

“Early roots of an ‘Opposition Press’:  
An Examination of the New York  
Times’ Editorials from the spring of  
1965”

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# THE ISSUE

- **1985:** Daniel Hallin's book, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam*, claims that:

“The administration's announced policy at this point coincided closely enough with the liberal views of the *Times* that the usual split between the front pages and the editorial page more or less disappeared, and the peace initiatives of April and May produced a major change in the *Times's* editorial position: the *Times* strongly supported the administration during those initiatives, and though it sometimes gave its support grudgingly as the ground war wound up, it avoided direct criticism of Johnson's Vietnam policy through the July troop decision. So in contrast to the escalation of the air war in February and March, **there was little critical interpretation of the administration actions anywhere in the *Times* during the escalation of the ground war in April–June.**” (pp. 95–96)

# THE ISSUE

- **1994: Seymour Hersh**
- At a conference on the My Lai massacre held at Tulane University in 1994, a member of the audience asked Seymour Hersh, the keynote speaker, a question about the media's coverage of Vietnam, suggesting that there was no opposition to Johnson's escalation of the war. Hersh generally agreed with the questioner and offered a reasonable analysis of why he thought that was the case (no opposition).

# THE ISSUE

- **May 1, 1995:** *The Nation* published an editorial reacting to McNamara's book *In Retrospect*. Here *The Nation* castigated the *Times* for not opposing the war:

“To read the *New York Times* editorial of April 12 you'd think the newspaper had fought against the war by all means possible from 1961 to 1975. **It never did.** The *Times* criticized the war but only as one that was fought badly or was no longer worth the cost to America. The first *Times* critic of the war, Anthony Lewis, piped up in late 1969. The first mainstream U.S. paper to editorialize against the war was *The Boston Globe*, earlier that year. The *Times* jeers McNamara's comfortable retirement, but I haven't noticed any of its editorialists or reporters who promoted the war starving in garrets of contrition.”

# THE ISSUE

- July 10, 1995: John Oakes responded to *The Nation's* critical editorial:

“... Alexander Cockburn says it was not until 1969 that ‘the first mainstream U.S. paper’ editorialized ‘against the [Vietnam] War.’ The facts are that by early 1965, *The New York Times* was saying editorially (Feb. 9): ‘The only sane way out [of Vietnam] is diplomatic, international, political, economic—not military. A solution will not be found by exchanging harder and harder blows. . . . “Victory” for either side is impossible.’ . . .

“In 1965 the *Times* was certainly among the very first—if not the first—of the ‘mainstream’ American press to editorialize against the war, to use Cockburn’s phrase. If the *Times’s* stance did not look like serious opposition to Cockburn, it surely did to President Johnson, to Secretary Rusk and to our readers, including the many who called us everything from heroes to traitors and Communists.”

# THE ISSUE

- **July 10, 1995:** Alexander Cockburn replied to Oakes:

“As in a friendly family dispute, the *Times* criticism of Johnson in the mid-sixties involved disagreement on details within a context of agreement on fundamentals: North Vietnam was the ‘aggressor’; the Vietcong were ‘terrorists’; ‘Americans went into Vietnam . . . to contain the advance of Communism,’ an exemplary motive of which ‘every American can be proud’; and what was needed instead of a ‘factional government in Saigon that can neither make war nor negotiate peace’ was ‘a government of national union that seeks to do both at the same time . . . and join with the United States both in offering negotiations to the North and in intensifying the war effort.’ (All quotes from *Times* editorials, January–July, 1965.)

“The trick was in prosecuting the war enough to make the Vietnamese scream but not enough to bring on a world war. ‘This is just what President Johnson is trying to avoid,’ the *Times* editorialized on July 9, 1965. **“He should be encouraged in that effort.”**

# THE CASE FOR MY POSITION

- April 22, 1965, “Descalation Needed”

“Those who have all along feared that the course the war has been taking since early February would force the United States into an ever greater commitment, leading to ever greater danger to Asia and to the world, are unhappily being proved true prophets. Once a war begins, forces take over which seem beyond control. In Vietnam, on both sides, one step is leading—as if inexorably—to another and then another. **Continuance of the present process by the opposing forces could lead to catastrophe.**”

“Continued bombing of North Vietnam makes progress toward a peaceful settlement—however far off it must necessarily be—more difficult rather than less, harder rather than easier. We think that as a follow-up to the President’s fine declaration in Baltimore, a **‘descalation’ of the war is needed, rather than the escalation that we now see imminent.**”

“President Johnson launched a very tentative but real peace offensive at Johns Hopkins. He has not yet given this policy enough time but the continued bombing has tended to **cast some doubt on the sincerity of the United States’ desire for negotiations.**”

“This is clearly a moment of crisis—for Vietnam, for the United States and for the world. **Less bombing, not more, offers some hope of peace**—without any weakness of American resolution. By taking such an attitude the United States would show strength as well as wisdom.”

# THE CASE FOR MY POSITION

- April 23, 1965, “Truth or Propaganda”

“The ‘contradictions, the double talk, the half-truths’ released in the name of the United States Government about the Vietnamese war are not the fault of the U.S.I.A. alone. The problem goes back to the Pentagon, to the State Department and to the White House.”

“The credibility of the United States Government is a precious thing; it has been sacrificed too often in the name of expediency.”

