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Robert Northshield, producer of NBC's *Huntley-Brinkley Report*, at the time the most popular television news programme in the USA, considered 1968 'the greatest year for news since 1945'. He did not explain what greatness consisted of, but one can be sure that he was thinking in visual terms, or of images relating to violence and confrontation, the very stuff of television news. For American viewers, television in 1968 captured two moments of violence in a way which defines the potential of a visual medium to change or affect viewer responses — the assassination of a Vietcong terrorist on the streets of downtown Saigon, on 1 February, at the start of the Tet Offensive, and coverage of Chicago police beating demonstrators in front of the Hilton Hotel on 28 August, the night Hubert Humphrey was nominated as Democratic candidate for president. On 1 February, and again on 28 August, cumbersome television equipment was in place, set up to record violence which then took place in front of the cameras, something which rarely happens. Both events suggest the potential of television as a visual medium to persuade through violent imagery; both are extremely atypical in their close-up depiction of violence.

Such notorious examples, remembered by all who saw them, elude the efforts of social scientists who attempt to correlate impact by analysing poll data. Because these images require analysis as visual images, it is not surprising that most historians fail to incorporate the visual impact of television's most dramatic images in narratives concerning the Tet Offensive or the 1968 American presidential campaign. On the other hand, television documentaries concerning 1968 use these images over and over again, to the point that they become, for students of the television documentary, what Dorothea Lange termed 'visual cookie-cutters'.¹

1 Interview with Robert Northshield, New Haven, CT, April 1978. The complete *Loan* execution footage is used in Peter Davis, *Hearts and Minds* (1974), which won an Academy Award for best documentary. Haskell Wexler, *Medium Cool* (1969) — the film's title is a pun which reverses Marshall McLuhan's notorious definition of television as a cool medium — contains footage shot in 35mm colour at the Democratic convention in 1968. Two recent television documentaries use network television newsreel from the convention: *Chicago 1968* (Chana Gazit, 1995, 60 mins) and *Daley: The Last Boss* (Barak Goodman, 1995, 154 mins), both of which appeared on the PBS series, *The American Experience*. Both are currently available on home video for \$19.95 each, from Facets Video, 1517 West Fullerton Ave., Chicago, IL, 60614. 1-800-331-6197.

American television turned to colour in 1968, when NBC broadcast entirely, and CBS mostly, in colour. ABC, in those days a very distant third, broadcast mostly in colour, though not as much as CBS. In October 1968, for the first time, colour sets outsold black and white. And it was a televisual society. The USA, with a total population of some 202 million, had 78 million television sets. By 1970, television had emerged as the principal source of news for a majority of Americans. NBC's *Huntley-Brinkley Report* ran for 30 minutes, five nights a week in September 1963; in 1968 it enjoyed the largest audience share, some 20 million viewers, at a time when the *New York Times* was not yet able to distribute nationally on the day of publication. This meant that television commanded a national audience that no newspaper, however influential, could match. CBS news, with Walter Cronkite, also ran for 30 minutes in September 1963. It found itself in second place, slightly behind NBC, in terms of ratings. ABC, ever strapped for funds, ran for 30 minutes only in January 1967; its evening broadcasts were anchored by a succession of newscasters — Peter Jennings, Bob Young, Frank Reynolds and Howard K. Smith.²

Arguments about media coverage and its impact on American public opinion can be studied, often with more heat than light, by looking at coverage of the 1968 Tet Offensive, the turning point of the Vietnam War. By autumn 1967, President Lyndon Johnson was in serious political trouble because of the costs of the Vietnam War. Johnson called home General William Westmoreland, American military commander in Vietnam, and asked that he tour the home front, promising 'light at the end of the tunnel'. Westmoreland did as he was told; Johnson's popularity rose, in terms of polls in which respondents stated whether or not they approved of the president.³

On 31 January 1968 (30 January, Saigon time), the North Vietnamese took advantage of the Tet lunar holiday to bring the war into the cities of South Vietnam for the first time; their massive assault made a mockery of Johnson's public relations campaign. A Vietcong sapper squad blew a hole in the wall of the American embassy compound in downtown Saigon, breaching it. Up near the demilitarized zone dividing North from South Vietnam, some 6000 American marines at the Khe Sanh airstrip were surrounded by an estimated 30,000 regular North Vietnamese troops. Gloomy parallels were all the rage on television back home, as commentators predicted that Khe Sanh would have to surrender, just as the French did at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, both instances of siege warfare, both commanded by the same North Vietnamese military leader, General Vo Nguyen Giap. During the Tet Offensive, the

2 Chester J. Pach, Jr, 'And That's the Way It Was: The Vietnam War on the Network Nightly News' in David Farber (ed.), *The Sixties: From Memory to History* (Chapel Hill, NC 1994), 92, 96. For a conservative's memoir of 1960s television, see Howard K. Smith, *Events Leading up to my Death: The Life of a Twentieth-Century Reporter* (New York 1996), 325–50.

3 See George C. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (Austin, TX 1994), in particular 151–8; Larry Berman, *Lyndon Johnson's War: The Road to Stalemate in Vietnam* (New York 1991), and Herbert Y. Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam* (Princeton 1977).

ancient capital city of Hue was captured by the North Vietnamese and held for 26 days. It seemed that all of South Vietnam was in enemy hands.

In this volatile situation, violent fighting captured in colour by all three American television networks constituted the most dramatic television coverage of the war. Because of lighting requirements, television could not cover night fighting; the random nature of guerrilla warfare made it difficult for television cameras to be near military action, and as transportation was provided by the military, journalists had to wait for available space. The technology was primitive by current standards — footage was generally shot on film, not video, then shipped to a laboratory in Tokyo for development, and then to New York City for final editing. Cumbersome three-man teams assured few close-ups of violence, even in daylight. The correspondent, holding the microphone, was connected by an electrical cord to the sound man, with his tape recorder, and both were linked to a muscular cameraman, carrying a 50-pound battery pack on his back. The overall record for television coverage of the Vietnam War up to the Tet Offensive is thus of limited visual interest. Network stories preserved at National Archives II in Suitland, MD, for the period 1965–68 (the three networks did not keep their own broadcasts), show long shots of helicopters landing and taking off, not violent images of death and destruction. Fighting is mostly discussed in voice-overs accompanying stories with pictures of jungle grass. As an alternative, network anchors read wire service bulletins from a New York studio with no visual material whatsoever. It is impossible to reconcile what people once claimed to remember of 'nightly violence' on television with the actual uninteresting record. From a visual perspective, America's first so-called 'living-room war' was not horrifying, or particularly upsetting. It was rather a series of random reports, at best reminding viewers back home of a war in which there was no clearly-defined battlefield. Nor can one look at pre-Tet television coverage and find a consistent theme of anti-war or anti-government bias.⁴

The significant exception is the most dramatic footage to come out of the entire war — the execution by General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, on 1 February 1968, of a Vietcong sympathizer, at a busy intersection in downtown Saigon. Eddie Adams of the Associated Press won a Pulitzer Prize for his photograph of the execution. This photograph was shown on all three network evening news broadcasts on Thursday, 1 February; the next morning it appeared on the front pages of newspapers the world over, an unusual instance of one visual medium reinforcing the impact of another. At no other moment in the entire Vietnam War did one event receive such visual reinforcement on television — the Loan photograph on Thursday evening; the colour newsfilm on Friday evening. NBC did not know on 1 February that the Loan execution had also been filmed by two of those awkward three-man camera teams (NBC and ABC). Actually, NBC had two cameramen covering the event. Vo Suu stood next to correspondent Howard Tuckner with his Auricon sound-on-film

⁴ The conclusion, most recently, of Pach, Jr, 'And That's the Way It Was', op. cit., 109–112.

camera. His brother, Vo Huynh, stood across the street, using a silent Arriflex camera. ABC's Vietnamese cameraman turned off his camera during part of the execution scene, fearing, he claimed, retribution by General Loan, Chief of Police for South Vietnam. An American military transport plane flew the footage to Tokyo, where it was developed at a laboratory before being sent by then-new satellite transmission to NBC headquarters in New York City. A cable from Tokyo to New York alerted NBC producer Robert Northshield as to what the footage contained. Northshield telephoned an NBC producer in Tokyo during the day to find out what was coming, but the actual footage was not transmitted to New York until a few minutes before the beginning of the 6.30 pm EST broadcast on Friday, 2 February.⁵

The impact of the execution footage and the still photograph was enormous, both on viewers across the country and on various policy-makers and political figures, though it is difficult to demonstrate that the newsfilm or still photograph alone changed public opinion from hawk to dove, or moved policy-makers to seek disengagement. Alan Brinkley, in a widely-used textbook on American history, says 'no single event did more to undermine support in the United States for the war'.⁶

Not everyone agrees. John Cory argues that people remember the still photograph, but not the television newsfilm. Harold Evans, though claiming that 'the Vietnam war is remembered by the moment of the street execution of a Vietcong officer in civilian clothing', insists that television as a medium 'informs and excites, but it cannot easily be recalled by the mind, and it cannot be pondered. By contrast, the still news picture, isolating a moment of time, has affinity with the way we remember.' More recently, Robert Hamilton has suggested that 'in an age of moving images (television, film) a sequence of images will be more memorable because of its cultural dominance. I think that the real relationship is one of mutual dependence and reinforcement.'⁷ Poet

5 Details about the NBC newsfilm are found in George A. Bailey and Lawrence W. Lichy, 'Rough Justice on a Saigon Street: A Gatekeeper Study of NBC's Tet Execution Film', reprinted in the extraordinary two-volume study of American media performance during Tet — Peter Braestrup, *Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington* (Boulder, CO 1977), II, 266–81. Don Oberdorfer, *Tet!* (Garden City, NY 1971), is a fine contemporary account of the crisis.

