by the ambush.⁸⁹ Halberstam's first article on the battle has perhaps the most succinct description its effects:

What made this defeat particularly galling to the Americans and the Vietnamese alike was that this was a battle initiated by the Government forces in a place of their own choice, with superior forces and with troops of the Seventh Vietnamese Division, which is generally considered an outstanding one in the country.⁹⁰

Halberstam's account provides some insight as to why the battle garnered such press attention in the United States. This was a battle that the U.S. and South Vietnamese should have won. This was the battle that they had been seeking. All along the military in Vietnam said that they could defeat the Vietcong if the VC would just stand and fight. The VC did stand, and it was the South Vietnamese who lost.

Besides Halberstam's observation of the battle, there was also a simpler reason why the battle received so much coverage in the United States press. This defeat was larger than any in the past year. The *El Paso Times* reported that Ap Bac "was one of the worst lickings the Vietnamese had taken in their four-year old war."⁹¹ Another paper commented on the increasing number of casualties and the fact that fighting was fiercer than any other engagement since 1954.⁹² Ap Bac was significant for the press simply

⁸⁷ Halberstam, "Vietnamese Reds Win Major Clash."

⁸⁸ *Chicago News*, "Mistakes, Luck Trip Up Viet Nam," January 3, 1963.

⁸⁹ *Los Angeles Times*, "Vietnamese Stunned By Red Ambush."

⁹⁰ Halberstam, "Vietnamese Reds Win Major Clash."

⁹¹ *El Paso Times*. "EP Officer Send Patrol Capturing 17 Viet Cong." January 5, 1963. sec. A.

⁹² Phil Newsom, "Guerilla War Steps Up." *Rochester Times-Union*, January 7, 1963.

because the size and scope of the operation, as well as the casualties suffered, dictated that it be important. The press had to comment on an operation that was bigger by far than most operations in Vietnam and which saw an unusually high number of casualties, both American and South Vietnamese. A week after the fact, *Time* magazine summarized the importance of the battle when it wrote, "The extent of the government defeat under conditions of its own choosing and the heavy losses suffered by the U.S. helicopters caused heads to snap from Saigon to Washington."⁹³

The content of the press reports was as important as the fact that the reporters were saying anything at all. The subjects closely paralleled the criticisms of the advisors present at the battle. The *Chicago Daily News* observed that although "authorities" had no official reports of criticism, "They do not discount the likelihood of considerable griping by American personnel in private when American helicopters and personnel become involved in action as occurred at Ap Bac."⁹⁴ It was this griping that the press used for its coverage. The reporters like Sheehan and Halberstam used their conversations with the advisors after the battle was over as the basis for their reports. Thus on January 9, when LTC Vann submitted his after-action report along with those of his subordinate advisors, the information in these reports was the same information that the press was already using in their articles.

LTC Vann's after-action report was straightforward. The South Vietnamese could have and should have won the battle. COL Porter, Vann's immediate superior agreed. He did not attempt to contradict or disprove anything found in the after-action report. Instead Porter agreed with the entire report and added his own comments. For his

⁹³ *Time*, "South Vietnam: The Helicopter War Runs into Trouble," January 11, 1963, p. 30.

⁹⁴ Peter Lisagor, "Tries to Ease Viet Tension: Military Advisors' Criticism of Troops Spurs State Dept.," *Chicago Daily News*, January 8, 1963.

overall analysis he simply wrote that the operation was a failure.⁹⁵ The other advisors in the Seventh Division agreed with these assessments, the ARVN could have won the battle but did not. The South Vietnamese had performed better in the past and could perform better in the future. Although the military analysis differed somewhat from the reporting of the press, the connection between the press and the advisors was obvious as both parties focused on the same topics. The relationship between the reporters and field advisors, who were close before Ap Bac, became clear as the reporters used the comments of the advisors for their articles.

The Criticisms

Disobeying orders is major crime in the United States Army, a crime that can result in death. However, at the battle of Ap Bac, time and time again, Vietnamese soldiers and officers refused to follow the orders of their superiors. When describing the action of the Mechanized Infantry Company, LTC Vann wrote, "The unit personnel failed to obey orders and procrastinated throughout the entire operation."⁹⁶ Vann later identified the Ding Tuong regiment, the Southern unit, as another example of a unit that failed to follow orders.⁹⁷ These failures stemmed from "a complete lack of discipline in battle."⁹⁸ COL Porter affirmed this fact in his cover letter: "Failure of commanders at all echelons to force their subordinates to respond to orders."⁹⁹ The press coverage picked up on this idea. The *Pacific Stars and Stripes* reported on the failure to obey orders and said, "Many of Harkins's own field advisors charged that the Vietnamese commanders

⁹⁵ COL Porter cover letter.

⁹⁶ LTC Vann AAR.

⁹⁷ LTC Vann AAR.

⁹⁸ LTC Vann AAR.

⁹⁹ COL Porter Cover Letter.

refused direct orders to press that attack, resulting in heavy government casualties.”¹⁰⁰

Halberstam picked up on this theme, reporting that one battalion of ARVN soldiers never acted aggressively because its “commander was wounded and others refused to assume command.”¹⁰¹ The South Vietnamese officers refused to take command of their units despite orders from their superiors to take charge.

Going hand in hand with the failure to follow orders was the unwillingness to fight and incur casualties. Vann listed the fear of taking casualties as one of the causes of the defeat.¹⁰² Major Harold Dill, Major Scanlon, and Captain Robert Mays all reported that their respective units refused any to undertake any action that might lead them to take casualties.¹⁰³ As for the soldiers themselves, Colonel Porter commented on their unwillingness to expose themselves to enemy fire, even just to fire back.¹⁰⁴ Each and every one of these advisors listed the unwillingness to fight as a major factor in the defeat. The press clearly picked up on this theme, and it was all over the news. The *Los Angeles Times* called the ARVN pursuit “half hearted,”¹⁰⁵ while the *National Observer* criticized the “lack of aggressiveness” of the South Vietnamese.¹⁰⁶ In a *New York Times* editorial, it was observed that one of the basic faults of the South Vietnamese was their unwillingness to attack.¹⁰⁷ The *Milwaukee Journal* noted that the South Vietnamese and American advisors were “cut to pieces” as a result of the fear of taking casualties.¹⁰⁸ The press coverage was so insistent on the poor Vietnamese performance that General

¹⁰⁰ *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, “Harkins Raps Criticism of Viet Troops.”

