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Influence of Media on Spanish-American War and  
Vietnam War

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Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci vypracoval samostatně a použil pouze uvedených pramenů a literatury.

V Olomouci dne 21. 6. 2012

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Martin Kostka

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*“Four hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets.”*

- Napoleon Bonaparte

*"This was the first struggle fought on television in everybody's living room every day... whether ordinary people can sustain a war effort under that kind of daily hammering is a very large question."*

- Dean Rusk, US Secretary of State

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## List of Abbreviations

NVA	North Vietnamese Army
KIA	Killed In Action
S&D	Search & Destroy
VC	Viet Cong

## **Abstract**

This bachelor thesis is divided into two main chapters, both theoretical. The first chapter focuses on the role of media as a starting element of the Spanish-American War. The second chapter shows the influence media had during the Vietnam War. Both chapters are dealing with the ability of media to influence public opinion to start or end an open military conflict.

## **Introduction**

Since the dawn of mankind, we fight each other from time to time. This will probably never change. And since the beginning of our military history, we understand that information is power, and the one with more power is usually the victor. Realizing this simple truth, wars were (are and will be) full of deception, ruses and espionage. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a new player emerged on the battlefield, both informational and literal – media.

Generals and politicians, the ones who are supposed to start, end and maintain control over conflicts, quickly realised the importance of media. Yet, most countries used them only for propaganda purposes. Everything was censored and carefully arranged so that people back home supported the war, not questioned its purpose and, if possible, joined the war or contributed to it in some way. The United States of America, however, always treated the media-military relationship differently. Everything is business in America, and journalism is no different. They will probably never admit this truth publicly, though.

As it is suggested by Dean Rusk's motto, used at the beginning, the second chapter of this thesis will focus on the Vietnam War and what role media played during the conflict and how. It will show how public opinion can be swayed; feeding it with selected, sometimes completely fabricated, or inaccurate information that corresponded with their current agenda (either political or economical). It will show how the media were biased towards the conflict, even though they claimed to be objective.

I have mentioned that everything in America is based on economy and that this business side of things interferes even with media that are, according to the definition presented in this thesis later on, supposed to be objective. And there is probably no more striking evidence showing this than the Spanish-American War. This war is not as known as other conflicts in American history (or in history in general). The more surprising it was for me to find out that a seemingly ordinary rivalry between two newspaper publishers can again change public opinion towards a conflict.



It is important to note, however, that media alone cannot induce war. It will always be up to politicians to start and/or end them. Nevertheless, media played a vital role in influencing the public opinion in both wars.

# 1 Spanish-American War

In 1898, a conflict between the United States of America and the Spanish Empire broke out. A conflict that is not as “famous” as other conflicts, but which had a crucial impact on the relationship between media and war. It was a war where, as J. Giessel (2012) puts it, journalists - war correspondents – not only reported about the news from the front, but also assumed roles of scouts, messengers, spies, and sometimes joined the fight itself. It was also a war showing dangers of sensation hunting and where media literally became “the event movers”. A war that, just like the Vietnam War almost eighty years later, was more under the control of journalists and newspaper publishers, rather than government representatives.

## 1.1 Yellow Journalism

*Yellow journalism* is a type of journalism that was established roughly in the half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in England, from where it quickly spread into the United States and the rest of the world. Pospíšil and Závodná (2010) define it as a very low kind of journalism that aims at our lowest (deepest if you like) parts of mind – our instincts. Sex, violence, food, celebrities, scandals, feelings; these are the typical topics of yellow journalism. Yellow journalism also tends to “bend” the truth, it uses half-lies (or half-truths preferably) as well as completely faked and fabricated information. As Pospíšil and Závodná state, it is a kind of journalism that serious reporters and publishers should avoid at all cost.

The two men to be “blamed” for the creation of this “journalistic atrocity” were Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. A competition of the two (or rather a competition of their newspapers) had no boundaries, both of them were prepared to do anything to win this “war of newspapers” including literal ignition of a real war between two nations.

## 1.2 Spanish-American War

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, two empires (among others) were struggling for the control over the Caribbean region. Spain, a dying empire of the past, and the United States of

America making its way to replace Spain and others alike as the new rising superpower since 1776.

Cuba, a relatively small island in the Caribbean Sea, had been a part of the Spanish empire since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Though Cuban people rebelled against it from time to time, these rebellions were usually suppressed by the Spanish government with a relative ease. This was not the case, however, of the revolution in 1895, respectively 1868<sup>1</sup>.

José Martí (1853 - 1895) is one of Cuba's national heroes. And it was in times of the last Cuban revolution he had become one. This intellectual, artist and revolutionary, was one of the leading characters of the last phase of the revolution. He, as it is explained by Media Rich Company (2009), encouraged the rebels to attack specific targets in Cuba – US owned sugar plantations. The reason for this was obvious. Martí hoped that it would have encouraged the US government to protect their economical interests in Cuba and eventually intervene on behalf of the oppressed Cubans. The US officials (McKinley's administrative) were, however, reluctant and not willing to intervene.

US government was hesitating whether to join the rebellion or not. O'Callaghan (1990) explains that on one hand, they were continually persuaded by businessmen, either plantation owners or others, who saw their economic interests in Cuba to maintain this status quo. There were also those, who saw this as a danger to American ideals. They simply did not want to become what their forefathers fought against a hundred years ago during the War of Independence. On the other hand, there were rising voices that the United States can no longer remain isolated. This rising tendency can be largely appointed to the two men mentioned at the beginning: Pulitzer and Hearst.

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<sup>1</sup> Cuban War of Independence is separated into three consecutive parts: Ten Years' War (1868 - 1878); Little War (1879 - 1880); Cuban War of Independence (1895 - 1898).

### 1.3 Newspapers' fight over the masses

According to J. Giessel (see p.10), not many Americans really cared when the revolution in Cuba started. Pulitzer and Hearst, however, quickly recognized the potential of this revolution. Or, perhaps, were able to make a fuss about nothing (a typical aspect of yellow journalism). I do not want to diminish the achievements of Cuban people anyhow, but without the two, there would probably be no independent Cuba (not that soon at least). It was those two men, who brought the US into the war with Spain and gave Cuban's their independence.