6 Richard N. Current et al., *American History: A Survey: Volume II: Since 1865* (7th edn; New York 1987), 880. Textbook prose easily trivializes television's impact. A major textbook in American history says this about the Loan execution in its latest (1996) incarnation: 'Viewers who watched the television clip saw the corpse drop to the ground, blood spouting [sic] from his head. As they gazed at such graphic representations of death and destruction, many Americans wondered about their nation's purposes and actions, and began to ask whether the war could be won.'

7 John Cory, 'TV's Legacy from the Vietnam War', *New York Times*, 21 April 1985, II, 29; Harold Evans, *Pictures on a Page: Photojournalism and Picture Editing* (Belmont, CA 1978), 5; Evans quotes fellow picture editor Tom Hopkinson to the same effect: 'The still picture . . . of the Saigon police chief . . . would have been lost on a television film. It was precisely its "stillness" — the sense of the moment frozen in time — that made its impact'. Robert Hamilton, 'Image and Context: The Production and Reproduction of *The Execution of a VC Suspect* by Eddie Adams' in Jeffrey Walsh and James Aulich (eds), *Vietnam Images: War and Representation* (New York 1989), 175.

FIGURES 1-9

The most significant newsfilm to come out of the Vietnam War.
 Frame enlargements freeze the sequence on the printed page, giving, in retrospect, the reader enough time to reflect on the visual violence, captured in full colour, as well as in Eddie Adams's Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph.
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1 Cholon district, downtown Saigon, late morning, Thursday, 1 February 1968 (Saigon time). South Vietnamese troops bring a Vietcong terrorist who was carrying a pistol and who had just killed a number of South Vietnamese on the third day of the 1968 Tet Offensive. The prisoner has been beaten. As the telex from NBC's Saigon bureau chief told New York editors: 'We are the only ones who have the film on the execution.' Frame enlargement from NBC colour newsfilm, broadcast to 20 million viewers on Friday, 2 February 1968, on the *Huntley-Brinkley Report*.

Gerald Lange would agree. And Professor Bruce Southard, a graduate student in 1968, never forgot what he saw on television:

I was just watching the news. General Loan pulled his gun and shot the man, and at first I could not believe that it was happening. It was unlike anything that I had seen before, and then I saw the blood coming out of the guy's head. . . . It really turned my stomach. I didn't throw up but I came close to it. After that I decided what we were doing in Vietnam was wrong, I could not conceive of the callousness with which one person executed another with no pretense, with no trial, with no evidence. . . . After that I became active in the antiwar movement.⁸

⁸ Interview with Bruce Southard in Peter Rollins and David Culbert, *Television's Vietnam: The Impact of Visual Images* (80 mins; Humanitas Films, 1982). An ideologically recast version of this film, narrated by Charlton Heston, was shown nationally over PBS in 1986.

Peter Braestrup, author of the most comprehensive study of media coverage during the Tet Offensive, does not try to distinguish between the impact of the photograph and that of the newsfilm. But he is very uneasy about emotional attempts to read a moral meaning into the event:

In journalistic terms, it was fantastic. It is not often that a television cameraman, or a still cameraman for that matter, gets on film happening right there before your eyes one man blowing another man's brains out. . . . It was kind of the supreme melodrama . . . a kind of super pornography. It evoked strong reactions among those who saw it apparently. . . . It was a kind of ultimate horror story that you captured in living color. But in terms of information it told you almost nothing. That's the chronic problem especially for television and for the still photos, the difference between drama and information.⁹

Braestrup's logic is impeccable, but his statement ignores the fact that many *did* read meaning into what they saw. Part of the explanation depends on the aesthetic component of a particular news moment. Consider the Eddie Adams photograph (Fig. 3). Loan, his arm outstretched, holds his pistol a few inches from the suspect's head. The Vietcong sympathizer appears to wince, in anticipation of certain death. The scene becomes a visual microcosm. We see a leading member of the South Vietnamese government exposed as a brutal assassin. A clear reproduction shows the background to be a downtown Saigon street in broad daylight. A large flatbed truck approaches. Details intensify the transitory nature of the scene. Poor-quality reproduction, and cropping of the figures which originally could be seen left and right, takes the scene out of its original mundane setting and makes it more universal — rough justice in any part of urban Vietnam.¹⁰ The dress of the Vietcong sympathizer is critical in establishing his visual defencelessness. We see a young civilian, his helplessness defined by a plaid shirt, its tail flapping in the breeze. On television we see his black shorts, clothing we associate with relaxation. A breeze has whipped up Loan's hair.

Formal composition helps to explain the photograph's impact. In the symmetry of Loan's sinewy arm and his pearl-handled revolver, the muscles in the forearm seem to approximate the bulge of the gun chamber. The gun becomes an extension of Loan's arm. The central position of that arm forces our eyes directly down the barrel of the gun. We experience the firing of the bullet kinesthetically in the tightened muscles of Loan's forearm. The back of his head forms a vertical line with the edge of his left shoulder — a vertical which urges us to look to the right. We see an ear, but Loan seems to lack a human face. We move easily from noticing the shape of his head, and his ill-fitting flack jacket, to equating oddity with inhuman behaviour.

⁹ Braestrup, interview in *Television's Vietnam*. This interview was filmed at a conference marking the 10th anniversary of the Tet Offensive, held at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, in February 1978.

¹⁰ David Culbert, 'Historians and the Visual Analysis of Television News' in William Adams and Fay Schreibman (eds), *Television Network News: Issues in Content Research* (Washington, DC 1978), 141–7.



2 Waiting is General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, Chief of Police for South Vietnam. Also waiting are an Associated Press photographer (Eddie Adams), a three-man camera team from ABC television, and a four-man camera team from NBC (one camera on each side of the street). General Loan pulls out his pistol.



3 Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph by Eddie Adams of the Loan execution. The angle at which the prisoner's shirttail is caught by a breeze, and the shadows cast to Loan's left by South Vietnamese marines suggest the fraction of a second's difference between frame enlargement 2 and this photograph. NBC cameraman Vo Suu and Adams were standing side by side. The photograph appeared in newspapers the world over on 2 February and on NBC television the night before.

The North Vietnamese believe that the photograph was a propaganda success for them during the Tet Offensive. Eddie Adams reports that when he returned to Ho Chi Minh City in 1983, he was met at the airport by a North Vietnamese journalist who wanted to thank the photographer who had helped the war effort. 'We have your photograph in the center of our War Museum', he quotes her as saying.¹¹

What about contextualizing an execution which, as Erik Barnouw has noted, reveals the problem of television images in general — an ability to show results, but not causes?¹² We know whom Loan shot, we know what the victim's widow thinks officially, we know where the gun came from, and we know what Loan and Adams think in retrospect. In 1979, General Loan was running a restaurant in a shopping centre about 20 miles south of Washington, DC. He was interviewed by Tom Buckley, a *New York Times* reporter who had earlier interviewed him in Saigon on several occasions. The gun was a short-barrel .38 Smith & Wesson Airweight, given to Loan by American Air Force intelligence officers. Loan knew whom he was shooting. He told Buckley:

They tell me that he had a revolver, that he wounded one of my policemen, that he spit in the face of the men who captured him. They say that they know this man. He is not a nameless civilian, as the press says. He is Nguyen Tan Dat, alias Han Son. He is the commander of a VC sapper unit.

In 1985, NBC's John Hart interviewed the widow of the slain man in Ho Chi Minh City; she settled for an ideological statement: 'I hate the leeches of the people and those who are the slaves for the imperialists who killed my husband. Even though I am old and weak, if I learn where he is I am ready to kill him.'¹³

In 1979, I spent three hours with Loan at his home in Burke, Virginia. Though English is his third language, he offered some additional contextual details:

I didn't think about the film — oh the hell with film — next day some American friend say 'what about film' — I had to go to Hue. I have big mouth — sometimes get me into trouble. According to Southeast Asian philosophy — if you can die it is good — otherwise you have to live.

The unit commander of the Vietnamese who should have done it is now in the United States. He called me on phone — he was hesitating — so I did it. We had joint US-Vietnamese teams of MPs.

'You have your responsibility of course' — my wife asked — 'but why do it?'
I did what I shouldn't do. For me I accept the consequences of my act.

¹¹ Eddie Adams, 'The Pictures That Burn in My Memory', cover story, *Parade Magazine*, 15 May 1983, 6. Adams feels that he destroyed Loan's life by taking a photograph of something that often occurs in war, but not with an Associated Press photographer standing at the ready.

¹² Barnouw, interview in *Television's Vietnam*: 'The trouble with a camera is that it has beguiling images that only deal with results and not with causes.'