¹⁰¹ Halberstam, “Motley U.S. Force Blocks Vietcong.”

¹⁰² LTC Vann AAR

¹⁰³ MAJ Dill AAR, MAJ Scanlon AAR, CPT Mays AAR.

¹⁰⁴ COL Porter Cover Letter.

¹⁰⁵ *Los Angeles Times*, “Vietnamese Stunned by Red Ambush.”

¹⁰⁶ *National Observer*, “Vulnerability in Vietnam.”

¹⁰⁷ Baldwin, “Copters No Substitute for Men.”

¹⁰⁸ *Milwaukee Journal*, “Basic Problem in Vietnam,” January 12, 1963.

Harkins felt obligated to comment on this situation and said, "I am concerned over recent allegations critical of the valor and courage of the Vietnamese soldier." He then goes on to call the Vietnamese soldiers "gallant and courageous."¹⁰⁹

Another aspect of the battle that found importance for both the advisors and the press was the use of helicopters. The use of helicopters was so pervasive and important in Vietnam that *Time* magazine's article on the battle was titled, "South Vietnam: The *Helicopter War* Runs into Trouble [emphasis added]."¹¹⁰ Major Herb Provost, the liaison officer whose after-action report dealt specifically with the use of helicopters, summarized, "The helicopter therefore generally becomes the most vulnerable aircraft when used in direct combat support."¹¹¹ COL Porter's cover letter also made reference to this issue as one-fourth of his letter dealt with the use of helicopters.¹¹² This issue rapidly surfaced in Washington as the *Washington Post* reported: "The White House has ordered a full report on U.S. helicopter losses in South Vietnam."¹¹³ Articles in the *San Antonio News*,¹¹⁴ the *Washington Post*,¹¹⁵ and the *Washington Star*¹¹⁶ all dealt with the helicopter losses from Ap Bac and the subsequent reaction in Washington. Another newspaper headline read, "Copters Stir Controversy in Vietnam."¹¹⁷ The helicopter became a major issue for the advisors in Vietnam, and it became an even bigger issue for the press in the United States.

¹⁰⁹ *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, "Harkins Raps Criticisms of Viet Troops."

¹¹⁰ *Time*, "The Helicopter War Runs into Trouble," p. 30.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² COL Porter Cover Letter.

¹¹³ Fred S. Hoffman, "Full Report on Helicopter Losses in Vietnam Ordered by White House," *Washington Post*, January 4, 1963.

¹¹⁴ *San Antonio News*, "Security Problem Blamed in Ambush," January 4, 1963, sec. C.

¹¹⁵ John G. Norris, "Damaged 'Copters Turn Spotlight on New War Concept," *Washington Post*, 6 January 6, 1963.

¹¹⁶ Richard Fryklund, "Vietnam 'Copter Losses Stir Pentagon Argument," *Washington Star*, January 8, 1963.

¹¹⁷ Phil Newsom, "Copters Stir Controversy in Vietnam," *Rochester Times-Union*, date unknown, January 1963.

Still another aspect of the battle that the advisors and press criticized afterwards was the lack of coordination between the units taking part in the operation. MAJ Provost noted this absence and wrote, "Apparently, no one at the CP knew to whom the Airborne Force was attached for operational control."¹¹⁸ Major Jack MacSllarrow, the advisor to the provincial regiment and the provincial chief was much more caustic in his report. Another advisor, Captain George Feliciano, spoke of the small arms fire his unit received from friendly forces.¹¹⁹ LTC Vann wrote in his report that one contributing factor to the failure was poor coordination.¹²⁰ For Sergeant Bowers the communication breakdown was so complete that, "I do not know what mission had been assigned."¹²¹ The *New York Times* expressly identified the lack of coordination and recounted, "Another key problem, illustrated by the latest losses, is the need for better coordination of all arms and all planning."¹²²

One of the most contentious issues in Vietnam was the role of the American advisor. American advisors could not issue orders to Vietnamese soldiers, only advise them, and this led to many problems in the eyes of the Americans. At one point MAJ Scanlon ordered the mechanized infantry company to secure the downed helicopters. Captain Ba, the company commander, refused.¹²³ MAJ Scanlon also related a story where a Vietnamese officer would ask him questions in English, but then pretended to not understand English when advised to attack. "I then asked him in his language to come with me to attack with the M-113's and he still said he didn't understand."¹²⁴ MAJ

¹¹⁸ MAJ Provost AAR.

¹¹⁹ CPT Feliciano AAR.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ SFC Bowers AAR.

¹²² Baldwin. "Copters No Substitute for Men."

¹²³ CPT Mays AAR.

¹²⁴ MAJ Scanlon AAR.

MacSarrow described his experience in trying to get the ARVN commander to move. He wrote, "Recommendations submitted by US Advisory personnel present were ignored time and time again."¹²⁵ Again and again the South Vietnamese, who were under no obligation to follow the American advice, ignored the orders and suggestions of the advisors.

Once more the press talked about the same issues. Halberstam said, "These advisors hope that one product of the defeat will be an improved and more fruitful relationship between United States advisors and the Vietnamese."¹²⁶ The *San Antonio Express* observed, "The shortcoming lies in South Vietnamese officers' disregard of American officers' advice."¹²⁷ The *Washington News* remarked that Ap Bac proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that South Vietnamese officers were refusing to follow American advisors.¹²⁸ The paper called the role of an advisor "difficult, almost impossible."¹²⁹ The *New York Times* reported that many American advisors had been and still were advocating a change in their role. These advisors wanted a stronger position.¹³⁰ The *Rochester Times-Union* reported that the battle "exploded into the open the long-standing but mostly hushed resentment among the Americans over their relationship with the Vietnamese."¹³¹

The similarities between the press and the advisors were not limited to analysis of the battle. LTC Vann listed several recommendations in his report, all of which were related to tactical military changes, such as assigning a helicopter to the division

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ David Halberstam, "Vietnam Defeat Shocks U.S. Aides." *The New York Times*, January 7, 1963.

¹²⁷ *San Antonio Express*, "Vietnamese Lessons Lost," January 9, 1963, sec. A.

