

Propaganda in Vietnam

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The earliest examples of propaganda date back to around 515 BCE and have been used with varying degrees of success and failure ever since. During World War II, Hitler employed a wildly successful propaganda campaign, even though he lost the war. Almost a decade later, in 1954, the United States embarked on a propaganda campaign in Vietnam. While the United States' propaganda campaign was successful in the beginning, it quickly began to flounder and fail. As the ground war began and escalated, the United States propaganda machine continued to fail in its propaganda efforts, not only in Vietnam but also at home and around the world. These propaganda failures, as well as the loss of a brutally violent war, were combined with declining support at home and ravaging television images to create a perfect storm that caused a myriad of emotional and cultural responses that linger to this day. The below image promised enemy soldiers that their medical needs would be met if they surrendered.



On April 26, 1954, delegates from the Soviet Union, Great Britain, the United States, France, and China met in Geneva Switzerland to discuss problems in Asia, specifically the war between Vietnam nationalists and French colonizers. As part of the agreement reached in July of 1954, the French agreed to remove all troops from North Vietnam to below the 17th parallel until the country was able to have a presidential election and, hopefully, reunite the country. When American propaganda efforts in Vietnam began in 1954, the chief of covert action in the United States Saigon Military Mission was Colonel Edward Lansdale. Col. Lansdale's job was to oversee the United States' first propaganda efforts in Vietnam, the first operation of which was "Passage to Freedom."

The object of this operation was for both American and French forces to work together to relocate as many people as possible from North Vietnam to below the 17th parallel into South

Vietnam. From 1954 to 1955, Col. Lansdale and his men used a variety of different gimmicks and tricks to entice the Vietnamese people to move to South Vietnam, such as fake news reports and sending South Vietnamese soldiers in disguise to spread rumors in the North. Although Col. Lansdale's maneuvers and ploys were successful, it was his next campaign that was his most successful and the one for which he has been best known.¹

"The Virgin Mary has Gone South" is probably Col. Lansdale's best-known propaganda campaign and was the second push to relocate Vietnamese citizens from North Vietnam to South Vietnam. In this campaign, the strategy was to use the religious sentiments of the Catholic citizens, by alleging that the Communist government of North Vietnam had plans to persecute Christians unless they moved to the South under Ngo Dinh Diem's Catholic friendly government. Through their efforts, Col. Lansdale's men were able to convince 60 percent of the 1.5 million North Vietnamese Catholics to flee to South Vietnam. Although they employed some leaflets and posters, the majority of this task was accomplished through the use of undercover South Vietnamese soldiers spreading rumors and priests making it the subject of their sermons.²

The failure of the United States government to effectively produce and manage propaganda surrounding the war in Vietnam has lasting consequences that are still felt today. The United States' psychological operations in Vietnam were unable to plan and execute programs successfully. They did not understand the way news and information was transmitted and were unable to maintain popular support for the war. These failures led to distrust of the United States government at home and abroad, mistreatment and neglect of our war veterans, and it changed the way we receive our news about world conflicts. This paper will argue that many of the United States' attempts at propaganda during the Vietnam War were futile because the United States was unable to plan and execute their propaganda operations, they failed to understand the way information was transferred and disseminated among the Vietnamese population, and they were unable to gain popular support for the war effort.

America's first failure in propaganda during Vietnam was its inability to devise a strategy and put its operations into effect. A good example of this is the Chieu Hoi program which ran from 1963 to 1971. The Chieu Hoi program targeted North Vietnamese soldiers and guerilla fighters, promising them a "safe pass" that guaranteed the defectors amnesty, fair treatment, and resettlement. The defectors were sent to Chieu Hoi centers that the United States had set up throughout South Vietnam for reeducation and reintroduction to civilian life. To inform soldiers and guerillas about these centers, the United States used posters in villages, deployed leaflets that were dropped from planes in various ways, and broadcast messages to people on the ground via

¹ Nicholas John Cull, David Holbrook Culbert, and David Welch, *Propaganda and Mass Persuasion: A Historical Encyclopedia, 1500 to the Present* (Santa Barbara, Ca: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2003), 421; "The Seabees and Operation Passage to Freedom, Vietnam 1954 Seabee Online," accessed December 5, 2019,

<https://seabeemagazine.navylive.dodlive.mil/2013/02/14/the-seabees-and-operation-passage-to-freedom-vietnam-1954/>.