¹³ Tom Buckley, 'The Villain of Vietnam', *Esquire*, 5 June 1979, 64. On-camera interview with Jim Hart, NBC television broadcast, 11 April 1985, quoted in *AIM Report*, May–B, 1985, n.p.



4 The Vietcong prisoner already shot. The exact instant of death — the moment when the bullet enters the man's brain — is not, technically speaking, caught by either the still photograph or the television newsfilm, since a South Vietnamese marine passes momentarily in front of the camera. But the newsfilm seems to show the instant of death when seen at camera speed.



5 Already dead — a fraction of a second later. The terrorist drops towards the street. Loan's head, momentarily obscured by a soldier passing in front of the camera, is again visible. A passer-by seems to take no notice of what has just happened.

How about my daughter, day and night, day and night — my daughter getting married in the near future — how will husband's family respond?¹⁴

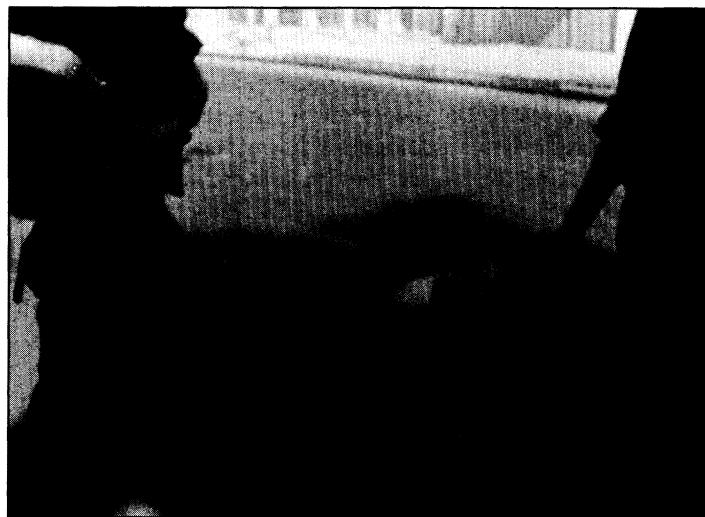
In Saigon on 1 February martial law was in effect. To be armed — the suspect was armed — and in civilian clothes was grounds for being shot. But the camera shows results, not causes, and certainly not context. Thus the Loan execution became a microcosm for the Tet Offensive and the entire war. It made vivid and particularized, in ways most people could not easily articulate, the frustrating, confusing sense that the war was no longer between good guys and bad guys. As for the impact of newsfilm versus still photograph, it is certain that the one reinforced the other, and that those who did not see on television blood spurting out of the head of the victim could study the photograph's moment frozen in time, a moment which seems to show the instant of death.

The problem of television coverage of the Vietnam War has been analysed carefully by Daniel Hallin in *The 'Uncensored War': The Media and Vietnam*, a careful treatment of its subject. Hallin insists that demonstrating television's impact on public opinion is not related to what people think they remember, and rejects claims that television was the 'first domino' of American public opinion. His conclusion as to the impact of television broadcasts before February 1968 is unambiguous: 'television coverage was lopsidedly favorable to American policy in Vietnam'. Television's turnaround, he insists, was part of a 'larger change, a response to as well as a cause of the unhappiness with the war that was developing at many levels, from the halls of the Pentagon, to Main Street, USA, and the fire bases of Quang Tri province'. He goes on to insist that 'there is no way to measure the impact of television's changing images of the war'. His conclusions are endorsed in Chester Pach, Jr.'s recent article about television and the Vietnam War, though Pach asserts that television did have an impact.¹⁵

George Herring, author of numerous books about the Vietnam War, is, if possible, even more insistent: 'A direct link between television reporting and public opinion cannot be established.' Larry Berman makes the same point in his study, *Lyndon Johnson's War*, though indirectly. He simply ignores television coverage, since he is alarmed at how revisionists have tried to make media coverage, along with the anti-war protest movement, scapegoats for America's failure in Vietnam. He dismisses the role of the media in his introduction, 'Vietnam Vogue vs. Vietnam as History', relegating those who discuss the role of the media to a lunatic fringe occupied by such groups as Accuracy

14 Interview with Loan, 25 July 1979, Burke, Virginia.

15 Daniel C. Hallin, *The 'Uncensored War': The Media and Vietnam* (New York 1986), 106, 110, 163. Hallin's analysis of network television is based on Department of Defense kinescopes, 1965–1968, now at National Archives II, College Park, MD. I looked at these kinescopes while working on *Television's Vietnam*.



6 A terrifying image, particularly in colour. The lifeblood literally spurts out of the terrorist's head, forming a pool on the street. Loan puts his pistol back in its holster.



7 The blood is now out of the dead man's body. There is no remaining blood pressure.

in Media. He is dismissive of what he terms a 'pass-the-guilt type of thinking'.¹⁶

Two wrongs do not make a right. Assertion is no proper device for denying the impact of television images during the Tet Offensive. One need not identify with shrill right-wing ideologues to consider the impact of media coverage on decision-making or public opinion. Here is the problem: how does one reconcile the persuasive conclusions of Daniel Hallin, Lawrence Lichy, Peter Braestrup and Chester Pach, Jr. that in general, television followed élite opinion, or had little demonstrable impact on policy-making in Vietnam, with the testimony of those who insist that the Loan footage did affect them. The two points can be reconciled.

First, consider a broadcast whose impact is noted with approval by even those who generally pass over in silence anything presented on television — CBS commentator Walter Cronkite's special broadcast about the Tet Offensive, transmitted on 27 February 1968. Cronkite had left his desk in New York to fly to Saigon for an on-site inspection. His broadcast included both his visit to Vietnam plus concluding remarks, seated at his desk back in New York, remarks widely quoted since:

To say that we are closer to victory today is to believe, in the face of the evidence, the optimists who have been wrong in the past. To suggest we are on the edge of defeat is to yield to unreasonable pessimism. To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic, yet unsatisfactory, conclusion. But it is increasingly clear to this reporter that the only rational way out then would be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend Democracy, and did the best they could.

According to David Halberstam, whose *The Powers That Be* continues to be used uncritically by those who have not noticed its factual inconsistencies, Johnson watched this broadcast in Washington, DC, telling his press secretary George Christian that 'it was a turning point, that if he had lost Walter Cronkite he had lost Mr Average Citizen. It solidified his decision not to run again.'¹⁷

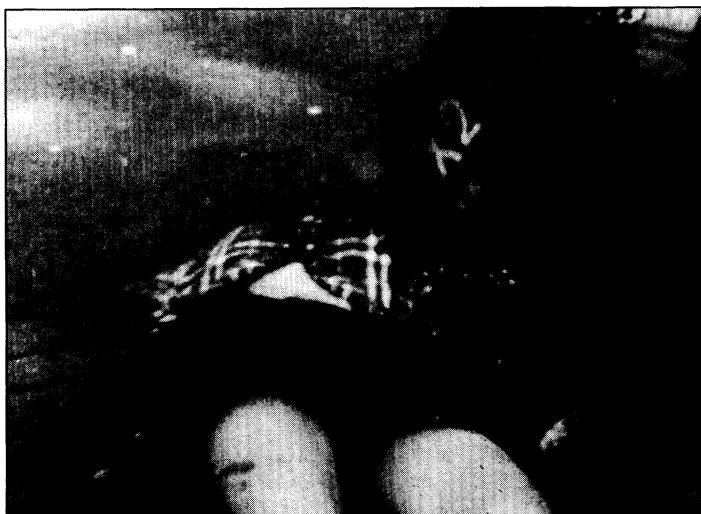
Larry Berman does feel that this broadcast affected Johnson. In fact, it is the only television programme he discusses in his entire treatment of the Tet turnaround. And each recent book about the Tet Offensive says the same thing about this broadcast. There is, however, one problem: Johnson did not see the

¹⁶ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975* (2nd edn, New York 1986), 203; Berman, *Lyndon Johnson's War*, op. cit., 7. Reed Irvine's *Accuracy in Media* is an organization despised by many American academics, though less vociferously than a few years ago. See appendix, 'Television documentaries and historical revisionism' in David Culbert, 'Television's Vietnam and Historical Revisionism in the United States', *Historical Journal of Film Radio and Television*, 8, 3 (1988), 253–67.

¹⁷ Cronkite CBS broadcast, 'Who, What, When, Where, Why: Report from Vietnam by Walter Cronkite', 27 February 1968, reprinted as Appendix XXVI, Braestrup, *Big Story*, II, op. cit., 180–9; David Halberstam, *The Powers That Be* (New York 1979), 514. See my review of this book, *American Historical Review* (1980), 237–8.



8 A zoom shot which NBC did not show, lest it offend viewers by its gratuitous violence. (It was shown, however, shortly thereafter.) A close-up of the dead man's face.



9 A South Vietnamese soldier places something on the body, a red armband, marked 'X2', a Vietcong insignia. The full sequence of the execution, including the close-ups of the dead body, has been used in a number of documentary films about Vietnam, including Peter Davis, *Hearts and Minds*.

broadcast as originally aired, because when Cronkite began speaking at 9.00 pm, CST, Johnson was at his Texas ranch changing into black tie, leaving at 9.05 pm to walk to his private plane to fly to Bergstrom Air Force Base where he would make a speech honouring Governor John Connally's 51st birthday at 10.06 pm.