¹²⁸ *Washington News*, "A Costly 'Advisor' System," January 11, 1963.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ *New York Times*, "Felt Sees Defeat of Vietnam Reds," January 12, 1963.

¹³¹ Newsom, "Copters Stir Controversy in Vietnam."

commander as a command and control platform, or were very specific to the battle, such as using a Board of Inquiry to ascertain whether the commander of the Dinh Toung Provincial Regiment and the 7th Mechanized Company were fit to retain their commands.¹³² The press did not presume to make recommendations on military matters, but it did comment that some kind of changes had to be made. The *Washington News* observed, "Informed sources said it appeared the U.S. military and the South Vietnamese government would have to revise military strategy in the light of lessons learned in the costly battle."¹³³ Both the advisors and the media recognized that the failure at Ap Bac meant that something had to change. The *Detroit Free Press* clearly identified this fact when it remarked, "The question, then, should not be why we lost the choppers, but why we are getting nowhere in the war and how do we go about ending the stalemate."¹³⁴ The current situation was a stalemate, and the *Detroit Free Press* wanted to know what the government was going to do to change it

There was no mention, either from the advisors or the press, that the U.S. should not be there in the first place. The *Wall Street Journal* summed it up and said, "None of this argues against the strategic reasons for trying to keep the Communists from conquering South Vietnam."¹³⁵ The press simply reported the same information as the advisors. This was simply because the reporters in Vietnam got their information from the advisors. Both believed that the war could be won, but that some changes had to be made. The only difference, as will be shown, was that the reporters were reaching the high-ranking officials in Saigon and Washington D.C., while the advisors were not.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ *Washington News*, "U.S. May Revise Strategy: Vietnamese 'Humiliated,'" January 4, 1963.

¹³⁴ *Detroit Free Press*, "The Mess in Vietnam Calls for a Hard Look," January 5, 1963, sec. A.

¹³⁵ *Wall Street Journal*, "War Without Will," January 10, 1963.

Chapter 4: “Initial Press Reports Have Distorted...:” After the Battle

The advisors were reporting their analyses of the battle, including all their criticisms. The press was reporting similar facts and ideas as the advisors. Yet the officials in Saigon and in Washington D.C. focused neither on the criticisms nor observations of the advisors. Similarly they ignored the comments of the press. Instead they focused on the simple fact that the press was providing negative coverage. They did not focus on why the coverage was negative, and when they did they simply decided that the press was wrong. The first official reaction to the battle provided the best summary of this situation. It took the form of a memorandum forwarded to President Kennedy by the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) on January 3rd. This memorandum read, “It appears that the initial press reports have distorted both the importance of the action and the damage suffered by the US/GVN forces...the operation is being continued.”¹³⁶ Thus, before the operation was even finished the JCS was responding to the negative reports of the battle found in the newspapers.

Early Reaction, January 2 through January 18

The reaction at MACV to Vann’s after-action report was vehement. Earlier General Harkins had wanted to relieve Vann immediately after the battle, when Vann’s comments that the battle had been “a miserable damn performance” made it into the papers in the U.S. General Harkins knew that LTC Vann had made the comment. However when asked about it, LTC Vann said that the reporters had overheard the conversations and that he had never directly spoken to reporters.¹³⁷ However General

¹³⁶ U.S. Department of State, “Editorial Note.”

¹³⁷ Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 279.

Harkins was dissuaded from firing LTC Vann. After actually receiving the after-action report, he again wanted to relieve Vann, but this time his anger extended to COL Porter as well.¹³⁸ In an April article, Halberstam reported, “The situation became so serious that a high United States officer was almost removed as a division advisor.”¹³⁹ In both cases General Harkins was dissuaded and LTC Vann and COL Porter kept their positions.

However, even before Gen. Harkins dealt with LTC Vann’s after action report, both Saigon and Washington were dealing with the coverage of the battle. On January 4, the U.S. Army Command in the Pacific sent a telegram to the JCS describing the battle as “one of the bloodiest and costliest battles of S. Vietnam war.”¹⁴⁰ That same day General Harkins prepared a report on the battle that was later forwarded to the President. This report acknowledged that some errors did occur at Ap Bac, but also that the battle was still a victory. It stated, “There are days-and there are days. This day they got a bear by the tail and they didn’t let go of it. At least they got most of it.”¹⁴¹ With these reports from the Pacific contradicting the reports of the press, the JCS felt that it had to act in response to the negative criticisms in the press and sent an investigative team to Vietnam headed by the Army Chief of Staff, General Earle Wheeler. Its mission was to provide the JCS and Secretary of Defense McNamara with “an up-to-date assessment of the situation in South Vietnam.”¹⁴²

In Vietnam, while Harkins was contemplating relieving Vann of his command, he was also dealing with the press accounts of the battle. He sent a telegram to General Taylor on January 10, which stated, “I am concerned over recent allegations critical of

¹³⁸ Ibid., 291.

¹³⁹ David Halberstam, “Saigon Criticized on ‘Cautious’ War,” *New York Times*, April 13, 1963.

¹⁴⁰ U.S. Department of State, “Editorial Note.”

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² U.S. Department of State, “Report by investigative team led by Wheeler to the JCS. January 1963.”

the valor and courage of the Vietnamese soldiers...I have all confidence that the Vietnamese Armed Forces will attain even greater success."¹⁴³ He read this statement to the press in conjunction with a visit by Admiral Harry Felt, the commander-in-chief of the Pacific forces, to South Vietnam. As the *Pacific Stars and Stripes* described the visit, Felt questioned the news coverage of the battle and said, "I understand it was a South Vietnamese victory."¹⁴⁴ However Felt's visit did have a purpose other than to make a press statement. The *New York Times* reported that Admiral Felt had many questions for General Harkins about Ap Bac and the situation in Vietnam.¹⁴⁵ Felt ventured to Vietnam to learn more about the battle that was causing such a furor in the media.