² Cull, Culbert, and Welch, 421.

loudspeakers.³ While the Chieu Hoi program was a good plan in concept and theory, two key failures in its execution refute its credibility as a successful program: communication barriers and its targeted audience.

“Language immediately emerged as a barrier against effective communication between Americans and their Vietnamese counterparts,” said Dr. Robert Kodosky, chair of the History Department at West Chester University.⁴ The literacy rate was very low, with only a few people in each village knowing how to read. As a consequence of the low literacy rate, leaflets and posters would have to convey their message with pictures rather than text. Even worse than the literacy rate was the number of people on either side who could understand enough English and Vietnamese to be able to communicate. In the Chieu Hoi centers, teachers could not understand their students and the students could not understand their teachers. As a result, the U. S. Army began to teach people Vietnamese, but it did not change the reality that there were never enough people who spoke both languages and, as a result, none of the messages could effectively be communicated.

Dr. Kodosky’s analysis of the aviation and leaflet program that ran during Vietnam gives vast details of the planes used, which delivery systems were used for distributing the leaflets, and the number of leaflets dropped and hours that were broadcast – all statistics that make the program look successful. Then he describes the problems with the program: the language barrier, difficulty in assessing the program, and lack of support and resources. I agree with Dr. Kodosky’s analysis because, despite all of the impressive statistics, the problems he described could have shut the program down. Dr. Kodosky concludes his analysis by stating that, “they knew too little about the hearts and minds of the people who resided there.”⁵ I agree with Dr. Kodosky’s conclusion, the fact that we did not know much about the Vietnamese people has been echoed in the first-hand accounts of Dr. David Hunt and Dr. James Whittaker.⁶

The second failure in the Chieu Hoi program was its inability to reach its targeted audience and the validity of those reached. Dr. James Whittaker, a social psychologist, spent time in Vietnam in 1966 studying the Chieu Hoi program with a group from Cambridge. He makes a point that one of the first things that he noticed was that, “most of those in Chieu Hoi centers had been laborers digging tunnels or carrying supplies for the VC.”⁷ Dr. Whittaker makes a good point that the targeted group only makes up a small percentage of those in the centers. Dr. Whittaker’s observation that, for the few soldiers or guerillas in the centers, there was no way to know their true motives. This sheds light on the fact that there was no way to tell if someone was really

³ James O. Whittaker, “Psychological Warfare in Vietnam,” *Political Psychology* 18, no. 1 (March 1997): 167-169; Robert J. Kodosky, “Leaflets, Loudspeakers, and Radios, Oh My!,” *Air Power History* 64, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 9.

⁴ Kodosky, 7.

⁵ Kodosky, 12.

⁶ David Hunt, “Propaganda and the Public: The Shaping of Opinion in the Southern Vietnamese Countryside during the Second Indochina War,” *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 31, no. 2 (July 2016); Whittaker, “Psychological Warfare in Vietnam.”

⁷ Whittaker, 176.

defecting or were there for a nefarious purpose. The centers were open for anybody and, at times, received the wounded and soldiers trying to evade capture. Dr. Whittaker at one point hinted at the prospect that some of these “defectors” could be spies. I agree with his assessment but think that odds were good that some of these defectors were spies.⁸

Another thing that Dr. Whittaker noticed when he first arrived was that the political indoctrination lacked substance. Dr. Whittaker observed that “South Vietnamese instructors simply reading from political propaganda while defectors slept or dozed.”⁹ This example alone shows that no effort was put into trying to reeducate these fighters and guerilla, regardless of any present language barriers. Also, there are no records of any type of quality control measures to ensure that what was taught was learned and retained. Dr. Whittaker concludes that the Chieu Hoi programs should have focused more on the Vietnamese citizens than on enemy combatants and that the Americans should have used more of an “interpersonal communication approach” than leaflets and loudspeakers.¹⁰

Understanding the way information was collected and transmitted in a technologically undeveloped country was the next weakness that led to the failure of the propaganda war in Vietnam. While many in the world received news of the war through a variety of ways such as television, radio, newspapers, and magazines, the citizens of Vietnam were heavily reliant on one method: the grapevine. The way the grapevine worked was the best reader in the village would read aloud from the newspaper and give his commentary on events to those listening as he read. The people who were listening would return home afterward and report what they had heard to friends and family, and then their friends and family would spread what they had heard in the fields at work the next day.¹¹ The grapevine was how the majority of the population received their news, but the information had to originate from somewhere.