When George Christian learned that Johnson could not have watched the original broadcast, he did not back down from his recollection of what happened. He is sure that he and Johnson did watch the programme together. As he told me, 'It did worry him immensely that Cronkite had in effect become dovish, because he saw the impact was going to be tremendous on the country.'¹⁸

Evolving technology may be the answer to what Christian thinks he remembers. In December 1967 the White House installed equipment which made it possible to videotape broadcasts off the air (using a reel-to-reel system far more uncertain than today's ubiquitous videocassette). One of the few broadcasts taped in February was the Cronkite special, though it is not possible to prove that just because it was taped Johnson saw it. It is possible that Johnson saw it later, possibly in the company of George Christian. It is also possible that Cronkite's conclusion was seen by Johnson in one of the daily typed summaries that his staff members made for him of what had been said on the evening news. Harry McPherson, counsel to the president, and one of his most effective speechwriters, feels that the Cronkite special 'had a huge impact on Johnson and his sense of crumbling public support for the war'. McPherson feels that Johnson 'liked and trusted' Cronkite, a fellow Texan, though he considered David Brinkley to be a 'smart ass'. McPherson thinks that Johnson watched television not so much for information as to 'gauge what its impact on the public would be'.¹⁹ This alone should remind historians about the importance of television in setting parameters for public debate — never mind the impact of violent images. And it should remind us of the danger of letting a too-convenient anecdote become the stuff of history, a gingered-up version of a less-certain manner in which Johnson eventually learned about the Cronkite broadcast.

Lyndon Johnson made his turnaround on the Vietnam War public knowledge when he withdrew from the presidential race in a television address on 31 March 1968. Adam Garfinkle suggests that Johnson's speech is what changed public opinion, though he believes that television coverage may have

¹⁸ David Culbert, 'Johnson and the Media' in Robert A. Divine (ed.), *The Johnson Years, Volume One: Foreign Policy, the Great Society, and the White House* (Lawrence, KS 1987), 224–7.

¹⁹ Ibid., 227; interviews with George Christian and Harry McPherson, 17 September, 27 April 1979. Time turns the 'smart ass' into an object of formal veneration (and neglect). On 26 August 1996, David Brinkley was back in Chicago, this time as television's 'elder statesman' alongside ABC's Peter Jennings. On-camera, Christopher Dodd, chairman of the Democratic National Committee, referred to 'Peter'; he then addressed the co-anchor as 'Mr Brinkley'. The latter interjected: 'Please — David'.

influenced the so-called Wise Men who told Johnson in late March that disengagement from the Vietnam War would be the preferred policy. Conflicting answers to poll questions make it difficult to trace the progress of collective disenchantment, but Gallup's polling organization did regularly ask respondents a question relating to approval or disapproval of the way Johnson was handling the war. This one question does show a dramatic downward movement, from a public *disapproval* rating of 47 per cent in January 1968 to 63 per cent in late March, just before Johnson went on television to say that he would not seek re-election. Unfortunately for those seeking simple answers, other questions, and questions asked by other polling organizations, make it impossible to link conclusively such a dramatic shift in public opinion with any one policy decision or event. That much said, it is still obvious that the perceived notion of Tet as a military disaster for America received its most vivid endorsement from the media, where visual images played such an important role. As Melvin Small concludes, 'Most Americans were shattered by the first television accounts of the "invasion" of Saigon . . . above all, film of the assassination of a suspected Viet Cong infiltrator in cold blood. . . . Tet was the turning-point in the battle for the hearts and minds of Americans.'²⁰

Consider again the problem of defining the impact of the Loan execution footage within the construct of television's usual uninteresting or visually unimpressive coverage of the Vietnam War. Gerald Lange says 'it never happened that way on television before', which is profoundly true, even if the testimony of a single viewer. Peter Braestrup is in part correct when he describes the execution as a form of super-pornography which tells us nothing about policy. Perhaps Lawrence Lichty is also partly correct, in not even attempting to assess impact, focusing instead on why a news organization ran the footage without a second's thought. For NBC, the only question was whether or not to trim the amount of footage showing blood spurting from the victim's head. As producer Robert Northshield insists:

We had it, and we used it. At the time, there was no argument about its impact. There couldn't have been an argument about it. . . . What its effects would be could not have possibly been predicted. Its effect I assume exists. I cannot in any way predict what that effect would be, nor must I try to predict. That is propagandistic. That is not journalistic by my definition.²¹

Scholars must be more courageous than practitioners, and certainly more

20 Adam Garfinkle, *Telltale Hearts: The Origins and Impact of the Vietnam Antiwar Movement* (New York 1995), 158–60; the poll data is discussed in Burns W. Roper, 'What Public Opinion Polls Said', Braestrup, *Big Story*, I, op. cit., 674–704. Melvin Small, *Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves* (New Brunswick, NJ 1988), 132, 134. Concerning the problems of interpreting the conflicting counsel offered by poll data at the time of Tet, see John Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York 1973).

21 Robert Northshield interview in *Television's Vietnam*, op. cit., Bailey and Lichty revised some of their conclusions in their 'Rough Justice in Saigon' in *Vietnam: A Guide to Vietnam: A Television History* (Boston 1983), n.p., a newspaper-format supplement to accompany the WGBH PBS television series.

courageous than George Herring, who evades the issue by arguing that 'a direct link between television reporting and public opinion cannot be established', as though historical causation were otherwise capable of airtight evidentiary documentation, attested to by notarized signatures of the principals involved (Lyndon Johnson did allegedly seek the signatures of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to guarantee that Khe Sanh would not fall to the enemy).

Daniel Hallin tries to avoid the Loan footage through discreet silence. He does not say a single word about the Eddie Adams photograph. The Loan footage, he admits, is 'the most famous television footage of the war', but he makes no effort to analyse its visual impact, or even to describe it visually, instead simply quoting the bland Howard Tuckner voice-over which accompanied the original footage. Hallin continues by adding three words: 'then the film'. Such silence is not golden.

Lawrence Lichy reports that NBC received only 90 letters from viewers, more than half of which said that the footage was in bad taste. For Lichy, so few letters proves that the footage had no impact.²² But this ignores the compelling visual evidence of the footage itself. Nobody who sees the television newsfilm forgets the blood spurting out of the terrorist's head. Such compelling reality is the despair of every Hollywood special-effects man who ever placed plastic covered packets of ketchup on the bodies of intended 'victims'. The Loan footage has a further way of fixing itself in our collective memory — its symbiotic relationship with the Eddie Adams still photograph. Nobody who sees that photograph forgets it.

The most significant evidence, however, relates to historical context. Large numbers of Americans — policy-makers, soldiers in the field and average citizens — had serious doubts about the wisdom of America's Vietnam policy by autumn 1967. Some believed Johnson's public relations campaign; others continued to believe in a so-called 'credibility gap'. In a time of uncertainty, compelling visual evidence has a power denied it in ordinary circumstances. This is why Tet was a military disaster for the North Vietnamese, though it ended up as a psychological victory in terms of its effect on public opinion in the USA.

The Tet Offensive, as seen on television, showed images of disaster of such wide-ranging scope that Lyndon Johnson himself was afraid to speak openly for a number of days about the military disaster actually suffered by the North Vietnamese. Harry McPherson says that what he saw nightly on television seemed more truthful than what Walt Rostow in the White House Situation Room told him each morning, based on CIA cables from Saigon.²³

Rostow's optimism about the accuracy of CIA intelligence reports now has scholarly confirmation. James J. Wirtz has written the most important study of American intelligence before and after Tet, and he is very clear. Rostow was able to inform Johnson by 7 February 1968 that the Offensive was a failure,

22 Ibid. Nor does this indicate records of those who called either NBC in New York or station affiliates.

23 Herbert Schandler interview in *Television's Vietnam*, op. cit.

something which then took Johnson himself some time to accept. Wirtz shows that American intelligence was more accurate than that of the North Vietnamese, since the CIA knew that the population of the South would not engage in a general uprising, the key to the success of the North Vietnamese plan. CIA analyst Joseph Hovey, in Saigon, did anticipate the Tet Offensive in a detailed memorandum dated 23 November 1967, which went to the White House on 8 December, along with a copy to Westmoreland. As Wirtz concludes, 'the Americans almost succeeded in anticipating their opponents' moves in time to avoid the military consequences of surprise', though official failure to act on Hovey's conclusions, according to Wirtz, represents a clear failure of analysis.

General Tran Van Tram, who directed the North Vietnamese attacks on Saigon during the Tet Offensive, was purged from the Communist Party's Central Committee for remarks made in a book published in 1982, *The Spring Offensive*, that 'the Tet objectives were beyond our strength. They were based on the subjective desires of the people who made the plan. Hence our losses were large, in material and manpower, and we were not able to retain the gains we had already made'.²⁴

White House Counsel Harry McPherson says this about the impact of the Loan photograph and the television newsfilm:

I saw that event on the screen and in the newspapers with two powerful impressions. . . . I knew that the impact of that footage on television on the American people would be tremendous, that it would hit them very hard, and it gave me all the more a feeling that I should do whatever I could to help us get out as quickly as possible.