While the military was dealing with the battle and the fallout in the press, the Kennedy Administration was formulating its position. Publicly President Kennedy ignored the negative aspects of the battle and concentrated on the progress of the war in Vietnam. On January 14th President Kennedy delivered his State of the Union address to the joint session of Congress. During his speech he talked of fighting communism, making several specific references to Vietnam. He stated, "The spearpoint of aggression has been blunted in Vietnam," while later in the speech he said, "And we have maintained the frontiers of freedom from Vietnam to West Berlin."¹⁴⁶ Although his speech was very optimistic, things were not that clear cut inside the administration. The CIA prepared an intelligence memorandum on Vietnam, which the President read on January 11th. Key to it was the observation that, despite claims of South Vietnamese success, "the tide has not yet turned. On balance, the war remains a slowly escalating

¹⁴³ Message from General Paul Harkins to General Taylor: 100830Z Jan 63. *Library of Congress: Manuscript Division, Vann-Sheehan Collection.*

¹⁴⁴ *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, "Harkins Raps Criticism of Viet Troops."

¹⁴⁵ *New York Times*, "Felt Sees Defeat of Vietnam Reds."

¹⁴⁶ President Kennedy, State of the Union.

stalemate. Both sides have problems, but both have improved their capabilities during recent months.”¹⁴⁷ This estimate disagreed with the views put forth in the many reports on Vietnam from MACV’s to Mansfield’s to Hilsman’s. In actuality, this estimate was more in line with the views of LTC Vann, the advisors, and the reporters who all reported that the Viet Cong were increasing in strength. However this estimate was replaced by many other more optimistic about the situation.

Six days after the CIA intelligence reached the President, the Special Group for Counterinsurgency, which comprised members of the State Department, Department of Defense, and the National Security Council met to discuss Vietnam. Chalmers Wood, the Director of the State Department’s Vietnam Working Group, observed that the battle “was more serious from the political viewpoint than militarily.”¹⁴⁸ The point was that the battle did not have much impact on the military situation in Vietnam. Instead it became a major issue in the politics of Washington. After Wood’s comments, “The Group discussed at length the question of relating press coverage in South Vietnam to the positive side.”¹⁴⁹ The focus of the discussion was not on the impact the battle had on US policy, whether militarily or politically. Instead it was on the negative press the battle was generating for the entire American effort in Vietnam.

This preoccupation with the press was easiest to discern in the US Information Agency (USIA), which was the agency located in Vietnam. It was responsible for press relations for the American effort. The Deputy Director of USIA wrote a memorandum

¹⁴⁷ U.S. Department of State, “Current Intelligence Memorandum prepared by CIA, January 11 1963,” *FRUS: Kennedy Administration, vol. III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*. U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/c1716.htm>, doc. 11.

¹⁴⁸ U.S. Department of State, “Minutes of a meeting of the Special Group for Counterinsurgency January 17, 1963,” *FRUS: Kennedy Administration vol. III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/c1716.htm>, doc. 14.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

about the Special Group for Counterinsurgency meeting to the Director of the USIA. He summed up the meeting and wrote, "The feeling of the group was that, although our policies were correct in Vietnam you would never know it from the press coverage of Vietnam in this country."¹⁵⁰ Again the issue was not the lessons to be learned from the battle but instead the response to the negative press accounts of the battle. At the close of the meeting the members agreed that the situation in Vietnam had improved in the last year, contrary to any press reports.¹⁵¹ The Group focused on the press situation because that was the problem they had to deal with. Before they could seriously analyze the situation in Vietnam and the Battle of Ap Bac, they were awaiting the results of the JCS investigative team sent to Vietnam.

The JCS Trip

General Wheeler's fact-finding team arrived in South Vietnam on January 18, 1963. Traveling throughout the country, visiting units in the field, talking to the advisors, and touring strategic hamlets, the team spent eight days in the country. Only one of them was spent in the Mekong Delta area, where most of the fighting in the guerrilla war was taking place. They spent absolutely no time in My Tho and Ap Bac. Major General Victor Krulak learned more about Ap Bac than any other member of the team. A close personal friend of President Kennedy, he was the Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities and Secretary of Defense Robert MacNamara's point man for Vietnam. He would play an important role in the ensuing stages of the war in Vietnam, including the discussions about Ap Bac. MG Krulak would be awarded the

¹⁵⁰ U.S. Department of State, "Memorandum from Deputy Director of US Information Agency to Director of US Information Agency, January 30, 1963," *FRUS: Kennedy Administration, vol. III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, U.S. Department of State. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/c1716.htm>, doc. 23.

¹⁵¹ U.S. Department of State, "Minutes of a meeting of the Special Group for Counterinsurgency January 17, 1963."

Legion of Merit for his actions as Special Assistant and then later a Distinguished Service Medal for his performance as the Commander, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific.

Nevertheless, Halberstam did not have a very high opinion of MG Krulak at the time. In a letter to LTC Vann, Halberstam described MG Krulak as “a two star phoney trying to use this war to become a four star phoney and commandant of the Marine Corps.”¹⁵²

Regardless, in January 1963, MG Krulak had lunch with BG York and COL Porter, but according to these two men, Krulak never asked a question about Ap Bac.¹⁵³ While in Vietnam, he nor any other member of the team ever talked to any of the other advisors.

MG Krulak’s role in Vietnam did not end with his discussion with York and Porter. Later during the trip to Vietnam, MG Krulak’s aide read LTC Vann’s after-action report. General Harkins had made copies of this report available to the team. Krulak’s aide, after reading the report, decided to speak to Vann personally to find out his opinion. After talking with Vann, the aide gave the report to Krulak to read. Nothing came of it. In an interview with Neil Sheehan later, Krulak said that the report did not make much of an impression on him. He recalled “deciding that Vann and his field advisors and Porter were being unduly harsh in their appraisal of the performance of the Saigon army because they were comparing it to the standards of their U.S. Army model.”¹⁵⁴ What is clear is that the concerns and issues in the after-action report did not make it into the report on the trip. The mission to South Vietnam ended up as a failure to reconcile the views of the advisors and the officials in Saigon and Washington. Krulak read the reports that had caused such a stir at MACV but did nothing about them. The other members of the

¹⁵² Letter from David Halberstam to Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann, October 29, 1963. *Library of Congress: Manuscript Division, Vann-Sheehan Collection.*

¹⁵³ Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 300.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 301.

mission did not even read the reports. The advisors and Vann were left in the field, unable to talk to those men whose mission was to find out the truth about Ap Bac and the Vietnam War.