*“Blood on the roadsides, blood in the fields, blood on the doorsteps, blood, blood, blood! The old, the young, the weak, the crippled — all are butchered without mercy.”*

The words above are taken from Pulitzer's *World*, quoted by Howard Jones (2002, p. 248), and are just an example of what Pulitzer and Hearst were giving to the masses. And the masses loved it. Masses were not (are not) interested in facts. They did not want to read how many units the Spanish deployed in Cuba, how much Spain spent to keep the revolutionaries at bay, how many dead or wounded there were. They wanted stories. Fascinating, heartbreaking and thrilling stories of pain, suffering, heroism and glory of the revolution. And that is what Pulitzer and Hearst were doing best: giving what the masses wanted; giving stories. No one cared much whether they were true or not.

According to Giessel (see p.10), many publishers sent their reporters to Cuba. Or at least they thought they were sending them to Cuba. Many of the reporters did not make it out of Florida and those, who were actually able to get into Cuba, did not usually get any further than Havana, Cuban capital (there were exceptions, of course<sup>2</sup>).

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<sup>2</sup> As Giessel (see p.1) further adds, some even joined the rebellion or served as spies and scouts for the US military.

Even those journalists who actually went out to get some information, to write stories about war, suffering, blood and glory, were surprised. Giessel (see p.10) explains that they were expecting severe fighting in the streets, in the fields, suffering of women and children, atrocities of Spanish oppressors and other “splendours” of war. True, there was some fighting, there was suffering<sup>3</sup>, but not as much that the journalists thought there would be and, most importantly, not as much as Pulitzer with Hearst wanted or needed.

Major aspect of yellow journalism is, as mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, “lying”. Making of half-truths, usage of unverified information or creation of completely made up stories. This is exactly what the majority of journalists in Cuba did, especially those sent there by Pulitzer or Hearst.

In 1897, for example, Frederick Remington, a newspaper cartoonist<sup>4</sup> who had been sent to Cuba to give Hearst some drawings of the fighting, telegraphed: “*Everything is quiet. There is no trouble here. There will be no war. I wish to return.*” According to the rumour, as described by Giessel (see p.10), Hearst promptly replied: “*Please remain. You furnish the pictures and I’ll furnish the war.*” And furnish he did. Although this story had never been proven to be true, for Hearst had always kept denying it, it shows the state in which the truth was in the hands of Hearst’s and “journalists” like him.

The main motivation for Hearst was, according to most historians, his fight with Pulitzer over the control of newspaper publishing dominion. Simply put: money, fame and prestige. There are few, however, like Kenneth Whyte in Richard Davies’s review (2012) of Kenneth’s book *The Uncrowned King: The Sensational Rise of William Randolph Hearst*, who believe that Hearst’s goals were much higher than that. Whyte claims that Hearst believed in the American ideals of freedom and independence from the War of Independence in 1776. The very same ideals that actually died with the Spanish-American War,

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<sup>3</sup> Spanish were using concentration camps to lockout local population to cut off the rebels’ support.

<sup>4</sup> Photography was still young at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; most pictures in the newspapers were simply hand-drawn cartoons.

respectively, with its outcome as the US became an imperial superpower. Thus becoming the very opposite of what Hearst, according to Whyte, tried to fight against. The main argument Whyte has is that Hearst was a son of a senator and from a very rich family, so he did not need money. Whyte is a little bit idealistic, in my opinion. Money is not the only “moving” force of man. Ambition is sometimes stronger than anything else, and, according to Giessel (see p.10), Hearst was definitely an ambitious man.

To him, this rebellion in Cuba was nothing more than an opportunity to make him famous. To show others what he was capable of. That he could defeat even Pulitzer, who was, at that time, a much respected journalist and newspaper publisher. The truth about his motives will probably remain hidden forever as Hearst would have never publicly admitted to do all this for a “mere ambition” or “fame hunting”. His true motives are not very important though. It is what he and Pulitzer did; persuading the whole nation to join the war against another country, using the power of media.

A cartoon by William Barritt was made in 1898 (see Appendix 1) which depicts Pulitzer and Hearst. In the picture, they are fighting over the sign “WAR” in full-length, yellow dresses (symbolizing yellow journalism). The sign on Hearst’s dress says: *“This is my war. I bought it and paid for it and if you don’t stop bothering me about it I’ll have you put off the – earth – see! P.S. Me name is Hearst.”* Although the cartoon was meant by Barritt as a satire, it nicely depicts the relation between the Spanish-American War, yellow journalism and an ability of media to manipulate the public opinion.

Newspapers were feeding the US readers with a second-hand; we might even say third-hand, misinterpreted and even completely fabricated news of glorious victories of Cuban rebels in epic battles and acts against humanity done by “those evil Spaniards”. Although it appealed to some, most Americans, though reading this kind of news eagerly, were not interested in Cuba itself very much. Therefore the US government was still reluctant to act against Spain. Something happened, however, something that changed their attitude, something that changed the role of media from a mere “event reflector” into a powerful tool capable of changing the opinion of the whole nation and forcing it to join a military conflict.

## 1.4 Sinking of USS Maine

This “something” began when a single US battleship entered the Havana harbour on January 25, 1898. Three weeks later, on February 15, it found itself lying at the bottom of the very same harbour after a mysterious explosion shook its hull and sank it. Two months later, the United States officially declared war on Spain, thus starting a swift and decisive conflict in which the US seized control of both Philippines and Cuba, and became a colonial empire, catapulting itself into position of other superpowers with an increasing ability to change and control global events.

The moving force behind this decision was not, however, the lives of more than two hundred and fifty American sailors who died during the explosion, neither the fact that the US Navy lost one of its pride warships. This force was a public opinion under the control of media.

Now, there are many different theories of why the USA actually entered the war, ranging from a selfless help to Cuban rebels, to a manifestation of changing nature of US citizens, gradually growing from isolated rebels of 1776 into an Anglo-Saxon supporters of “*Manifest Destiny*”. Nevertheless, the most accepted theory is the one with Pulitzer and Hearst influencing the public opinion about the “Cuban situation” through their newspapers.

Sinking of *Maine* remains a mystery even today, more than a hundred years after it. Several theories emerged throughout the years, none of them, however, brought enough evidence to support it one way or another.

O'Callaghan (1990) describes two main theories. The most accepted theory today (and the one accepted by American media right after the ship sank) is that the ship was hit by a Spanish mine. Second most common theory says that the ship's explosion was from within, suggesting it to be an accident.