Television images of disaster were very much in his mind as he wrote drafts for Johnson's television address on 31 March.

Secretary of State Dean Rusk understood the impact of the Loan footage, shown on the third day of the most momentous battle of the war. As he watched that Friday night he realized that it would 'give critics a cause célèbre'. A few days later he told off a group of reporters in a State Department background briefing: 'Whose side are you on?' Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy also watched that Friday evening. He reportedly felt 'horror and dismay', claiming it 'cost the government side an "unnecessary roughing" penalty at a time when it could least afford it'.²⁵

²⁴ James J. Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War* (Ithaca, NY 1991), 246, 172–3. The fight between the CIA and MACV analysts about the size of the enemy's order of battle before the beginning of the Tet Offensive was the topic of a CBS documentary, 'The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception', plus a much-publicized libel suit brought by General Westmoreland against CBS, a trial which concluded without a verdict. The documents which became part of that trial record have proved immensely valuable to historians. See *Vietnam: A Documentary Collection — Westmoreland v. CBS* (New York 1985). *New York Times* obituary for Tran Van Tram, 25 April 1996, C20. The most important new source of documents relating to North Vietnamese intent is the Wilson Center's ongoing *Cold War International History Bulletin*. See 'New Evidence on the Vietnam/Indochina Wars', Issue 6–7, Winter 1995/1996, 232–40.

²⁵ Harry McPherson interview in *Television's Vietnam*, op. cit.; Oberdorfer, *Tet!*, op. cit., 170–1.

A letter was sent to Senator William Fulbright, and passed on to Johnson's staff which asked, 'Why did they shoot the boy?'. Congressman Henry S. Reuss of Wisconsin sent an angry letter to General Earle Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, after seeing the Loan photograph: nothing, Reuss insisted, could 'justify or excuse actions by United States or allied forces which sink to this level. Murder or torture of prisoners is horrible and un-American.' The next day, Wheeler, presumably after seeing the television newsfilm, wrote to Reuss, a letter immediately leaked to the *New York Times*. Wheeler agreed that Loan's act was despicable, but that it had occurred 'in a flash of outrage rather than "in cold blood"'. He added that 'by any decent-minded measurement', the record of the South Vietnamese was better than that of the communists. Air Vice Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, in Saigon, took note of the photograph and newsfilm, as well as its international impact: 'I know the foreign press makes a lot of noise about this death, but when you see your friends die it is hard to control your reactions.'²⁶

NBC ran the unedited version of the Loan execution footage in a special television broadcast on 10 March, in which commentator Frank McGhee concluded that 'the war is being lost by the Administration's definition', and that 'it's futile to destroy Vietnam in the effort to save it'. *Variety*, the entertainment industry's trade journal, discussed the broadcast in glowing terms, noting in particular the purpose of the unedited Loan footage, in which 'viewers were spared nothing in the program's assemblage of all the shocking footage that has come out of Vietnam in the changed war'. As the reviewer noted:

Just how far this show was willing to go was pointed up in the execution footage. On the McGhee hour, viewers saw the entire take with the enormous pool of blood forming as the officer lay dying in the street. To close the segment, Tuckner noted that the executioner was still chief of police.

ABC's anchorman, Howard K. Smith, resigned in February 1968 because he felt that the media did such a poor job of providing any context for the violence of the Tet Offensive. He was quoted in *Time* as saying that his own son, left for dead in Vietnam in 1965, had watched the North Vietnamese execute a dozen American soldiers in uniform. According to Smith, the context of the Loan shooting was never publicized: 'Not even a perfunctory acknowledgment was made of the fact that such executions en masse are the Viet Cong way of war'.²⁷

Robert Kennedy, who entered the presidential race on 10 March 1968, made his first major speech following Tet on 8 February, at the Chicago Book

²⁶ Bailey and Lichtry, 'Rough Justice in Saigon', WGBH supplement, n.p.; Reuss to Wheeler, 2 February; Wheeler to Reuss, 3 February; Tom Buckley, 'Ky Says Regime Will Arm Public', *New York Times*, 6 February 1968, all in William M. Hammond, *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1962–1968* (Washington, DC 1988), 351–2.

²⁷ Bill Greeley, 'NBC-TV Busts Out with Downbeat on Vietnam via Frank McGhee & Co', *Variety*, 13 March 1968, 44, quoted in Braestrup, *Big Story*, I, op. cit., 654–6; Hammond, *Public Affairs*, op. cit., 370.

and Author luncheon. He insisted that Tet was a military disaster for the Americans, and that the South Vietnamese government was 'a government without supporters'. He turned to the Loan shooting:

Last week, a Vietcong suspect was turned over to the chief of the Vietnamese security services, who executed him on the spot — a flat violation of the Geneva Convention on the Rules of War. The photograph of the execution was on front pages all around the world — leading our best and oldest friends to ask, more in sorrow than anger, what has happened to America.

On 18 March, two days after he announced his candidacy for president, he made a major address at Kansas State University, again insisting that Tet remained a military disaster, again blaming the South Vietnamese government, and introducing television images in his condemnation of American efforts to regain the city of Hue:

Millions of Americans could see, on their television screens, South Vietnamese soldiers occupied in looting the city these Americans were fighting to recapture. . . . If it becomes 'necessary' to destroy all of South Vietnam in order to 'save' it, will we do that too?²⁸

Let us summarize what this evidence suggests. First, the general rule. Most television coverage of the war was visually uninteresting; television's impact was overrated, encapsulated in the 'living-room war' cliché from which many scholars have tried since 1968 to free it. Television followed élite opinion; it did not lead.

Now the exception to the rule. The Loan execution is the most visually-significant footage to come out of the war; it merits careful attention precisely because it defines the potential of the medium for influencing élite and mass opinion thanks to its visual content and the historical context in which it was first seen. Its impact is related to a changing climate of opinion which found policy-makers as well as average citizens worried as to whether the USA's Vietnam policy merited continued support. In this moment of doubt and uncertainty, a visual microcosm purporting to show the actual practice of justice by the government of South Vietnam offered persuasive — albeit misleading — evidence which gave people looking for factual reasons to justify a change in policy an opportunity to do so. The Loan footage and photograph legitimized the moral arguments of the anti-war movement. Anti-war t-shirts used an outline of the Loan Photograph as a logo. The Loan footage had exceptional impact because people were looking for a reason to change their views on a matter of policy. In this moment of crisis, a television news story became part of the foreign policy-making process for the average person, for the politician looking for dramatic images with which to clothe his election-year promises, and for policy-makers, both military and civilian. It happened again a few months later in Chicago, as the whole world watched.

28 Braestrup, *Big Story*, I, op. cit., 644, 647.

Though the chairman of the Department of Law Enforcement at Virginia Commonwealth University experienced momentary syntactical aphasia, he certainly meant to tell his fellow police officials that what happened on 28 August 1968 during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago dramatically visualized what most Americans felt the police stood for in American society. Hormachea's book, *Confrontation: Violence and the Police*, included substantial excerpts from both the City of Chicago's post-convention defence of its police department, and the better-known report by Daniel A. Walker, *Rights in Conflict*, which condemned police brutality, including photographs showing Chicago police attacking newsmen. Walker's introduction spoke of a 'police riot', noting the way members of the media had been singled out for assault. Walker felt that the police were out of control because they knew that 'violence against demonstrators, as against rioters, would be condoned by city officials'. Walker was very blunt as to what this meant for police in an age of television: 'Surely this is not the last time that a violent dissenting group will clash head-on with those whose duty it is to enforce the laws. And the next time the whole world will still be watching.'²⁹

Those who cannot or will not allow television images to intrude into accounts of policy-making during the Tet Offensive are more likely to admit that television images of a police riot on 28 August 1968 undermined Hubert Humphrey's candidacy, and helped give Richard Nixon electoral victory in the November elections. Indeed, television images of what happened on 28 August are amongst the most violent ever recorded by television cameras. An estimated 90 million Americans saw this coverage on the night Humphrey was nominated, and television showed violent highlights the next day, the next year, and then in countless documentaries since. Only those who resolutely obtain their documentation exclusively from printed sources can claim to be unaware of how television covered the violence in Chicago on 28 August.

Ironically, those who write about Chicago frequently have not seen, or remember but vaguely, the footage they seek to describe. If the response of most historians to what happened is the same indignation felt by network television commentators, or Daniel Walker personally, it is important to remember that not everyone at the time felt that television made a contribution by exposing police brutality. Television coverage of violence in Chicago, for example, played a lesser role than it did in making possible the Voting Rights Act of 1965. A causal connection exists in the latter instance between televised images of police violence, an aroused electorate, an angry president and passage of a specific piece of reform legislation.³⁰

29 C.R. and Marion Hormachea (eds), *Confrontation: Violence and the Police* (Boston 1971), 1. Excerpts from *The Strategy of Confrontation: Chicago and the Democratic National Convention–1968* (Chicago, n.d., September 1968), 72–9; and Daniel A. Walker, *Rights in Conflict* (Washington, DC 1969), 82–93. Both reports are discussed in Martin Elzy, 'Illinois Viewed from the Johnson White House', *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 74, 1 (1982), 16; as to why Johnson wanted the convention in Chicago, see *ibid.*, 3–16.