Later Reaction, January 18 and Onward

Before MG Krulak, General Wheeler and the rest of the JCS team returned from their trip, the issue of the press was again brought to the fore of the official dialogue. The government could not wait for the Wheeler report to deal with the press. On January 24, 1963, the Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, sent a telegram to the Embassy in Vietnam, requesting “your frank, general, and confidential evaluation overall job being done by U.S. newsmen in reporting war in Vietnam to U.S. public.” Rusk commented, “We are still getting adverse play in daily press,” and he called the press issue a “long vexed question.”¹⁵⁵

The response to this inquiry came on February 5. The telegram from the embassy stated that the quality of reporting was as good as the average reporting of any domestic story.¹⁵⁶ The telegram observed that only the Associated Press, United Press International, and the *New York Times* stationed full time correspondents in Vietnam because Vietnam was not a major issue in domestic reporting. Of course, once Ap Bac took place, Vietnam became a major issue, but before then Vietnam was rarely front page news. This also meant that “so called ‘positive’ stories got relatively little play, if they make papers at all, while bad news often hits page one.”¹⁵⁷ The harshest criticism of the

¹⁵⁵ U.S. Department of State, “Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam, January 24, 1963,” *FRUS: Kennedy Administration, vol. III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*. U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/c1716.htm>, doc. 17.

¹⁵⁶ U.S. Department of State, “Telegram from the embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, February 5th, 1963,” *FRUS: Kennedy Administration, vol. III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/c1716.htm>, doc. 30.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

press was reserved not for the field reporters, but for the editors, commentators, and columnists, who “licked chops with delight and reached for simplest adjectives they could muster” when reports of the battle came in.¹⁵⁸ Once again the issue was not whether what the press was saying was true or not. Instead it was accepted that the press was distorting things, and that the situation in Vietnam was not as bad as the press said. The question was why is the press so critical of the American effort in Vietnam.

Before General Wheeler and his team returned, Roger Hilsman, with Michael Forrestal of the National Security Council, wrote a memorandum for the President on January 25. Yet again the officials did not separate their discussion of the progress of the war in Vietnam from the actions of the press, but rather dealt with them together. This document was very significant in several respects. It was more optimistic than Hilsman’s reports from the beginning of January. Hilsman was still somewhat cautionary, pointing out that the Viet Cong are still effective and fought “stubbornly and with telling results at Ap Bac, near My Tho.”¹⁵⁹ However he negated his own caution by examining the press reporting of the battle and concluding, “The My Tho operation, for example, contained some mistakes, but it was not nearly the botched up disaster that the press made it appear to be.”¹⁶⁰ He reasoned that America was “probably winning, but certainly more slowly than we had hoped...the basic strategic concept developed last year is still valid.”¹⁶¹ Hilsman recognized that Ap Bac was a setback and that the Viet Cong fought exceedingly well, but he felt no need to alter U.S. policy. The Viet Cong might still be

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ U.S. Department of State, “Memorandum from Hilsman to Forrestal, January 25th, 1963,” *FRUS, Kennedy Administration, vol. III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/c1716.htm>, doc. 19.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

fighting, but the U.S. and South Vietnamese were turning the tide. One truth, however, was certain: the press had the information wrong.

Wheeler Report

At the end of January, General Wheeler submitted his long-awaited report on Vietnam to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The report did not focus solely on Ap Bac. Instead it covered a variety of topics as it followed its mandate to obtain information on the overall situation in Vietnam.¹⁶² The entire report juxtaposed problems with successes. For example, an increase in intelligence capability was a major component of the report and was used to determine the progress of the war. The intelligence had both unfavorable indicators, such as “the continuity of Viet Cong strength,” and favorable indicators, such as “deteriorations in the physical and moral condition of the Viet Cong.”¹⁶³ Overall the increase in the quality of the information coming to the Vietnamese forces was an indicator of progress, and more important, South Vietnamese success. The number of successes in the report always outweighed the number of problems. Thus the report concluded that the war was going well. Towards the end of the report, it finally made its evaluation of the overall state of affairs and asserted, “Victory is now a hopeful prospect.”¹⁶⁴ That overarching theme overshadowed any problems discovered in Vietnam.

The Wheeler report, although it concentrated on the overall situation in Vietnam, made several observations concerning Ap Bac and the negative press. General Wheeler wrote, “Continuing bad press has colored public attitudes both in the United States and

¹⁶² U.S. Department of State. “Report by investigative team led by Wheeler to the JCS, January 1963.”

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

Vietnam.”¹⁶⁵ He recognized the importance of domestic opinion on American policy in Vietnam. The bad press from Ap Bac was damaging because it was driving public opinion against the war in Vietnam. “The unfortunate aftermath of reports of the fight at Ap Bac on 2 January 1963 is a prime instance of the harm being done to the war effort.”¹⁶⁶ The negative press was not just an annoyance but was actually hurting American efforts. General Wheeler goes on to say that the press reports were based on United States sources, but he temporized saying that they were based on “ill-considered statements” made by a few American officers.”¹⁶⁷ General Wheeler disagreed with the press coverage, even though he conceded the fact that the reporters were basing their analysis on information gained from American advisors. The war was going well and the press coverage was an impediment to the war’s progress, not an indication that a problem existed with strategy or tactics in Vietnam.

Nowhere in its pages did the Wheeler report suggest that the U.S. should make any major changes in policy. General Wheeler even said specifically that the advisory system should stay in place with “only *minor* alterations (emphasis added).”¹⁶⁸ Intelligence indicated that the war was going well. It was going so well that General Wheeler discussed the National Campaign Plan, which was the South Vietnamese strategy for defeating the guerrillas. The discussion was in favorable terms, an indication that Gen. Wheeler agreed with and supported the plan. In the end, the report was another example of the optimism about the success of the American effort which dominated official thinking.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

After the Wheeler Report

After Wheeler presented the report to the JCS, Michael Forrestal set up a meeting between the President and General Wheeler to discuss the trip. A couple of days prior to this meeting Forrestal had sent a simple message to the President in which he asked the ever present question, “Why do we have such a bad press from South Vietnam?”¹⁶⁹ This question continued to weigh heavily on Forrestal’s mind after the meeting with General Wheeler. Forrestal suggested that with the President’s permission, he would start a campaign “to make a rapid and vigorous effort to improve press relations in Saigon.”¹⁷⁰ Forrestal wanted to deal with the press problem. It could not wait for American success to positively effect the coverage.