## 1.5 Remember the Maine

Whatever the truth behind the sinking is, it actually mattered little in 1898. Journalists already had their version. They already knew the aggressor, who insidiously attacked an unaware American ship and took the souls of most of its crewmembers. Pospíšil and Závodná (2010) remind that one of the typical aspects of yellow journalism is to make its own truth; to use unverified information, and even when verified, it tends to change this and that to fit the needs of journalists and publishers, namely of Hearst and Pulitzer. As Musicant (1998) explains, The New York Journal, owned by Hearst and The New York World, owned by his rival Pulitzer, were the leading newspapers in this medial war against Spain (and against each other).

An issue of New York Journal (see Appendix 2) was released the day after the explosion with striking headlines saying: “*DESTRUCTION OF THE WARSHIP MAINE WAS THE WORK OF AN ENEMY*”. Although the indefinite article in “an enemy” might imply otherwise, Hearst had already decided, who that enemy was. The New York Journal even put a reward of \$50.000 for any evidence leading to the one or ones responsible for the attack. The article, transcribed by Ronal Shephard (2009), goes on: “*If this can be proven, the brutal nature of the Spaniards will be shown by the fact that they waited to spring the mine after all the men had retired for the night.*”

Though not being as radical as the Journal, Pulitzer’s New York World, too, blamed the great deal of guilt over the loss of *Maine* to Spaniards. Interestingly, Pulitzer privately confessed that he was not convinced of Spain’s guilt, as explained by Wilson and McAuley (1987). Publicly, however, he needed his newspaper to sell, so he fed the already agitated public, yet with new accusations and demanded Spain to surrender its interests in Cuba, and give it its long-wished independence.

*Remember the Maine* soon became a motto of newspapers. It quickly became the rallying cry of the American public; a much-needed support for all those people in the government who saw this conflict as a necessity and opportunity. As Wilson and McAuley



(1987) add, people like the future US president Theodore “Teddy” Roosevelt were among them.

Under this pressure, President McKinley had no other option than to send Spain an ultimatum demanding its immediate withdrawal from Cuba. This was, of course, refused. And so, on April 19, 1898, both nations were dragged into a war. A war, that began as a typical competition between two newspaper owners over the media empire.

Though this conflict was unprecedented and actually started a new era of military-media relationship, it lies moreover forgotten and overshadowed by another conflict in which, again, media played a vital role – the Vietnam War.

## 2 Vietnam War

On the early morning of 30<sup>th</sup> April, 1975, one of the darkest periods in history of the United States of America was coming to an end as the last helicopter took off, evacuating last stranded American personnel out of Saigon, capital of the Republic of Vietnam (or South Vietnam), leaving it, and its people, at the mercy of the incoming North Vietnamese Army (NVA), and meaning the end of a conflict known as *the Vietnam War*.

Similarly to the Spanish-American War eighty years earlier, journalists and reporters were given a rare opportunity to move completely freely wherever they wanted, uncensored, unrestricted, uncontrolled. Jose L. Rodriguez (2004) states that the media were given a unique opportunity to get the war news first hand and inform the world the way they wanted. To this day, journalists like Robert Elegant (1981), a British-American journalist, who covered both The Korean War and Vietnam, are ashamed of how poorly the media handled the situation in Vietnam.

Another similarity between those two conflicts is a tremendous impact media had on the public opinion back home. Where Pulitzer, Hearst and others were able to ignite the flames of war and forcing the US into war with Spain, the media in Vietnam succeeded in dousing those flames, thus ending it. It is arguable whether the influence the media had was alone strong enough to end the war or not, but we can claim for sure that they played a vital role in it.

As mentioned above, most Americans perceive this part of their recent history as a dark stain upon their past. Apart from other factors, one of the main reasons for this current state is, without a doubt, overall negative portrayal of the conflict in media, especially its coverage in a new type of mass media – television.

## 2.1 Rise of television

Before dealing with the Vietnam struggle itself, it is necessary to explain the radical change the American information hungry society was going through.

John Hellmann in Bigsby's *The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Culture* (2006) describes the situation in the early 1960s as a rapid increase of households having a television. This is supported by Bonior, Champlin and Kolly in Erin McLaughlin's essay (2012), who claim that there was less than 9 percent of families having a television at home in 1950, while the number increased to 93 percent in 1966.

As Hellmann further explains, this increase led to a rapid change in the perception of information of American public as more and more former newspaper readers became "TV news watchers". As Daniel C. Hallin (1984) specifies, there was a series of surveys conducted from 1964 to 1972 that demonstrate the rising influence of television as a primary source of information. In 1964, 58 percent of respondents claimed they relied on TV news while 56 percent relied on newspapers. In 1972, newspapers, as a primary information source, dropped to 50 percent, showing a clear increase of those primarily relying on TV news.

Hellmann also believes television to be one of the reasons for the Vietnam War's outcome. In the 1950s, most of the TV programme consisted of Western movies and situational comedies with a daily 15 minute news relation. While this may seem unimportant at first, we have to realize that those programs were heavily censored (if situational comedies need any censorship at all). Families were watching lonely tough cowboys fighting injustice, cavalry riding prairie in clean and shiny uniforms, hunting down those savage and evil Indians, who were threatening the American way of life; laughing at sitcoms like *Father*

*knows best.*<sup>5</sup> The shocking impact of the upcoming events, as Hellmann concludes, is not very hard to imagine afterwards.

Images of American soldier, shooting blindly into jungle; US bombers “carpet” bombing North Vietnamese cities during Christmas; “Hueys” spreading Agent Orange<sup>6</sup> over Vietnam jungles and fields; assault on U.S. embassy and prisoner executions during the Tet offensive; massacre at My Lai or crying children running away from a village that was just hit by napalm dropped by an American jet.

All these (and more) events, that were constantly being shown by the media to American public, caused American people to change their opinion about the conflict in Vietnam, increasing the influence of anti-war movements, thus putting the government together with all those Vietnam veterans, who though and died for their country, into a very bad light.

The truth was not (is not) always black and white, as the media during the Vietnam War tried to suggest. The following pages will try to explain some of these events. How they were presented by the media (especially in television), why they were presented the way they were, and what impact these presentations had. And ultimately, how were media able to change the course of war.

## **2.2 In the beginning**

The open hostility between the USA and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (or North Vietnam) began in November, 1963, after John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, and Lyndon B. Johnson, his vice president, assumed presidency. The exact beginning

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<sup>5</sup> A thirty minutes long comedy series from 1954.