Dr. David Hunt, a professor of History at the University of Massachusetts, studied interviews that were done with villagers in the Mekong Delta and discovered that their main source of information for the grapevine was through newspapers and radio programs. While access to radios was limited, listening to the radio, like reading, was a social event.

Due to poor reception, radio programming was limited, so the villagers would tune in to whatever station would come in clear and the whole village would gather and listen to the broadcast and then spread the new information through the grapevine.

Although radio was an efficient way to spread news and propaganda to a mass audience, due to poor reception and the limited availability of radios, it was simply unable to reach many people with its message. According to Hunt, most Vietnamese received their news of the war

⁸ Whittaker, 167-168.

⁹ Whittaker, 168.

¹⁰ Whittaker, 178.

¹¹ Hunt, “Propaganda and the Public,” 504-506.

through local city newspapers. Much like the American newspaper sources, the local city newspapers contained news on the war but also contained stories, poems and helpful advice on daily life during a war. Since reading has been a social event for the Vietnamese, they preferred reading their news from a source that addressed issues of life other than just the war.¹²

Another aspect of the newspapers, leaflets, and posters produced by American forces that the Vietnamese did not like was the fact that they contained graphic photographs and artwork. Some of the photographs and images depicted American soldiers trying to help villagers, but the majority featured American military might and graphic images of casualties of war or torture victims to intimidate.¹³ North Vietnamese propaganda art that was featured on leaflets and posters was all hand-painted by soldiers and villagers that were trained by Vietnamese folk artists. The artwork was colorful and full of socialist images and depicted the myriad of struggles they all were facing. The Socialist realist images that dominated the artwork, “celebrated the strength and determination of a Vietnamese people united against a superpower.”¹⁴ Once the artwork was approved for use by the North Vietnamese Government, it was mass-produced in small numbers for distribution, unlike the Americans that mass-produced thousands of leaflets and posters.

The final failure in America's propaganda war in Vietnam was its inability to win enduring support for the war both at home and abroad, which was due largely to how the media covered the war. During World War II and Korea, most Americans received their news from newspapers or the radio, and the government had certain controls in place to censor how much information the American citizen received about the war. By 1962, 90 percent of American homes had television sets and it completely changed how America got its news.¹⁵ Every night during the height of the war, images of troops in and out of combat in Vietnam were seen on television screens in homes across America. Dr. Huebner commented that “Vietnam is best remembered as the first televised war.”¹⁶ Due to inadequate policy, television stations broadcast graphic, uncensored images of the brutality of war. It was blatant, shocking and, frankly, too much for the average American citizen to see on a nightly basis.

During the early stages of the war, there was very little press coverage other than the occasional story about the spread of Communism in Vietnam and Eisenhower's “Domino Theory.” From 1960 to 1965, as tensions escalated in Vietnam, so did the media coverage until television networks had to extend their broadcast time to cover it.¹⁷ Despite the graphic images that American

¹² Hunt, 501-502.

¹³ “History of PSYOP,” accessed October 30, 2019, <http://www.psywarrior.com/psyhist.html>.

¹⁴ David Heather and Sherry Buchanan, *Vietnam Posters: The David Heather Collection*, (London: Prestel Publishing, 2009), 13.

¹⁵ TV History, “Number of TV Households in America: 1950-1978,” Accessed March 23, 2020, http://www.tvhistory.tv/Annual_TV_Households_50-78.JPG.

¹⁶ Andrew J. Huebner, “Rethinking American Press Coverage of the Vietnam War, 1965-68,” *Journalism History: Athens* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 151.

¹⁷ Alan Rohn, “Media Role in The Vietnam War,” *The Vietnam War*, n.d., accessed December 10, 2019, <http://thevietnamwar.info/media-role-vietnam-war/>.

citizens were exposed to nightly, support for the war remained high for several years. The American people and the world felt that we were doing our duty to fight the rise of Communism. Over the next three years, violence escalated in Vietnam until it appeared the war was at a stalemate until one coordinated attack by North Vietnam left the Americans with a strategic victory but at the cost of support back home.