Three days after the President met with General Wheeler, the Special Group for Counterinsurgency met with MG Krulak to hear his report of Vietnam. After Krulak’s remarked that “real progress” had been made in Vietnam, the group again discussed the press problem in Vietnam, going over the embassy’s response to its earlier inquiries.¹⁷¹ This preoccupation with the press continued two days later when General Wheeler discussed Vietnam with Ambassador-at-Large Averell Harriman. Wheeler spoke of his observations of Vietnam and “described the U.S. press situation as ‘terrible.’”¹⁷² The situation with the press did not improve as the month of February progressed. Towards the end of the month, in a letter from Chalmers Wood, director of the Vietnam Working

¹⁶⁹ U.S. Department of State, “Memorandum from Michael Forrestal of the NSC staff to the President, February 1, 1963,” *FRUS: Kennedy Administration, vol. III, January-August 1963*, U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/c1716.htm>, doc. 27.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ U.S. Department of State, “Minutes of a meeting of the Special Group for Counterinsurgency, February 7th, 1963,” *FRUS: Kennedy Administration, vol. III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/c1716.htm>, doc. 32.

¹⁷² U.S. Department of State, “Memorandum of conversation between Harriman and Wheeler, February 9th, 1963,” *FRUS, Kennedy Administration, vol. III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/c1716.htm>, doc. 36.

Group, to William Trueheart at the Vietnam Embassy, Wood asked if there was anything they could do to improve the image of the Vietnamese soldier, “which unhappily is not good at the moment because of unfavorable press reports of the Ap Bac affair.”¹⁷³ While this was taking place in Washington, General Harkins sent a letter to President Diem, in which he concluded that South Vietnam was defeating the VC.¹⁷⁴ Admiral Felt, Harkins’s superior, quoted from this letter in a telegram to the Defense Intelligence Agency, saying he concurred “wholeheartedly” in it.¹⁷⁵

Although the majority of the officials in Washington and Saigon ascribed to the rosy outlook of the Wheeler Report, Chester Bowles was an exception. As the President’s Special Representative and Advisor on African, Asian, and Latin American Affairs, Bowles had a wide purview. He commented that he had to speak out due to the present situation in Vietnam and the recent events. He observed that the outlook in Washington and Saigon is “cautiously optimistic.”¹⁷⁶ However Bowles warned, “I see nothing in the present course of events to dispel my conviction...that this situation may ultimately prove to be as troublesome as Cuba in its effects on the Administration’s position at home and abroad.”¹⁷⁷ He pointed out several times that the current optimism was very similar to the optimism which prevailed in 1954 during the Eisenhower Administration. Trying to raise new concerns and issues, Bowles asked, “What are our

¹⁷³ U.S. Department of State, “Letter from Director of the Vietnam Working Group to the Embassy in Vietnam, February 26th, 1963,” *FRUS, Kennedy Administration, vol. III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/hof/frus/c1716.htm>, doc. 44.

¹⁷⁴ U.S. Department of State, “Letter from the MACV Commander to President Diem, February 23, 1963,” *FRUS, Kennedy Administration, vol. III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/hof/frus/c1716.htm>, doc. 41.

¹⁷⁵ U.S. Department of State, “Editorial note.” *FRUS, Kennedy Administration, vol. III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/hof/frus/c1716.htm>.

¹⁷⁶ U.S. Department of State, “Memorandum from the President’s Special Representative and Advisor on African, Asian and Latin American Affairs to the President, March 7th, 1963,” *FRUS, Kennedy Administration, vol. III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/hof/frus/c1716.htm>, doc. 52.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

basic long-range interests in Southeast Asia and, specifically, in South Vietnam?"¹⁷⁸ He was not going to be put off by the comprehensive plan for South Vietnam. He did not want a policy to win the war. He wanted a definition of what winning the war meant.¹⁷⁹ Bowles called into question the basic assumptions upon which America's policy was based as well as the policy itself. However the government was too focused on the press coverage to act on Bowles memorandum or even consider it.

The Return of the Advisors to the U.S.

Even while the debate on how to manage the press coverage occurred in the halls of Washington, the advisors in Vietnam did not remain silent. In April of 1963 LTC Vann's tour in Vietnam ended, and he returned to the United States. As all advisors at the division and corps level did, he submitted a final report of his tour of duty. Vann's report opened with an encouraging statement, "There is not the slightest doubt that significant improvements have occurred."¹⁸⁰ However the rest of the document was less than optimistic. The very next line of his report stated that the counterinsurgency effort was only ten to twenty percent as effective as it should be.¹⁸¹ Continuing this trend of criticism, LTC Vann commented, "It appears both ridiculous and wasteful to have advisors here and not have them utilized."¹⁸² Vann believed that the advisory system as it was constituted was unacceptable and would not work. He had not made this specific point in the wake of Ap Bac, but he did make it in April.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann Final Report as Senior Advisor, Seventh Division, April 1, 1963, *Library of Congress: Manuscript Division, Vann-Sheehan Collection.*

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid.

As LTC Vann was preparing his report, and of course unbeknownst to him, the CIA was preparing a National Intelligence Estimate. It stated quite simply that, "We believe that Communist progress has been blunted and that the situation is improving."¹⁸³ It acknowledged that there was no "persuasive indications" that the VC had been seriously weakened," but the South Vietnamese and Americans "are causing the Viet Cong increased difficulty."¹⁸⁴ Thus LTC Vann's pessimistic report went up against the optimistic report of the intelligence community. It did not change anything. Going to MACV headquarters it remained there, and was never forwarded up the chain of command.

Instead, LTC Vann flew to Washington D.C. for his next duty assignment. It was common practice for all senior advisors at the division level and above to be debriefed upon the completion of their tour of duty in Vietnam. However neither LTC Vann nor COL Porter, who left Vietnam a month before Vann, were debriefed. No reason was given.¹⁸⁵ Presumably this snub was a result of their actions after Ap Bac. They had criticized the war effort as a result of the battle. However, the government focused on the news reports in the U.S. and concluded that the media coverage was wrong. The war was going well and the reporters were misguided. The reports of the advisors, which closely paralleled the news reports, were also misguided and thus when LTC Vann and COL Porter tried to speak out later, they were ignored. They were wrong before, and they were wrong again.

¹⁸³ U.S. Department of Defense, "National Intelligence Estimate 53-63: Prospects in South Vietnam, April 17th, 1963," *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam*, vol. 2, Senator Gravel ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 336.