<sup>6</sup> A defoliant used during the Vietnam War to destroy vast areas of Vietnamese jungles in order to strip The Viet Cong and NVA of any means of cover.

of the Vietnam conflict is hard to pinpoint, however. Generally, the First Indochina War<sup>7</sup> is considered to be the very beginning of the war.

Before the open conflict began with the *Gulf of Tonkin incident*<sup>8</sup> (or the *USS Maddox Incident*) as its pretence, American soldiers were already fighting in Vietnam and the media were already feeding Americans with stories. During Kennedy's administration, almost 16,000 "advisors" were sent as a reaction to the growing communist aggression in East Asia.<sup>9</sup> *Green Berets*, as these units were called, were to serve as an insurgent element, helping the South Vietnamese army with arming and training, sabotaging NVA's installations, and even sparking rebellions in North Vietnam.

As Hellmann (see p.19) writes, the portrayal of these men the by media, as well as the whole reason for them being in Vietnam was, overall, positive. According to him, these men were portrayed just like those cowboys in movies – "good guys shooting the bad guys". They appeared in popular magazines as men fighting with jungle, helping the innocent South Vietnamese and occasionally dying for them, and for the United States of America, of course. And, because media portrayed this positively, the American public accepted it positively as well.

This state remained unchanged until Kennedy's assassination; media were primarily focused on this event; out of sight, out of mind. According to Hallin (1986), this drop of attention continued until 1965, when the numbers of US troops in Vietnam reached approximately 175,000, although Hellmann (see p.19) contradicts that this lack of interest continued until 1968.

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<sup>7</sup> War in French Indochina (former French colony) between France (heavily supported by the USA) and Viet Minh (Vietnamese communists) from 1946 to 1954, resulting in French defeat at Dien Bien Phu.

<sup>8</sup> Three North Vietnamese PT boats attacked USS Maddox in the Gulf of Tonkin

<sup>9</sup> Kennedy, just like the presidents before him, was afraid of the so-called "domino theory": if one nation in Asia had fallen to communism, others would have too.

As for Hallin's claim, media did not find the conflict interesting enough before the numbers of soldiers increased enough, supplying the media with both military and human conflicts as well as various moral issues.

Hallin is also supported by Bonior, Champlin and Kolly (see p.19). According to their numbers, 86 percent of the CBS and NBC nightly news covered the war. Most importantly, this coverage was overall positive keeping the "good guys versus bad communists" attitude. Though, as Hellmann explains (2006), there was an occasional friction between the military and media. The example given is from August 1965, when a CBS reporter Morley Safer narrated a story where villagers of Can Ne stood by and watched as their houses were being burnt by US marines, using the Zippo cigarette lighters. Although it was not that important at the time, this image became one of the signifiers of the Vietnam War later on.

Robert Elegant (see p.18) claims, however, that it was the CBS reporter himself, who lent his Zippo lighter to the marine, and prompted him to set the hut on fire, thus creating the much needed drama for television. Images full of emotions, yet, images without any context. This was a typical aspect of many reports to come.

It is also worth noting that it were images like this one that greatly contributed to the fact that Vietnam veterans were treated the way they were; as savage, ruthless, drug abusing psychopaths and baby killers. As it is pictured in *Vietnam Lost Films: Episode 3* (2011), it was for the first time in American history that war veterans were not treated as heroes, even though they fought as bravely and valiantly as their grandfathers and fathers in WW1 and WW2.

Apart from that the coverage was overall positive. This state of things did not last long, however, as severe problem was rising from 1965 to 1968. American public was becoming more and more weary and tired of the war and so were the media. One of the reasons for that might be the usage of strategy the US government chose.

## 2.3 Search & Destroy

In November, 1965, a four day long battle took place at La Drang between the NVA and the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry of the United States Army. The battle was important not only from the military point of view, but it also established a way in which Vietnam was received and published by media and by public consequently.

Though both sides claimed this battle their victory, generally, the US Army is considered to be the victor here. Michael C. Hall in *Vietnam Lost Films: Episode 1* (2011) describes that this claim can be supported only by a raw number of casualties – *Body count*, for nothing else was gained in the battle. US won 1:12, that is, for one killed American, twelve NVA soldiers were killed. It was 234 Americans killed in action (KIA) and approximately 3,000 KIA Vietnamese soldiers in absolute numbers. This sheer “body counting” became an implementation of a strategy called *Search & Destroy* (S&D).

S&D is (it is still used today to some extent), simply put, about deployment, searching, destruction and extraction. This means that American units were deployed in a certain area, where enemy was expected to be. These units then, were supposed to find the enemy and cause as much casualties as possible without suffering too many losses of their own. The goal was, as Hellmann (see p.19) explains, that if the US forces had inflicted enough casualties, the North Vietnamese forces would have eventually dried out and withdrawn from the war.

From the military perspective, this strategy was very successful, as Michael C. Hall in *Vietnam Lost Films: Episode 3* (2011) explains. After the Tet Offensive, for example, the Viet Cong (VC) was incapacitated for the rest of the war, thus leaving the burden of fighting on the NVA alone, mainly due to the successful application of the S&D strategy. Though, this strategy sounds simple and effective, Johnson’s administrative failed to communicate this strategy to the media and public. And, as will be explained on the upcoming pages, if media are not given enough information, they tend to jump to their own, sometimes completely fabricated, conclusions.

A nice example is given by Karl Marlantes, a Vietnam veteran, who explains the difference between the Vietnam War and WWII:

*“Well, if you are in Pacific, you take this island and that island, getting you closer to Tokyo, so you can measure your progress, looks like we are winning. Or you land in Normandy, free Paris and cross Rhine, you have your objectives. Vietnam was a first war where it was not clear. How do you know you have won?”* (Vietnam Lost Films: Episode 4, 2011, at 46:20)

Therefore, most of the battles were usually just a short skirmishes over a village, hill, mountain passage etc., where American soldiers killed as many as they could and then simply left the place, which was then recaptured by North Vietnamese soon after.

According to Hellmann’s description (see p. 19), Americans back home were getting tired of weekly reports of statistics of how many North Vietnamese were killed and how many Americans will never return home alive. Media needed drama to keep their report interesting enough. And they did not have to wait long to get what they asked for.

## **2.4 The turning point**

On January 30, 1968, while most of the South Vietnamese were still sleeping after another day of Tet holidays<sup>10</sup>, thousands of VC members, who were able to secretly infiltrate many major South Vietnamese cities, including Saigon, mounted a major offensive later known as the *Tet Offensive*. Their objective was to take American and South Vietnam forces by surprise, hoping to spark a revolution in all those cities. And succeed they did, from a certain perspective.