# THE CASE FOR MY POSITION

- May 6, 1965, “Illusion of Omnipotence”

“United States policy since the end of World War II has been based on anti-Communism, accompanied by efforts to achieve a *détente* with the Soviet bloc. The evolution of such a *détente* was one of the most encouraging developments in world affairs in recent years. But if it means anything, the Johnson Doctrine means that the emphasis is now going to be on resisting the advance of Communism anywhere in the world with military force rather than on differentiating between various kinds of Communism or trying to co-exist with any of them. **The United States gives the appearance of heading toward the unenviable, self-righteous and self-defeating position of world policeman.**”

“Ours is the most powerful nation on earth, but there are things that even the United States cannot do in this period of history.”

# THE CASE FOR MY POSITION

- May 28, 1965, “War Without Consent”

“The steady build-up of American combat troops in South Vietnam raises questions that deserve forthright answers. Only a month ago reports of a projected build-up in ground forces were officially denied in Washington. Since those denials there has been a 50 per cent increase in American military personnel in Vietnam.

“In the past ten weeks, while the Administration has reported continuity of policy, American troops in Vietnam have been doubled to more than 46,500. Indications that the total will rise above 60,000 this summer have been accompanied by reports that the objective is a force exceeding 100,000, including three full Army and Marine combat divisions.”

“If this aim [to maintain a stalemate] is being abandoned, if the country is being taken gradually and almost surreptitiously into a large-scale land war on the continent of Asia, the time has come for the nation to be told what is happening—and why.”

# THE CASE FOR MY POSITION

- June 7, 1965, “Congress in Vietnam”

The *Times* observed that there was Congressional interest in ending the “leave-it-to-Lyndon era in American foreign policy.” It categorically stated that “grave constitutional questions are raised by the acknowledgment of an increasing combat role for American troops.”

# THE CASE FOR MY POSITION

- June 9, 1965, “Ground War in Asia”

“The American people were told by a minor State Department official yesterday that, in effect, they were in a land war on the continent of Asia. This is only one of the extraordinary aspects of the first formal announcement that a decision has been made to commit American ground forces to open combat in South Vietnam: **The nation is informed about it not by the President, not by a Cabinet member, not even by a sub-Cabinet official, but by a public relations officer.**”

“There is still no official explanation offered for a move that fundamentally alters the character of the American involvement in Vietnam. A program of weapons supply, training and combat advice to South Vietnamese, initiated by Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy, has now been transformed by President Johnson into an American war against Asians.”

“**The country deserves answers to this and many other questions. It has been taken into a ground war by Presidential decision when there is no emergency that would seem to rule out Congressional debate.** The duty now is for reassurance from the White House that the nation will be informed on where it is being led and that Congress will be consulted before another furious upward whirl is taken on the escalation spiral.”

# THE CASE FOR MY POSITION

- June 10, 1965, “Ground War in Washington”

“The White House denies that the President ordered the new combat role in March ‘or at any other time.’ It is explained that General Westmoreland’s authority was ‘implicit’ in the assignment of Marines to Danang. Yet how could ‘implicit’ authority have been so explicitly defined all along as was finally claimed in yesterday’s White House statement? It is there limited to instances when South Vietnamese forces are ‘faced with aggressive attack when other effective reserves are not available and when in his [Westmoreland’s] judgment the military situation urgently requires it.’”

“The time has come for the President to take the country into his confidence and to give the Congress time for a full debate before the war is escalated any further.”

# THE CASE FOR MY POSITION

- June 13, 1965, “New Vietnam Crisis”

“The latest political crisis in Saigon makes more urgent than ever a clear statement of the nature and extent of the American commitment in South Vietnam.

“President Johnson has repeatedly affirmed that this country’s forces are engaged in South Vietnam at the request of that country’s government and in an advisory capacity. Secretary of Defense McNamara and other high officials have stated that political stability in Saigon is indispensable to military success.

“The latest turn in the merry-go-round of Government in Saigon **calls both these premises of American policy into serious question.** Who speaks for South Vietnam? At whose invitation are American forces now participating in the war there? If political stability is a prerequisite for military success, what chance of success now exists?”

“The bombing of North Vietnam has obviously failed in its purpose of bringing communists to the negotiating table; the country is entitled to know what reasons there are for believing that escalation in the jungle warfare will prove more effective—and at what cost?”

# THE CASE FOR MY POSITION

- June 26, 1965, “Missed Opportunity”

“President Johnson’s speech to the United Nations in San Francisco must disappoint all who had hoped he would capture the world’s imagination by specific proposals for attaining the objectives that brought the U.N. into being. Instead, the great bulk of the President’s speech consisted of noble but trite sentiments whose mere repetition makes no contribution to their realization. The eloquent phrases failed to mask the fact that an opportunity was missed.”

“The President concluded his speech by declaring that ‘this is the age, and we are the men, and this is the place to give reality to our commitments under the United Nations Charter.’ We regret that the urgency implied by these words was not matched by a program to give them substance.”

# SUMMARY

- **The Times:**
  - Argued that Johnson was guilty of “**deliberate distortion**”
  - Demanded to know “**why**” the country was being taken into a land war in Asia “**surreptitiously**”
  - Questioned “**motives**” of American foreign policy
  - Questioned “**democratic decision making**” process
  - Claimed there was a “**constitutional crisis**”
  - Claimed that American policy under Johnson had become wedded to the “**imperialist, jingoist past**”
- **The Challenge**
  - Given this evidence, is it possible to maintain that there was “**little critical interpretation of the administration actions anywhere in the *Times* . . . in April–June**”?