Interestingly, another of LTC Vann's and COL Porter's contemporaries in Vietnam was able to make his view heard. On May 10, Michael Forrestal sent a memorandum to the President in which he mentioned that Roger Hilsman had spoken to an unnamed major who had just returned from a tour of duty in Vietnam. Forrestal's memorandum included Hilsman's original notes on the subject, in which he identified three areas of concern that the major raised and with which Hilsman agreed. These three areas concerned major policy shifts in Vietnam.¹⁸⁶ Hilsman and Forrestal brought these points, made by a major who had served in the field in Vietnam as an advisor, all the way up the chain of command to the attention of the President.

This major's views were not the only ones to be heard from Vietnam. Colonel Frank Serong, a member of the Australian Army who was attached to the American mission to Vietnam, was interviewed by the Special Group for Counterinsurgency. Serong had earlier written reports that were more pessimistic than those of MACV headquarters. However in this interview he was quite clear. He believed that, "We are winning the war in Vietnam, current statistical indicators reflect favorable trends."¹⁸⁷ In addition to his favorable analysis of the situation in Vietnam, Serong also commented on the press situation that had surfaced over and over in official circles. He observed, "There are problems with the press in Viet-Nam but they are reporting what they see or are being told."¹⁸⁸ Unlike LTC Vann and COL Porter, there was no stigma attached to these advisors. Additionally there were no negative press reports effecting public opinion

¹⁸⁶ U.S. Department of State, "Memorandum from Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council for the President, May 10th, 1963," *FRUS, Kennedy Administration, vol. III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/c1716.htm>, doc. 120.

¹⁸⁷ U.S. Department of State, "Minutes of a meeting of the Special Group for Counterinsurgency, May 23rd, 1963," *FRUS, Kennedy Administration, vol. III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/c1716.htm>, doc. 132.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

that the government had to deal with. Accordingly the officials could focus on what these two advisors, the unnamed major and COL Serong, were saying, and not on whether the media was covering the war in Vietnam correctly.

Afterwards

Although LTC Vann was never debriefed, he still tried to make his opinion known. While on duty in Washington D.C., LTC Vann provided a copy of his reports, both the after-action report for Ap Bac and his final report as senior advisor, to his superior, Colonel Blanchard. The reports were forwarded up the chain of command until it reached the Joint Chiefs of Staff. COL Blanchard's cover letter for the briefing described why it went all the way to the JCS. COL Blanchard wrote, "[LTC Vann's] briefing will apprise us of some of the features of VN military command, operations, training, and attitude which do not always make it into the reports we see."¹⁸⁹ Vann was scheduled to give a briefing to the entire Joint Chiefs on July 8. It never took place.

The day before Vann was scheduled to give his briefing, MG Krulak circulated a 129 page report of his trip to Vietnam, which said that the war was a success. His report was very clear on that issue: "The counterinsurgency campaign is moving forward on the military and economic fronts. There is reason for optimism in both of these areas."¹⁹⁰ Perhaps the most important aspect of the report, which would offset LTC Vann's report, was MG Krulak's interviews and meetings with forty-eight field advisors in Vietnam. His conclusion based on those meetings was very positive.¹⁹¹ He observed, "the visit still

¹⁸⁹ Colonel Blanchard Cover Letter for Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann Cancelled JCS briefing. July 8, 1963, *Library of Congress: Manuscript Division, Vann-Sheehan Collection*.

¹⁹⁰ U.S. Department of State. "Report by the Joint Chiefs of Staff's Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities, July 1963." *FRUS, Kennedy Administration, vol. III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, U.S. Department of State. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/hof/frus/c1716.htm>, doc. 207.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

added substance to the view that we are indeed winning the war, that our present course is sound and that, resolutely pursued, it will see the job done."¹⁹² LTC Vann's report contradicted the report of MG Krulak, the JCS's member whose job it was to analyze counterinsurgency warfare. Three hours before LTC Vann's scheduled briefing, Blanchard's office received a phone call from Krulak's office. The phone call simply said that the briefing was cancelled. The briefing was sent back with a handwritten note, "Not used-thank you."¹⁹³ LTC Vann never did give his briefing to the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Vann did not again attempt through military or civilian channels to convey his opinion of the situation in Vietnam. Instead he went back to Vietnam as a civilian advisor under the State Department. Colonel Porter retired from the army without any of the controversy surrounding LTC Vann. The other advisors present at the battle were neither senior enough to brief the generals who visited Vietnam on fact-finding missions nor important enough to brief MACV headquarters. Instead they finished their tours of duty and moved on to their next assignments. The field advisors, the men who were on the ground at Ap Bac and watched the battle unfold, were never able to tell their story. The reporters involved in the battle would go on to write more stories critical of Vietnam. David Halberstam won the Pulitzer Prize for his reporting, and both Neil Sheehan and he would win Pulitzer Prizes for works on Vietnam. Despite the discussion in Washington on how to improve press coverage, the reporters in Vietnam continued to criticize American strategy.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

Conclusion: “There Were No Facts”¹⁹⁴

William Hammond writes, “In the years since the Vietnam War has ended, a belief has grown up that press coverage of the war so distorted the reality of what happened in South Vietnam that the American people lost heart and gave up.”¹⁹⁵ This view generally tends to believe that the American press lost the war in Vietnam. This view is wrong. Nevertheless Hammond did recognize an important fact. The press does distort reality. The reporters view of what happened is distorted simply because that view depended on the information available. The reporters only knew what they could learn from the advisors in the field and any other sources such as logs and reports. Their view of reality is their perception of the truth based on the information they have. At Ap Bac, both the advisors and reporters in Vietnam disagreed with the officials as to what was the truth. John Mecklin, the director of the U.S. Information Agency in Vietnam, wrote of “the feud between the newsmen who said $2+2=3$ and the officials who said $2+2=5$.”¹⁹⁶ Adding the advisors, who were closest to the truth because they were actually there, you had the advisors and the newsmen saying one thing while the officials said another. Both sides reported their perception of the truth. There was no truth, only the perception of it.

Perception was not limited to the reporters, advisors, and officials only. On January 20, 1963, Malcolm Browne wrote a very discerning article on Vietnam. He quoted U.S. officials who asserted “that political and public reaction in the United States to [Ap Bac] demonstrated a basic ignorance of the situation. The battle at Ap Bac should

¹⁹⁴ Mecklin, *Mission in Torment*, 62.