30 See David Garrow, *Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King, Jr, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965* (New Haven, CT 1978), 84–5, 89.

For example, 9000 persons, according to Terry Anderson, wrote or called CBS to complain that they had seen enough violence on television at the Democratic convention, and that 'they no longer wanted to see that behavior on TV'. *The Encyclopedia Britannica Yearbook* for 1969 contained a special article about television with an assessment of Chicago's demonstrators intended to instruct students and their parents:

The majority of the police acted responsibly and with minimum force, but they simply formed a backdrop for the excesses of the rabid ones. The most notorious scene took place on Wednesday night, August 28, when the organizers assembled their followers where the television cameras were, outside the convention headquarters hotel, the Conrad Hilton. Television filmed most of the 18-minute donnybrook touched off by brickbats, bottles, and bags hurled at police by agitators. The television film was played to the nation the rest of the week.³¹

In a brilliant, angry overview of how Chicago media treated the Democratic convention, Nathan B. Blumberg, a journalism professor who went to Chicago in August 1968, notes how violence directed against reporters, photographers, and television cameramen momentarily turned one part of America's establishment against another. An editorial in *Editor & Publisher*, the trade journal for newspaper publishers, insisted that violence directed against newsmen caused the media to attack police brutality in Chicago. Blumberg underscores this point:

The closer reporters and cameramen were to the action in Chicago, the more they were infuriated by what they saw and experienced. The violence was far worse than television showed; the savagery was too widespread to be picked up by a few cameras. No person of decent instincts could witness that hell on the streets and in the parks without revulsion, and that revulsion was communicated effectively. . . . The thumpings suffered by journalists . . . was decisive.

Blumberg notes the tortured results of the Chicago coverage, such as the 'edifying transformation of Jack Mabley, assistant managing editor of *Chicago's American*, from chief cheerleader of Chicago's police to rabid civil libertarian — and then back again'. He quotes Mabley's column of 29 August, 'A Horrifying View of the Police State', which describes the police arrest of Jerry Rubin simply for being Jerry Rubin:

I have heard Rubin speak, and he was obscene and revolting. . . . But Rubin was grabbed off the street and rushed to jail because of what he thinks. This is the way it is done in Prague. This is what happens to candidates who finish second in Vietnam. This is not the beginning of the police state, it IS the police state.³²

The Soviet Union's invasion of Prague on 20 August was not lost on those witnessing police violence in Chicago; Richard Daley publicly condemned the Soviet intervention. The *Chicago Sun-Times*, defending police violence,

31 Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties* (New York 1995), 235; Bruce L. Felknor, 'An Incredible Year in US History', *Encyclopedia Britannica Yearbook 1969* (Chicago 1969), 782.

32 Nathan B. Blumberg, 'The "Orthodox" Media Under Fire: Chicago and the Press', *Montana Journalism Review*, no. 12 (1969), 39, 46.

claimed that 'pictures of police fighting the mob of invading peace protesters were like a newsreel from a police state such as Prague'. But not for long. Following the convention, the *Sun-Times* made a single editorial comment, emphasizing the baleful influence of television:

We Pause
 For a Message . . .
 Now that the Democratic Convention is over . . .
 Good Night, Chet.
 Good Night, David,
 AND
 Good-by
 Walter Cronkite.

Blumberg's vitriol becomes supercharged when he turns to the *Chicago Tribune's* coverage of the convention. He notes the day-after-day defence of Mayor Daley, the continued attempt to discredit Daniel Walker and his report, and concludes with this assessment of 'The World's Greatest Newspaper' and its editorial bias:

Tribune employees require no special antennae to pick up the managerial signal that everyone is expected to follow the official line. Writers stray no farther from the proclaimed dogma than do writers on *Pravda* or *Izvestia*, to which the *Tribune* bears several resemblances. On the beam, for example, was its television columnist who was never far behind the editorial writers in bemoaning television's violent intrusion into the fantasy world; on one occasion he deplored the fact that 'television screens were cluttered night after night with scenes of long-haired, wild-eyed, foul-mouthed young people, many of them alien to this city, rioting in the streets of Chicago. . .'.³³

One would be wrong to conclude that all media coverage of the Chicago convention attacked the police and Mayor Daley. 'The World's Greatest Newspaper' was still Chicago's circulation leader in 1968.

Blumberg is correct in insisting that violence against 63 newsmen, 13 of whom had cameras or recording equipment deliberately damaged, led to the condemnation of Daley and his police force which was most unusual in a world in which mass media generally supported the institutions of society. NBC's David Brinkley might not have seemed as angry as Blumberg, but his concluding remarks at 12.42 am on the morning of 29 August were delivered with a calm which belied the intensity of his anger:

NBC's reporters and camera crews in Grant Park have turned in a performance that is certainly above and beyond the call. They've had their heads smashed, they've been sprayed with teargas, their cameras grabbed and destroyed. . . . But in spite of all that and more, they have done their job anyway and they got the news on the air anyway, and from all of us here, all of us, our respects and our thanks.³⁴

33 Ibid., 48, 54.

34 NBC Huntley-Brinkley Convention coverage, 29 August 1968, approx. 12.42 am, Vanderbilt Television News Archive, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN. For information about how to use these holdings see John Lynch, 'Vanderbilt Television News Archive', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 16, 1, (March 1996), 81–3.

In many respects, television coverage on the night of 28 August served a function almost never asked of the medium. A Chicago strike by electricity and telephone workers meant that television was forced to improvise. Cameras were set up at fixed positions inside the Chicago International Amphitheater, where the convention met, where delegates listened to speeches and where Hubert Humphrey received the Democratic nomination in the first ballot on 28 August 1968. The Conrad Hilton hotel, the convention's headquarters, was a number of blocks away on Michigan Avenue, across from Grant Park, featuring a bandstand used for summer concerts. Just beyond was Lake Michigan.³⁵

Television in 1968 still relied on film, not videotape, for news events, but thanks to the strike, the networks could not set up microwave relays necessary for live coverage outside the Amphitheater. This meant that footage shot on film or on videotape had to be rushed by motorcycle to a Chicago station affiliate, processed, and then put on the air, a time-consuming procedure, particularly during rush-hour in downtown Chicago, to say nothing of a downtown full of demonstrators and police barriers. When one sees 'videotape' at the bottom of a television image, it means that in 1968 this was 'second-class' footage, shot on videotape, rather than on film.³⁶

By the evening of 28 August, delegates inside the Amphitheater expected additional violence on Michigan Avenue. But they had no way of seeing what was happening because they were blocks away, and were obliged to remain where they were on the night of the balloting. When television did capture the 'police riot', it took more than an hour to get it on the air. About the time 90 million Americans were seeing images of televised violence (nearly *one-half* of the entire population), delegates were able to see the same violence on monitors located inside the Amphitheater. The result was pandemonium. Television images of violence defined the collapse of party unity seen by an enormous percentage of the population, while directly affecting the nominating process inside the Amphitheater. The evident contempt of network anchors inside the convention hall towards Mayor Daley increased the impact. It is a defining moment for the power of television images in American politics.

There is an archival problem for all who write about what was shown. CBS has no archival record of its coverage on 28 August; it has colour footage of

³⁵ David Farber, *Chicago '68* (Chicago 1988), 158.

³⁶ David Brinkley: 'Meantime let's pick up from videotape the latest installment of the war along Michigan Boulevard . . .'. NBC Huntley-Brinkley Convention coverage, 28 August 1968, approx. 9.50 pm, Vanderbilt Television News Archive. Colour footage of the same riot is found in '1968', a CBS News Special Report with Harry Reasoner, broadcast on 25 August 1978, available for \$207 from Patricia Leggio, CBS News, 524 West 57th St., New York, NY 10019; FAX 212-975-5442. The CBS special failed to impress the television critic for the *Washington Post* at the time it was aired: "You'll understand 1978 better by watching 1968." Well, maybe . . . but not this "1968", which . . . coupled with Reasoner's glib commentaries, seem like moldy leftovers reheated for the tube. . . . Guilt-by-editing seems like something more typical of a 1968 radical-chic documentary than a network overview that's ostensibly 10 years removed from the emotionalism of the events.' Tom Zito, 'Leftovers From "1968"', *Washington Post*, 26 August 1978.

the police attacking demonstrators, but it is impossible to see everything CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite said that night, or how he responded to what was happening on the convention floor. CBS retained only the effective violent images, plus additional outtakes of violence. ABC, in distant third place, also destroyed its complete convention coverage of 28 August. The same is true for NBC, though scholars can see what NBC broadcast on 28 August, thanks to the foresight of Paul Simpson, founder of the Vanderbilt Television News Archive at Vanderbilt University in Nashville. He began off-air videotaping of the three networks' evening news programmes on 4 August 1968.³⁷ He also decided to videotape the complete NBC coverage for the evening of 28 August, since NBC's *Huntley-Brinkley Report* had the largest number of viewers. Vanderbilt videotaped off the air in 'living' black and white; the vast majority of those who viewed television on 28 August also saw the violence in black and white. Indeed, colour is curiously remote from our collective memory of police violence that day, even if today's documentaries about America in the 1960s use only colour archival footage, in the process 'colourizing' our collective memory of what happened.