From the military perspective, it was an utter disaster. Though Americans were, indeed, taken by surprise, they quickly reorganized their forces and crushed this offensive.

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<sup>10</sup> Tet is the Vietnamese Lunar New Year Celebration similar to the Chinese Lunar New Year celebration.



Except for Hue, a former imperial capital, the VC was not only unable to succeed in taking a foothold in any city, but its casualties were so high that it was actually incapacitated for the rest of the war. Therefore, it would seem that from the military point of view, the Tet Offensive was a great American victory. Yet, it was after the Tet that the Americans started to lose their grip in Vietnam and were forced to leave few years later.

The reason why this happened is, according to Hellmann (see p. 19), in the way in which the media treated information, and how they presented it to the American public. All those gruesome images of harsh, house to house combat, merciless fighting over the US embassy in Saigon and the simple fact that the American units were taken completely by surprise were, as Hellmann says, in sharp contrast with what the government claimed: that the war is going well. This seeded mistrust between the public and the government, mistrust fed by the mass media. Following pages will try to explain how the mass media treated the Tet Offensive.

#### **2.4.1 US embassy**

The attack on the US embassy in Saigon during the Tet Offensive is one of the examples how half-truth, unverified or even fabricated information aired on TV can change the course of war, one way or the other.

Early in the morning on January 31, 1968, several Viet Cong guerrillas attacked the US embassy in Saigon. Dolf Droge in *Vietnam War: The Impact of Media* (1984) together with Don Oberdorfer (1971) claim that only three marines were defending the embassy during the attack. And against the odds, those three marines were able to repel the VC attack, killing all nineteen attackers without even getting inside the embassy itself, thus claiming another heroic victory against the surprise attack during Tet. The American media, however, reported this event differently.

Following lines are from an NBC report about the attack on the embassy:

*“Snipers are in the building and on the rooftops near the embassy and are firing on American personnel inside the compound. Twenty suicide commandos are reported to be*

*holding the first floor of the embassy and some were still there toward daybreak.”* (Vietnam War: The Impact of Media, 1984, at 05:29)

Although the report itself is not a complete fabrication, it contains many “additions” to it, making it more appealing for the audience. In other words, it contains enough drama for television. Drama that was strong enough for many Americans to start questioning their government whether all those claims about winning in Vietnam are true or whether the NVA and VC are really that weak etc.

#### **2.4.2 Nguyen Ngoc Loan**

Nguyen Ngoc Loan was a general of South Vietnam’s police. He is infamously known from the picture (see Appendix 3) on which he executed a handcuffed VC prisoner in the middle of the street during the Tet Offensive. This Pulitzer Prize winning image is among one of the most significant pictures of the world and drastically helped the anti-war movement in America.

An “addition” can be seen (or more accurately heard) in the filmed version that was taken at the same time by an NBC cameraman. According to Charlton Heston in *Vietnam War: Impact of Media* (1984), the sound of a pistol shot was added later to create the much needed drama, as the original film was taken without any recorded sound.<sup>11</sup>

Peter Braestrup in *Vietnam War: The Impact of Media* (1984) also adds that from television’s perspective the film was perfect. It contained all the melodrama it needed. There was no information value in it, however, because the film and the photo were released just as they were, without any further explanation. What the NBC did not report about, was the event preceding the execution.

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<sup>11</sup> A reconstructed NBC report is shown in Vietnam War – The Impact of Media at 33:25; viewer’s discretion is advised.

Hellman (2004) claims that the executed man was, according to South Vietnam sources, in charge of a death squad, whose members were said to massacre up to thirty people; police officers and their families including the family of one of Loan's officers. It is not an excuse for someone, who is supposed to represent the "good guys", to execute an unarmed prisoner of war without a trial. It just puts the whole event into context. Context, that the original NBC report was missing.

Robert Northshield, an NBC producer, who was primarily responsible for the report, defends it in *Vietnam War: Impact of Media* (1984). He claims that the film was aired without any possibility to predict its political impact, nor any predictions of this kind should ever be made by any reporter, for it would be, using his own words: "*propagandistic, not journalistic*".

Although he shields himself with a claim that journalists should be objective, the report was actually quite the opposite. That is because you cannot maintain objectivity while keeping the context of the message hidden from the public. Because then the report becomes a message, and a half-truth message is, in fact, propaganda (or rather anti-propaganda in this case). Giving the public what you want them to see, hear or read and keeping the rest to yourself is the very fundamental part of propaganda.

To conclude this incident, here is an interesting confession by Eddie Adams, author of the photography, in *Time Magazine*:

*"The general killed the Viet Cong; I killed the general with my camera. Still photographs are the most powerful weapon in the world. People believe them, but photographs do lie, even without manipulation. They are only half-truths ... What the photograph didn't say was, 'What would you do if you were the general at that time and place on that hot day, and you caught the so-called bad guy after he blew away one, two or three American soldiers?'"* (Adams, 1998)

It is said that a picture is worth a thousand words. Charlton Heston in *Vietnam War: Impact of Media* (1984) contradicts: "... a picture often needs a thousand words to explain what it means."

### 2.4.3 Khe Sahn

During the Tet Offensive, North Vietnam attacked a US base at *Khe Sahn*. It was an American artillery base with an airstrip just a few miles from demilitarized zone between South and North, thus making it vital for the NVA and VC to take the base from the hands of Americans.

Americans were not unprepared, however. Hellmann (2004) explains that they actually wanted the NVA to attack at Khe Sahn as a part of their strategy of attrition. American military leaders were hoping to lure all the enemy forces from wide area to one place where they could have been destroyed, using their air and artillery superiority towards that goal. As with the Tet Offensive, there are two ways to tell, whether the US forces succeeded at Khe Sahn or not.

Military point of view can be simplified to the number of casualties on both sides, applied by the S&D strategy. According to Tom Carhart in *Vietnam War: Impact of Media* (1984), a military historian, the US forces had 199 KIA and approximately 1,600 were wounded in action, while North Vietnamese forces suffered from 9,000 to 14,000 casualties from 21<sup>st</sup> of January to 16<sup>th</sup> of April, 1968. Although as, for example, Peter Brush (2006) explains, the casualty counting at Khe Sahn is not that simple<sup>12</sup>. Nevertheless, we can see that Khe Sahn can be considered a decisive American victory (by comparison to the applied strategy). Media again saw, and more importantly, depicted the battle differently.