¹⁹⁵ William Hammond, “The Press in Vietnam as Agent of Defeat: A Critical Examination,” *Reviews in American History* 17, no. 2. (June 1989): 312.

¹⁹⁶ Mecklin, *Mission in Torment*, xi.

not have come as a surprise to the public.”¹⁹⁷ What Browne and the officials he quoted addressed was a major problem not just for Ap Bac or foreign policy in Vietnam, but for United States policy in general. Public reaction to foreign policy also depends on perception. The public gains its information and forms its perceptions on foreign policy based on news coverage. The American public’s perception is dependent on the media’s perception of the truth. Perception builds upon perception. The press, whether for good or ill, is a major player in the policy-making decisions of the United States Government, as it provides the information for the public.

The story of Ap Bac and the concern over the media and the public’s perception are the first part of important story in contemporary America, the role of press in government policy. The pattern of military and civilian preoccupation with the press coverage became a hallmark of every discussion of Vietnam. The military perceived that the press was falsely reporting that American involvement was unsuccessful. On January 10, General Harkins’s message to Admiral Felt indicated that he was still concerned over the bad press the Vietnamese soldier was getting. On January 16, the Special Group for Counterinsurgency discussed “at length” the press coverage. Eight days later Secretary of State Rusk called the news coverage “adverse play.” The next day Roger Hilsman declared that the battle was not “the botched up disaster that the press made it appear to be.” The list goes on. Each and every time government agencies met, they tried to determine how to deal with the adverse press and to improve relations with the press. These groups did not try to analyze the battle of Ap Bac or the situation in Vietnam. They were too focused on the press coverage and its subsequent impact on public opinion.

¹⁹⁷ Malcolm W. Browne, “May Hurt War Effort: Says U.S. Dumb on Asian News,” January 20, 1963.

This reaction to the press was the real tragedy of Ap Bac. The military and the Kennedy administration defended their actions and strategies without first reviewing them. This is not the fault of the press. It is not the Kennedy Administration's fault either. It is not necessarily a problem at all. Inherent to democratic governments such as the United States is the need to justify foreign policy to the people. The government must maintain the support of those it governs. Thus the Kennedy administration became defensive when the press reported adversely on its policy in Vietnam. If the press reports were perceived as negative, then President Kennedy would lose support for his foreign policy as the public would perceive that the policy was not working.

The press even picked up on the defensive reactions of the government. A *New York Times* story on January 15 said, "A defensive reaction to adverse reports about last week's battle should not obscure a deficiency that is well-documented and is often cited by Americans on the spot in Vietnam."¹⁹⁸ The deficiency the article was talking about was the poor SVN leadership and lack of a political policy. These are two of the same issues that Vann dealt with in his final report in April. Here were two parties, the advisors and the reporters claiming the same thing: America's tactics in Vietnam were ineffective. However the government was so focused on keeping domestic support for the war that it ignored this information and focused on getting better press coverage. They were concerned about how the coverage would affect domestic opinion on the American war effort. This danger is inherent to U.S. democracy.

Understanding how the voices of the advisors and the reporters were ignored is the essential lesson learned from Ap Bac. They were drowned out in a sea of perception. The after-action report sent by Vann, with the reports of the sixteen advisors with the

¹⁹⁸ *New York Times*, "What's Wrong in Vietnam?"

Seventh Division, was submitted on January 9. Before the report was submitted to MACV, in fact in just the two days following the battle, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Army Command in the Pacific, and General Harkins at MACV all sent messages to the effect that Ap Bac was not the disaster the press was reporting. They perceived Ap Bac as a victory. All three of these reports aimed to counter negative press reports that concerned both the Defense Department and the President. The military was reacting to inquiries before any real analysis of the battle had been made. The after-action report arrived a week after General Harkins and the JCS had called the battle a victory. Thus when LTC Vann and the other advisors submitted their reports on the subject, which contained the same information as the newspaper reports, the conclusion had already been reached that Ap Bac was a victory and the problem lay not in American strategy, but in poor reporting. When LTC Vann said that the operation “must be considered a failure,” General Harkins and the JCS had already said it was a success. It is not surprising that General Harkins reacted angrily to the report. Ap Bac was a thorn in the side of the military. They were constantly questioned concerning the battle. The press and the advisors perceived Ap Bac as a defeat, while the Saigon officials perceived it as a victory. The truth was lost in between.

Throughout the entire discussion of the war in Vietnam in 1962 and 1963, there is one important thing to remember. Almost without exception, everyone, including all the advisors, thought that the war could be won. Michael Hunt describes the feeling that the advisors were “carried along by the conviction that they could break the enemy if given a larger role.”¹⁹⁹ David Halberstam and the other reporters never said that the war could not be won and that the U.S. should leave Vietnam as fast as possible. The Joint Chiefs

¹⁹⁹ Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's War*, 40.

of Staff, the Department of Defense, and the State Department all thought the war was not only winnable, but that the U.S. was winning it. Optimism over the war did not describe just the view of military and civilian officials. In the end the advisors and the reporters were just as optimistic over the outcome of the war. The argument was merely over tactics and strategy, not involvement. This was a danger inherent in the Cold War Consensus. Everyone agreed on the need to fight communism, and no one was asking the question, should we be in Vietnam? Even the media, the oppositional institution to the government, was in support of war.

In the aftermath of the battle one thing was certain, the military and civilian officials in Saigon and Washington focused on the press coverage. Eventually the views of the advisors, although not LTC Vann's nor any of the other Ap Bac advisors, would make it to the Washington bureaucracy. However this was not until May, five months after the battle. At that time the discussion on the press had faded and the officials were more open to dissenting views. Unfortunately any discussion of U.S. policy on Vietnam would soon be overshadowed by the eruption of the Buddhist crisis in May. When Vann returned to Washington and tried to give his report to the JCS in July, they were more concerned with the Buddhist problem than with questioning American policy. The Buddhist Crisis vastly overshadowed Ap Bac and the press controversy, eventually leading to the coup against Diem and deepening American involvement. The number of American soldiers in Vietnam increased, and the over 58,000 names on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial attest to the outcome of America's involvement.

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Appendix