Few who write about television violence as shown on 28 August have used Vanderbilt's holdings. For example, David Farber, author of the best study of the Chicago convention, admits in a footnote that he looked only at CBS materials, 'but certainly similar materials are available from the other networks'.³⁸ Since CBS does not have a complete record of what was shown on 28 August, Farber says little about the network coverage that evening. Robert J. Donovan and Ray Scherer, authors of a recent study of television news, obviously have not seen what they describe in their book, the moment when George McGovern's floor manager, Senator Abraham A. Ribicoff, responding to scenes of violence shown on the television monitors inside the Amphitheater, stood at the podium and lectured Mayor Daley, seated with the Illinois delegation in the place of honour directly below.

Ribicoff: If George McGovern is president of the United States, we wouldn't have to have Gestapo tactics in the streets of Chicago.

Crowd roars.

With George McGovern we wouldn't have a National Guard.

Crowd roars turn to boos.

Boo that, boo that.

Gavel bangs in an effort to restore order. More boos.

How hard it is.

Reaction shot: NBC camera close-up of Mayor Daley, sitting with his aides. Daley boos Ribicoff. He pushes to one side some balloons which float near his face.

NBC's Chet Huntley (voice-over):

Mr Daley is not pleased with Senator Ribicoff.

Ribicoff:

How hard it is, how hard it is to accept the truth.

Crowd roars.

³⁷ CBS sued Vanderbilt for doing what it would not do itself. The 1976 Copyright Act gives Vanderbilt the legal right to videotape news broadcasts off-the-air.

³⁸ Farber, *Chicago '68*, op. cit., 288, n.122.

Huntley:

And he looked at Mayor Daley.

NBC's David Brinkley:

We would like to know what the Mayor is saying, but we can't hear it.

Mayor Daley clearly says 'Fuck you' so that his lips can be read by every television viewer.

Donovan and Scherer, not having reviewed this footage, conjure up a stock response: 'This brought Mayor Daley of Chicago . . . to his feet in the center aisle. Red-faced, puffed with rage, he shouted. . . .' David Farber did not see this footage either. He misquotes Ribicoff's exact words (as do Donovan and Scherer), then adds: 'The live television cameras in the hall zeroed in on Mayor Daley's purple-faced rage. Off microphone, the Mayor cursed.'³⁹

What is missing? The *visual impact*, and this in books which purport to analyse the impact of a visual medium. The television viewer could not sense the spatial proximity of Daley to Ribicoff, because one fixed camera directed at the podium speaker, in close-up, could not also capture the reaction of a convention delegate on the floor. Mayor Daley's heavy jowls mark him as the very antithesis of the face-man. But his public impassiveness makes for an unforgettable image. He always looks uncomfortable on camera, something every viewer senses. Ribicoff has no intention of helping maximize the convention vote for George McGovern, a hopeless quest since Humphrey already has the votes, as everyone knows. Ribicoff's sole purpose is to convey anger with the person he holds personally responsible for what is happening outside. The podium vitriol comes from one member of the political establishment attacking another member of the political establishment, while television conveys this hatred to every viewer. Senator Ribicoff becomes the convention's anchorperson, momentarily denying Huntley-Brinkley their usual role.

Daley is not 'red-faced'; he is not 'purple-faced'. He sits not with a beefy entourage of office-toadies, but with young, up-and-coming members of an Irish-American political organization. Daley at first sits impassively; his handsome aides are the first to boo. Then a few 'let-joy-be-unconfined' balloons drift into the camera frame; Daley brushes them aside, as irritated by their canned good spirits as we are amused by their sudden intrusion. How, we marvel, can these balloons interrupt a scene so filled with hatred? In time, Daley himself boos. Finding this to his liking, he boos again, with gusto. Then comes the moment when we are allowed to anticipate the slogan popularized by George Bush in a later campaign: 'Read my lips'. We see Mayor Daley, now energized in a way which comes but slowly to someone possessed of such on-camera impassiveness, utter the barnyard expression: 'Fuck you'. It is impossible not to see what Daley has said.

This allows David Brinkley to send a gentle one-liner, the sort of comment which persuaded Lyndon Johnson that he was a 'smart ass' — 'We would like

³⁹ NBC Huntley-Brinkley Convention coverage, 28 August 1968, approx. 10.20 pm, Vanderbilt Television News Archive; Robert J. Donovan and Ray Scherer, *Unsilent Revolution: Television News and American Public Life, 1948–1991* (New York 1992), 104; Farber, *Chicago '68*, op. cit., 201.

to know what the Mayor is saying, but we can't hear it.⁴⁰ The exchange, the improvisatory nature of Daley's response, the balloons, the needling comment by Brinkley — all add up to a moment of visual transcendence, a moment remembered by all who watched. What Ribicoff said is in every account of the evening; what a shame to deny Daley's response, a response so in need of visual description.

The confrontation with the police that night is a different sort of television imagery, effective in part because one rarely sees what is happening. The surreal quality of the action makes it easier to agree with a comment which appeared in an underground publication, the *Barb*: 'While the police were beating up the demonstrators in Chicago, you could see the Russian soldiers chasing Czech civilians in Prague. . . . But, for the record, the Chicago police are much more brutal.'⁴¹

The violent confrontation occurs directly in front of television cameras in fixed positions at the intersection of Michigan Avenue and Balboa Street. NBC's Jack Perkins — who had been in Saigon during the Tet Offensive — provides a voice-over, but what is happening is infinitely more powerful than his words. The camera has so restricted a field of vision that the entire screen is occupied by police, attired in 'informal' short-sleeved shirts, visually out of place with white riot helmets, replete with ominous-looking plastic visors, to be lowered if someone throws rocks.

We see incidents of gratuitous violence, which occur over and over again right in front of the camera (located on top of a Hertz rental truck). The police van is the destination for each protester who is arrested. Again and again these people, for the most part not appearing in the least to resemble media stereotypes of so-called hippies, are brought to the back of the van, then gratuitously hit with a club; the few who resist are subdued by overwhelming force. When we see a police officer jam his knee into the groin of a male protester — something which also made for a memorable still photograph — we know what a police riot means. We feel it.

Then the sounds — the live sounds — begin to make an impression. A tear-gas canister is fired. Eventually we hear the crowd's chant which encapsulates the occasion in print: 'The whole world's watching, the whole world's watch-

⁴⁰ David Brinkley, NBC convention coverage, 28 August, approx. 10.20 pm. Farber's sole source is the *Hyde Park-Kenwood Voices*, January 1969, which reports that Daley turned virulently antisemitic towards Ribicoff: 'Fuck you, you Jew son of a bitch, you lousy mother-fucker go home.' To Farber this suggests 'the Jew part too — sworn out at a time of extreme visceral anger — with its medieval sense of condemning the stateless, wandering heretic'. Farber, *Chicago '68*, op. cit., 249. I was in graduate school in Chicago, 1966–70, and can endorse the claim that Hyde Park was not Daley country. The comment quoted by Farber, however, is far more extreme than what the camera recorded while Ribicoff was attacking Daley to his face on the convention floor. In *Daley: The Last Boss* (PBS 1995), two of Daley's aides tell, straight-faced, a wondrous tale: each solemnly insists that Daley actually shouted 'you faker', claiming that it was one of Daley's favourite expressions. The programme's producer allows these statements to remain unchallenged.

⁴¹ Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties*, op. cit., 224.

ing!'. Then a reference to nazi Germany's police brutality: 'Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil!' (The crowd's German is Americanized: 'sig' not 'zeeg'.) The response encourages us to translate mass enthusiasm for Hitler into a taunt likening Chicago police brutality to Hitler's Gestapo, a parallel made explicit by Ribicoff inside the convention hall when he refers to 'Gestapo tactics'. The popularity of 'Sieg Heil!' stems from crowd responses captured in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935), an ironic contribution of this film to a later generation's political awareness.

Above all, the utter confusion revealed by the camera, and the eerie quality of images in which the viewer senses neither the direction of the crowd nor the police universalizes the scene. The police riot in Chicago was as destructive to Humphrey's candidacy as Loan's execution of the Vietcong sympathizer was to official pronouncements about 'light at the end of the tunnel'. In both instances television captured gratuitous action by police authority. Chicago's television violence was endlessly rebroadcast. It was shown on 28 August nationally, inside the convention hall the same evening, then again and again as part of NBC's Morning News on 29 August.⁴² It became a fixture of 1960s iconography, and is now part of every single television documentary made about the USA in the 1960s.

David Farber notes the symbiotic connection between television and the protesters:

As a politician, even a local one, Daley was a dinosaur and he knew it, even as he fought it. He had no respect for sound bites, spin control, photo opportunities. . . . Daley saw the mass media and the protesters as two sides to the same problem. . . . The world invoked by the protesters seemed like nothing more than an ineffective burned offering simulated by the image merchants that sold them in their everyday dreams.⁴³

Adam Garfinkle, author of a persuasive book about the impact of the anti-war movement, notes the actual results of protest at the Chicago convention:

New Left tactics adopted in 1968 were politically nihilistic, increasingly violent, and overwhelmingly counterproductive both to the New Left and to stopping the war. The year represented the beginning of the self-destruction of the New Left, even though it appeared at the time to those within and those without to have reached a new zenith of influence and growth. . . . The New Left, by systematically trashing Humphrey's campaign, thus helped prolong the war and prolong the killing, for a Humphrey administration almost surely would have effected a faster withdrawal than the Nixon administration did.⁴⁴

This, of course, is the exact opposite of what those who saw the images of the police riot at first concluded. To them, Daley was the villain, and

⁴² Farber, *Chicago '68*, op. cit., 251.