Lack of experience of the reporters in Vietnam is considered to be one of the main reasons of the Vietnam debacle. Robert Elegant (see p.18) compares the attitude of most reporters in Vietnam to the attitude of some military officers. He explains that most of the reporters, who arrived in Vietnam, were there for a six month cycle<sup>13</sup>. Many of those newly

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<sup>12</sup> Only those soldiers, who were participating in certain operations during the Khe Sahn siege, were considered its casualties etc.

<sup>13</sup> Soldiers served in Vietnam on a one year cycle; after one year, they were allowed to go home, if they wanted.

arrived journalists, according to Elegant, saw Vietnam as a quick way to get an acknowledgment of readers/viewers back home, and not only of them, but of their fellow journalists in Vietnam as well. Elegant further describes the western media establishment in Vietnam as a state of its own. That is because of their inexperience and antagonism towards the military. Most journalists did not know much (or anything) about Vietnamese language, their culture or way of life so, as Elegant explains, they made themselves isolated from the Vietnamese. Their anti-military attitude made them also isolated from the American soldiers, so, in the six month cycle, they were unable (or unwilling) to learn neither about Vietnam itself nor about the fighting there. In the end, they were writing for each other, not for the fighting soldiers, Vietnamese or American public. Battle at Khe Sahn base just fits into Elegant's description of an inexperienced journalist.

The antagonism towards the military, described by Elegant (see p.18), was a result of the whole period of the 1960s. All over the world, society was changing; protesting against their governments (in Communist bloc just like in the Western bloc), and the United States were not different. Norman Podhoretz in *Vietnam War: The Impact of Media* (1984), a Commentary magazine editor, says that any information given by the government was almost automatically accepted to be false, while information given by the media were considered to be accurate by the same merit. We can see now, it was not true. However, this thesis does not want to support Podhoretz's argument, as he puts it, that everything said by the government was true and everything, said in the media, was not.

### **Another Dien Bien Phu**

As explained above, the American media misinterpreted the S&D strategy, which offered no immediate and visible merit of success or defeat. This, together with other factors, like the lack of bilateral communication between them and the military, as explained by

Elegant (see p.18), led to a fatal misconception of Khe Sahn battle and its incorrect comparison to Dien Bien Phu.<sup>14</sup>

The following example is a quotation of an NBC News report by John Laurence:

*“From the North Vietnamese point of view, Khe Sahn is an easy target for its mortars and rockets. A convenient place to bleed the Marines, and what may be most crucial, tie down and isolate 6,000 American troops and about 20,000 reserves far from the protective coastal plain. For twenty years, General Giap has used the same tactics.”* (Vietnam War: The Impact of Media, 1984, at 14:57)

This is a rather grim prediction of the outcome of the battle. Also notice the mention of General Giap, the very same man who led the Vietnamese forces at Dien Bien Phu. This shows a clear parallel, made by journalists and reporters, between Khe Sahn and a battle that took place twenty years ago. From their viewpoint, the situation was simple. American soldiers were surrounded and vastly outnumbered by a determined enemy, who was able to defeat a powerful country once before; a recipe for disaster from reporters’ perspective.

As already mentioned, Khe Sahn was not only a military base, but also a large airstrip. One particular detail attracted TV reporters: a smoking wreckage of C-130, a large cargo plane that the North Vietnamese were able to shot down during the battle. For military, this shot down airplane was not a big issue or an obstacle; for TV news, however, it was an emotional “crowd-puller” full of smoke, death and drama. “*TV loves fire*”, said Peter Braestrup in *Vietnam War: The Impact of Media* (1984), and as he adds, there was a joke about the TV reporters (applicable to most reporters in general) running around during the Vietnam War: “*If there is a smoke, I can sell it.*”

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<sup>14</sup> The Battle of Dien Bien Phu (13 March – 7 May 1954) was the final battle of the First Indochina War where the French army was surrounded and defeated by the Viet Minh (predecessor of the NVA and VC) forces led by general Giap.

Braestrup further explains that there was, indeed, a shot down C-130 on the airstrip during the Khe Sahn siege; one of four planes the Americans lost, although Gen. Westmorland<sup>15</sup> in *Vietnam War: The Impact of Media* (1984) contradicts that only one plane was shot down by North Vietnamese anti-air. Nevertheless, they both describe the following drama pretty much the same. According to both, the first thing the TV news reporters saw, immediately after their landing at Khe Sahn, was a burning C-130 with “clueless” marines running around. Then, reporters just stood in front of the smoking wreckage, airing their grim proclamations of yet another shot down plane and the despair of American troops fighting, just like the French at Dien Bien Phu twenty years ago, a battle they could not win.

Such strong proclamations of the upcoming and inevitable defeat at Khe Sahn were, aired back. People, in the coziness of their living rooms, were supplied by seemingly infinite stream of images from the Tet Offensive; US embassy being captured by determined guerilla fighters capable of anything; allies not complying to Geneva Conventions or basic principles of humanity; American soldiers dying, surrounded by enemies in a pointless battle over some insignificant piece of land in a country far, far away. All that was needed was to deliver a coup de grace to government’s endeavors in Vietnam, thus successfully destabilizing it. The man responsible for delivering this final blow is believed to be Walter Cronkite.

#### **2.4.4 Walter Cronkite – the man who helped lose the war**

Walter Cronkite (1916 - 2009) was an iconic figure during the 1960s and 1970s. Reporter and anchorman, who, in my opinion, associated media, power of the public opinion and war, forever. “America’s most trusted man”, as he was often referred to, is considered to be the one responsible for the dramatic drop of public support towards the war. According to *Vietnam Lost: Episode 4*: the support dropped below 40 percent in 1968 and Walter Cronkite played a vital role in it.

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<sup>15</sup> Commanding officer of the US forces in Vietnam from 1964 to 1968.

Timothy Maga (2003) describes that for many Americans, he represented a reliable source of information and even the only source of relevant information to some. As Maga writes, a new coinage developed at that time. “To watch Walter Cronkite” meant “to watch TV news”. At every important event in the 1960s, there was Cronkite; Cuban Missile Crisis; JFK’s assassination; Neil Armstrong’s first steps on the Moon. All of America saw these events in television, accompanied by Cronkite’s rather emotionless objective commentaries, thus connected him with important and objective news.