In January 1968, there was a temporary ceasefire for the Vietnamese Tet holiday. The North Vietnamese broke the ceasefire and launched a country-wide coordinated attack. American and South Vietnamese troops were caught completely off guard. Despite large initial losses, the U.S. Army fought back and accomplished a notable defeat of the North Vietnamese. Rather than focus on the big picture, the media focused on adverse actions of combat such as the Battle of Hue and the attack on the U.S. Embassy.¹⁸ I agree with Dr. Huebner when he said that he did not think the media was antiwar after Tet, they just “lay bare the confusion, misery, difficulty, and tragedy of the conflict.”¹⁹ Due to the media coverage of Tet, public support for the war dropped dramatically, as “Americans... were shaken by the television images of its armed forces in disarray during the early stages of the conflict and disturbed by the extreme violence of the U.S. counterattack.”²⁰ As the war dragged on, the media did not shy away from showing graphic images and increasingly showed more and more. The more the public saw of the war, the lower their support dropped. In the words of Tom Englehardt, it was a “home front televisual disaster.”²¹

This low support of the war did not end when the war was over but carried on for many years after and has lasting consequences that are still felt today. Public support for the war was so low that when the troops came home, they were not greeted as heroes like veterans of past wars, but rather looked at as if they were criminals, with judgment and disapproval. Many of the troops returned and developed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder due to going from fighting a physical enemy to fighting a mental and emotional one with no time for adjustment. There was not a lot of help available for veterans suffering from PTSD, so many withdrew and depended on drugs and alcohol to self-medicate and cope with their issues. There are many Vietnam veterans today who continue to deal with these issues.

While the definition of propaganda is broad, its most basic objective is to win the hearts and minds of the targeted audience. To do that, one must have credible information about the target audience. America had been doing propaganda operations in Asia since the 1940s and specifically in Vietnam since the early 1950s, yet still did not know enough information about the native people of Vietnam to produce effective propaganda. Instead of sticking to the grapevine concept that served them so well during “The Virgin Mary went South,” the United States relied more on a leaflet and audio broadcasts which were ineffective at reaching their target audience.

This lack of knowledge of the people of Vietnam was put on display in the United States’

¹⁸ Alan Rohn.

¹⁹ Huebner, “Rethinking American Press Coverage,” 151.

²⁰ Cull, Culbert, and Welch, *Propaganda and Mass Persuasion*, 419.

²¹ Tom Englehardt, *The End of the Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation*, Rev.ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 205.

inability to properly plan and execute the Chieu Hoi program. The inability of operatives to be able to relate to their target audience was blamed on communication barriers which may not have been as big a problem if they had targeted a different demographic group. Next, the United States failed by not being able to understand the transfer of information in a country that not technologically advanced. They did not understand that information traveled through the grapevine or that listening to the radio or reading the newspaper was a social event. By understanding how knowledge and information were transferred, the United States could have developed techniques and propaganda to reach people in a way which they were accustomed to.

Lastly, the United States was unable to get popular support for the war. Popular support is fickle and can change with the printing of a headline. Losing popular support at the hands of the media the way we did still affects how people view the Vietnam War today. It also changed the way war is reported today. The United States government has put limits on what can be shown on TV and in pictures, both in magazines and news articles, while still allowing freedom of the press to report on what is happening.

The outcome of the propaganda war in Vietnam does not change the outcome of the actual ground war that was going on. It does offer lessons to be learned for future wars and conflicts. Technology is a wonderful thing and can make some aspects of life so much easier, but when that technology is taken away it leaves us unable to fully relate to the situation. American forces faced this situation as they tried to propagandize a population that was barely literate and did not have technological luxuries; as Americans, we could not relate to or understand their lifestyle. This misunderstanding caused the entire propaganda effort to fail. Nicholas Cull said it best when he stated that “the United States was ultimately the victim of its own propaganda apparatus in Vietnam.”²² Propaganda is a tool that, based solely on the effectiveness of its use, can determine the outcome of wars.

²² Cull, Culbert, and Welch, *Propaganda and Mass Persuasion*, 423.