⁴³ Farber, 'The Silent Majority and Talk about Revolution' in David Farber (ed.), *The Sixties*, op. cit., 303, 305.

⁴⁴ Garfinkle, *Telltale Hearts*, op. cit., 161. Even more extreme conclusions are drawn by Jeffrey Herf in 'Reliving the Sixties', *Partisan Review*, 57, 2 (1990), 254: 'The 1968ers wanted American power out of Indochina. The United States did get out. The Communists did win. And the people of Indochina suffered. This catastrophe is what some of the generation of 1968 and its chroniclers are still reluctant to discuss.'

Humphrey's patron. Televised violence pushed viewers to Nixon's side. One is thus well-advised to remember Blumberg's account of how Chicago newspapers first attacked protesters, then attacked the police riot, then returned to defending Mayor Daley and attacks on their 'fine' city. The immediacy of visual experience in violent television newsfilm is not endlessly capable of inducing strong responses. Television in 1968 quickly turned to horse-race aspects of the autumn campaign.

The return of the Democratic Party convention to Chicago in August 1996 for the first time since 1968 provided television with endless opportunities to re-run stock footage of police attacking protesters. Changes in television's format and scope made it easy, in hindsight, to see what the medium contributed to the 'meaning' of the 1968 convention. In 1968 nearly half of all Americans watched the convention — some 90 million viewers. Network saturation was a thing of the past in 1996. Cable competed for viewers, the conventions themselves had lost their appeal, and even the one hour a night provided for convention coverage attracted at best 19 million viewers out of a population of 220 million.⁴⁵

Chicago 1996 beat the theme of party unity to death, replacing the spectacle — and unrehearsed boredom — of previous conventions with a saccharine 'special', stressing unity and family. One political cartoon showed television sets labelled 'Chicago '68' and 'Chicago '96'. In the former, police in riot helmets, truncheons raised, march towards unseen victims. In the latter, a disgruntled viewer stands ready to club the set, as a split screen reveals President Clinton talking to his wife Hillary: 'I love you too!! Kissy Kissy'. Frank Rich deplored a convention planned as an Infomercial, in a column entitled 'New Deal Lite'. As he noted:

The audience gets the touchy-feely trappings of feel-your-pain, old-style Democratic compassion for the less fortunate without the substance. . . . This is all show-biz iconography and salesmanship . . . [compared to] a 1968 convention whose ideological passions now seem almost as remote as those of William Jennings Bryan's 'cross of gold' convention speech here a century ago.

Walter Goodman, longtime television critic for the *New York Times*, was equally disgusted by a convention so filled with 'caring'. To him, 'the opening of the Democratic convention portends as damp a television campaign as the nation has enjoyed or endured. Monday night was real-people night. Last night was family night — if you love children, honk.'⁴⁶ William Safire, who attended the 1968 convention at Richard Nixon's behest, drew another obvious conclusion: 'The trauma of Chicago '68 — the convention that violently punished the opposition — is one reason that all conventions today

⁴⁵ James Bennet, 'Expanded Coverage on TV Turns Out to be a Mixed Blessing', *New York Times*, 30 August 1996, A11; see also Caryn James, 'In Speech After Speech, Conventions Seem Tuned Out of Politics', *New York Times*, 29 August 1996, A17.

⁴⁶ Frank Rich, *New York Times*, 28 August 1996, A15; Good man, 'Blending Disability with Celebrity to Lure Viewers', *New York Times*, 28 August 1996, A9.

stress unity above all, televising togetherness even to the extent of stifling the internal agreement that deserves expression.⁴⁷

Cable television's C-Span presented a panel discussion about 1968 on 24 August 1996. There were two eye-witnesses. Ted Stein, former protester, is today a civil rights lawyer. Now bald, his luxurious beard reminds us visually of his past. For 'balance', Ron Hart, a black career officer with the Chicago police, who tells us he retired in 1991. Hart complains that television only covered police violence. He was a member of the Chicago police force in August 1968. Where, he asks, was the television footage of students hitting police with bricks: 'They only took the pictures when the police was in action. . . . Why this failing on the part of the media?' He insists that what happened was not a police riot but instead a 'demonstrators' riot'. He points out that not a single demonstrator was killed, not a single demonstrator was shot, and that 'police lives were imperilled'. Not surprisingly, he also claims that 'the media is liberal and always has been'. If, as former anti-war protester Don Rose said recently, 'It's like the Civil War, 1968, everybody's position is unchanging', perhaps the comments of Ron Hart are but those of a more effective on-camera personality making Mayor Daley's case.⁴⁸

Perhaps by now television images have become the agreed-upon device for recalling the central meaning of Chicago 1968 — a convention which stifled delegate disagreement over Vietnam, though the police riot obscures the ideological and policy issues which explain those in the streets, even those seeking nothing more, in truth, than a cheap thrill or a chance to tweak Mayor Daley's nose.

Some scholars, including John Robinson and Melvin Small, disagree. They insist that a notorious Gallup poll question, two weeks after the convention ended, proves that televised images of violence simply strengthened popular support for police authority in America. The September poll reported that 56 per cent of those asked felt that the police behaved correctly; 31 per cent disagreed; 17 per cent had no opinion. Small, citing Robinson's conclusions, feels that this poll proves something basic: 'Many television viewers witnessing violence between "hippies" and police instinctively sided with the police, no matter what they saw on their screens.' To Small, this means that images of dissent cannot be part of the decision-making process: 'The fact that many Americans did not accept what they saw with their own eyes suggests that one can never predict with certainty the impact of stories in the print and broadcast media on popular attitudes and public opinion.'⁴⁹

47 Safire, 'Chicago: A Long Way From '68', *New York Times*, 26 August 1996, A15. For an excellent analysis of both 1996 conventions see Michael Kelly, 'Glasshouse Conventions', *The New Yorker*, 9 September 1996, 34–40. See also John Kifner, '28-Year-Old Snapshots Are Still Vivid, and Still Violent', *New York Times*, 26 August 1996, A11.

48 C-Span, 24 August 1996. I am grateful to Chris Maynard for providing me with a video copy of this broadcast.

49 John P. Robinson, 'Public Reaction to Political Protest: Chicago 1968', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 34 (Spring 1970), 1–9; Melvin Small, *Covering Dissent: The Media and the Anti-Vietnam War Movement* (New Brunswick, NJ 1994), 89, 90.

Actually, this single poll is less conclusive than might seem to be the case. There was no follow-up question after Daniel Walker published his official report in which he insisted that there had been a police riot. The report, when it appeared in 1969, was the subject of nationwide debate. Indeed C.R. Hormachea would hardly have included the Walker Report in a book addressed to his fellow police officers had he felt that Americans believed that the police behaved properly in Chicago. Most Americans were deeply troubled by what they had seen there; their attitudes went, as was the case for the media itself, from loathing of the police to a realization in autumn 1968 that no society can survive without the availability of police to ensure orderly process. This does not mean that most Americans came to support what the police did in Chicago, precisely because the media coverage of dramatic close-up violence showed police attacking or brutally arresting protesters, not protesters violently attacking the police. As scholars have noted, the legacy of Chicago lost some of its anarchistic overtones as passions cooled.

In retrospect, there is no doubt about the meaning of the images of violence shown on television in August 1968. The images show excessive force on the part of the police; there is no doubt that those images outraged delegates on the night of 28 August as they watched monitors inside the Amphitheater. There is also no doubt that the media itself was outraged by the actions of Chicago's police. And there is no doubt that the televised police riot has become the conventional way in which history remembers the 1968 Democratic convention, seemingly unwilling to confront the evidence of that Gallup poll.

Television producers see things differently from many historians. To them the televised representation of history becomes a recognition of television's legitimacy as a social institution. As James Schwoch notes,

Television acts as an agent of history and memory, recording and preserving representations to be referenced in the future. The institution of television itself becomes the guarantor of history, even as it invokes history to validate its own presence at an event. The rise of a televisual historical consciousness makes up for its supposed failure to fully advance public ideals.⁵⁰

Historians of the contemporary world have their own obligation, and that is to bring into their accounts of political decision-making the inescapable power of televised images, often televised images of violence, to alter or affect how mass decisions are made in democratic societies. Visual images which are powerful enough, once seen, to be remembered, such as Loan's execution footage, or the police riot on 28 August 1968, cannot be denied their rightful place in explaining historical causation. They mattered in 1968, they matter in 1998, and they cannot be ignored by scholars troubled by the ambiguity and uncertainty which goes along with reading visual images, to say nothing of explaining the impact of visual images in history.

⁵⁰ James Schwoch, review of Jankowski and Fuchs, *Television Today and Tomorrow* (New York 1995), *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 16, 2 (June 1996), 302.

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