In his hour long special report on February 27, 1968, he concluded that the war in Vietnam cannot end in any other way than a stalemate. This was unprecedented and quite shocking statement from a reporter, who was not only considered a professional, but, until this point, a strong supporter of American presence in South Asia, as Peter Kalisher, a CBS’s Paris bureau chief explains in Murray Fromson’s article (2009). As Kalisher mentions, Cronkite was in Vietnam during the Tet Offensive and the experience had shaken his belief in American victory as well as the whole reason for America’s presence in South Asia.

The reason why Cronkite’s professionalism is mentioned in the previous paragraph is his “slip”<sup>16</sup>. It is because journalism theorists, like Verner and Bezchlebová (2007), claim that according to journalism ethics: a true reporter should be a mere reproducer of events, not its creator. That is, he/she should be unbiased, unmoved by his/her reports and, in case of Cronkite’s “slip”, should avoid any commentary which would express his/her attitude towards the reported event. As Verner and Bezchlebová further add, many journalists, especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, had become more like preachers of morality than reporters.

It is not difficult to describe, how this Cronkite’s open expression about the outcome of the war, shook and changed public opinion, not only towards the conflict in Vietnam, but to a political situation in the US as well. It shocked not only the public, but also the president Johnson. It was said about him that he, just like many other Americans, was watching

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<sup>16</sup> This thesis does not try to diminish any of Walter Cronkite’s contributions to journalism in any way.



Cronkite's special report and right after its end he turned to his advisors and said: "*If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost Middle America.*"<sup>17</sup> As Ian C. Friedman (2010) writes that it did not matter that Johnson appeared in television soon after and tried to explain that the Tet Offensive, conducted by North Vietnamese, utterly failed, that the VC was in ruins, and that the NVA failed at capturing Khe Sahn and suffered heavy casualties in due process. All that mattered to people was that a respected journalist did not see any other outcome.

Public, controlled by the mass media, believed to Cronkite; "America's most trusted man". They believed to those reporters, standing in front of the same burning C-130. They believed those war journalists, who never saw the compound of the US embassy in Saigon and yet, described, in vivid details, heavy fighting for its every floor. Aired the horrors of the war on daily basis, showing how prisoners are executed on the streets just like animals. This is the power media can have. This is why America withdrawn from Vietnam. Not because of the resilient enemy their soldiers stood against, but because of their own reporters. Reporters who: "*valued the freedom of speech above everything else, even the value of life.*" (Reed Irvine in Vietnam War: The Impact of Media, 1984, 49:01)

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<sup>17</sup> Johnson's political career literally ended due to it as he stated that he will not candidate in the upcoming elections for a 2<sup>nd</sup> term as the president of the USA.

## **Conclusion**

The evidence presented in this thesis shows that journalists and reporters were more often driven by their own personal goals rather than the truth itself. Pulitzer and Hearst competed over the publicity and highest selling numbers possible. TV networks in Vietnam followed pretty much the same path, for they are not different from any other business company. Their product is information; information that you have to sell in order to profit (especially in a world driven by economy). Pulitzer and Hearst knew that American public was not interested in naked truth. It was sometimes necessary to “improve” it in order to sell it. Although not every journalist followed this pattern during the Vietnam War, the results were the same in the end. Some were not convinced that the US had right to be in Vietnam so they somewhat supported North Vietnam in their reports; some, like Walter Cronkite, were shocked by the horrors of the war (especially after the Tet Offensive); some simply did not believe that information given by their government were true and so they presented only uneducated guesses and half-truths.

While it is questionable whether the US was right to join the war in Vietnam in the first place, I believe that the decision to retreat from the war before its end was ultimately wrong. Yes, no other American died after the retreat but all those soldiers, who fought and died for their country, and whose brothers in arms were treated like criminals back home due to their portrayal in media, actually died in vain. These soldiers were never defeated in Vietnam; they did not lose any single battle and yet, their sacrifices were rendered useless in the end. And we must not forget South Vietnamese people. Media, to this day, remain silent about those thousands of lives that were suddenly ended just because they did not fit into the Hanoi regime pattern that took control of the South right after the US’s hasty retreat. No one spoke of them. No interviews, no clicking noises of cameras, no banner headlines in magazines and newspapers.

As I have to repeat, however, it would be naïve to claim that both Spanish-American War and Vietnam War were decided on the ink coated pages of newspapers and flashing screens of televisions, nevertheless, media played an important role in both cases.

Lastly, media controlled public in both cases, but it was the public who let itself being controlled and manipulated. That should be the main lesson taught by the Spanish-American War and Vietnam: to not only know, but to understand as well.

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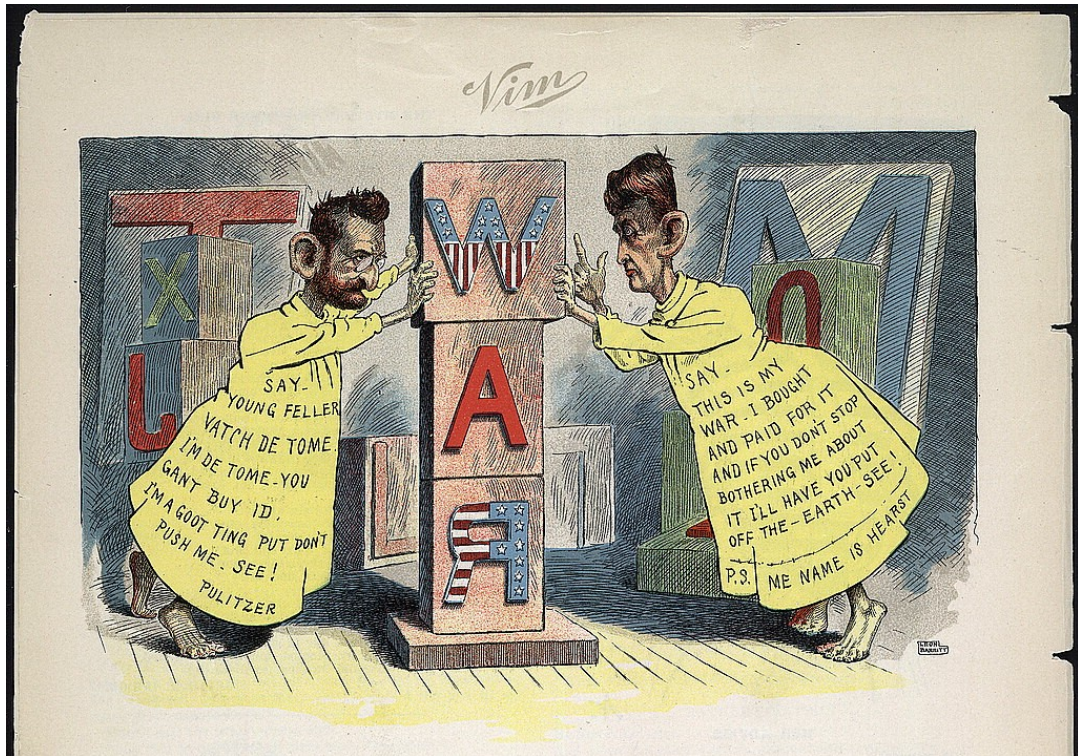
*Vietnam Lost Films*, epizoda 1, The Beginning. TV, History 9. května 2012 22:00.

*Vietnam Lost Films*, epizoda 3, The Tet Offensive. TV, History 23. května 2012 22:00.

*Vietnam Lost Films*, epizoda 4, An Endless War. TV, History 30. května 2012 22:00.

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## Appendix 1



*The big type war of the yellow kids*

Source: BARRITT, W. In: Vim, v. 1, č. 2, 29. 6 1898. Dostupné z:

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/ppmsc.02832/>

# Appendix 2

**\$50,000 REWARD.—WHO DESTROYED THE MAINE?—\$50,000 REWARD.**

EDITION FOR GREATER NEW YORK

**NEW YORK JOURNAL**  
AND ADVERTISER.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 1898. PRICE ONE CENT.

---

**DESTRUCTION OF THE WAR SHIP MAINE WAS THE WORK OF AN ENEMY**

**\$50,000!**

**\$50,000 REWARD!**

For the Detection of the Perpetrator of the Maine Outrage!

The New York Journal offers a reward of \$50,000 cash for information furnished to it which will enable the government to identify the perpetrator of the Maine outrage. The reward will be paid to the person who first furnishes such information. The reward will be paid to the person who first furnishes such information. The reward will be paid to the person who first furnishes such information.

Assistant Secretary Roosevelt  
Convinced the Explosion of  
the War Ship Was Not  
an Accident.

The Journal Offers \$50,000 Reward for the  
Conviction of the Criminals Who Sent  
258 American Sailors to Their Death.  
Naval Officers Unanimous That  
the Ship Was Destroyed  
on Purpose.

**\$50,000!**

**\$50,000 REWARD!**

For the Detection of the Perpetrator of the Maine Outrage!

The New York Journal offers a reward of \$50,000 cash for information furnished to it which will enable the government to identify the perpetrator of the Maine outrage. The reward will be paid to the person who first furnishes such information. The reward will be paid to the person who first furnishes such information. The reward will be paid to the person who first furnishes such information.

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**NAVAL OFFICERS THINK THE MAINE WAS DESTROYED BY A SPANISH MINE.**

Lange Report. Havana, the Journal's special correspondent in Havana, cables that it is the belief of many Spanish naval officers that the Maine was destroyed by a hidden mine or a sunken torpedo. This is the opinion of several Spanish naval authorities. The Spaniards, it is believed, intended to have the Maine arrested prior to the Spanish attack. They expected the vessel with a hidden mine, and it is thought the explosion was caused by a hidden mine or a sunken torpedo. If this can be proved, the naval history of the Spaniards will be open to the fact that they were not in the wrong.

---

**Hidden Mine or a Sunken Torpedo Believed to Have Been the Weapon Used Against the American Man-of-War—Officers and Men Tell Thrilling Stories of Being Blown into the Air Amid a Mass of Shattered Steel and Exploding Shells—Survivors Brought to Key West Scout the Idea of Accident—Spanish Officials Protest Too Much—Our Cabinet Orders a Searching Inquiry—Journal Sends Divers to Havana to Report Upon the Condition of the Wreck.**

*New York Journal article on the sinking of the USS Maine*

Source: Hearst, W. R. In: New York Journal and Advertiser, 17. 2. 1898. Taken from R. Shepard's *Yellow Journalism* (see p. 33)



## Appendix 3



*Nguyen Ngoc Loan executes VC prisoner*

Source: ADAMS, E. In: © 1968 World Wide Photos, 1.2. 1968. Dostupné z:

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in\\_pictures/3672428.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_pictures/3672428.stm)

## **Resumé**

Práce se zaměřuje na popis a analýzu Španělsko-americké války a války ve Vietnamu z pohledu vlivu médií, resp. na vliv médií jako na hlavní příčinu počátku Španělsko-americké války a určujícího prvku pro ukončení války ve Vietnamu. Dále zpochybňuje nestrannost médií, jakož i přibližuje mediální agendu v obou případech.

## Anotace

<b>Jméno a příjmení:</b>	Martin Kostka
<b>Katedra:</b>	Katedra anglického jazyka
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<b>Rok obhajoby:</b>	2012

<b>Název práce:</b>	Vliv médií na Španělsko-americkou válku a válku ve Vietnamu
<b>Název v angličtině:</b>	Influence of Media on Spanish-American War and Vietnam War
<b>Anotace práce:</b>	Práce se zaměřuje na popis a analýzu Španělsko-americké války a války ve Vietnamu z pohledu vlivu médií, resp. na vliv médií jako na hlavní příčinu počátku Španělsko-americké války a určujícího prvku pro ukončení války ve Vietnamu. Dále zpochybňuje nestrannost médií, jakož i přibližuje mediální agendu v obou případech.
<b>Klíčová slova:</b>	Španělsko-americká válka, válka ve Vietnamu, média, názor, vliv
<b>Anotace v angličtině:</b>	This thesis focuses on description and analysis of the Spanish-American War and the Vietnam War, specifically on the influence of media as a main cause for Spanish-American War and a signifying element to end the Vietnam War. It further impeaches the objectivity of media as well as showing its agenda in both cases.
<b>Klíčová slova v angličtině:</b>	Spanish-American War, Vietnam War, media, opinion, influence
<b>Přílohy vázané v práci:</b>	Appendix 1: <i>The Big Type War</i> Appendix 2: <i>New York Article on the Sinking of the USS Maine</i> Appendix 3: <i>Nguyen Ngoc Loan executes VC prisoner</i>
<b>Rozsah práce:</b>	43
<b>Jazyk práce:</b>	angličtina