CULBERT: The first question that I would like to ask you is not the first one we were just rehearsing but let's go to LBJ. What was the impact of the media coverage of Tet on LBJ and on his decision not to seek reelection in March and remember to sort of rephrase this question in your answer.

BRAESTRUP: Lyndon Johnson was always very sensitive to what he saw on the TV screen and as you will recall, he had a console set up in the Oval office in which all three network news shows could be simultaneously. In those days they appeared simultaneously. He was very sensitive to what he saw in the press. This was true from the start of the war and it was true at Tet. We know now that Lyndon Johnson and his staff were shaken in the first week of February right after the attacks in Vietnam on the cities by the Vietcong. They were shaken not only by the attacks but by their treatment on television. And so, possibly as a result, was the rest of political and journalistic Washington. When the President is shaken and shows it, it affects the whole political community in Washington and this was very important. But I think the effects of the media coverage and I contend that this media coverage was distorted. It showed Hanoi as the Tet offensive by Hanoi as resulting in a disaster for the allies in South Vietnam. The historians now have concluded that it was a military and political defeat for Hanoi and for the Vietcong in the south. These such claims were not made with any persistence at the time of Tet by Lyndon Johnson after the first couple of days. The administration which had conducted a
kind of orchestrated propaganda campaign designed to convince the American public that progress was being made in Vietnam after three years of war. This propaganda campaign included a speech by General Westmoreland before the National Press Club in November of 1967. It included speeches by Lyndon Johnson and by the principal leaders of the administration—all during the last half of 1967 designed to shore up public opinion in favor of the war. However, the administration was shocked into a kind of candor. They did not claim victory over the communist at Tet so much as they claimed and not very strongly and not very often that the communist had not achieved a victory. There is a difference between claiming a victory for your side and claiming in a more subdued way a defeat for the other. Much of the media, especially on television, did not make this distinction. The television people and the commentators and the correspondents in the newspapers immediately harked back to that propaganda campaign of late 1967 and contrasted the administration's prior optimism with the undeniable surprise, undeniable initial military setbacks to the allied cause in South Vietnam. They did not listen carefully to what the administration was saying during Tet. They in effect wrote off what the administration was saying at Tet very cautiously as simply being more of the same propaganda. The media was kind of shocked and the administration was paying the price for creating a credibility gap over the previous years of the war when the crunch came at Tet. This kind of one wrong by the administration being answered by another wrong by the media. Two wrongs don't make a right and that's essentially what happened in the media portrayal of the Tet offensive in February and March of 1968.
CULBERT: Peter, one of the phrases that was used in war over and over and over again was "light at the end of the tunnel." Do you really think your message ends up suggesting that Tet showed that there was light at the end of the tunnel?

BRAESTRUP: Not at all. The other problem with discussions now of the Tet offensive is that both opponents of the war and administration figures of various persuasions the administration was far from united on what to do about the war. But almost everybody involved in the Tet offensive claims that the Tet offensive showed something about that light at the end of the tunnel. My argument in the book is that the Tet offensive per se showed us very little that was new about the war. It did not show that victory was any closer or any further away. It did not show us suddenly that the war was foolish as the doves claim. There were no great revelations observable at the time of Tet that should have caused anybody to make up their minds one way or the other about the rights and wrongs of the war. It was an occasion, a time of crisis particularly in Washington which was exploited by both hawks, the joint chiefs of staff, and by doves, in the Senate—Senator Fullbright and within the administration some of the whiz kids in the Pentagon. Everybody was trying to exploit this crisis to change things. This was the last thing that Lyndon Johnson wanted to do at Tet or for the three years prior to Tet. Lyndon Johnson essentially sought to buy time. Lyndon Johnson essentially sought to buy time for those two months. He hunkered down in the White House. He was apprehensive about the political effects of this crisis out there in Vietnam. Even though
that crisis ended rather swiftly. He was worried then as always about the domestic, political repercussions, how he would look in the history books, how he would look in terms of his great society programs. He was not what you would consider an enthusiast for the war in Vietnam. So he was continually trying to satisfy everybody. He tried to do this at Tet. He tried to satisfy the hawks with a little more reinforcement for Vietnam. OK
CULBERT: Peter, you were just talking a minute ago about in a sense why we need to take another look at Tet and why we need a symposium. Maybe you can say something about that.

BRAESTRUP: It's going on now ten years after the Tet offensive is a whole series of scholarly reanalyses, reexaminations of what happened during those two months and much of what the scholars are digging up is very upsetting to people who were there, to newsmen who covered the Tet events, to administration figures and their critics, to doves and to hawks because many of the cherished assumptions about Tet have kind of been turned topsy-turvy by the scholars who are now beginning to dig at the what's and the why's of the Vietnam War. I think I'd like to discuss a number of those cherished assumptions that have been turned upside down. One of the cherished assumptions of the doves was that the Tet offensive suddenly revealed to the American public as communicated by the media the folly of Vietnam War and turned around public opinion, cherished assumption. It was shared for self-serving reason of course by many in the television business, many in the print media because it made us seem important. We turned the public around in the war. It makes us pretty important people. But the studies of the public opinion polls shows a real difference between the presidential crisis, the political crisis that occurred in Washington when Lyndon Johnson failed to respond as a president normally does to a crisis getting on national TV, explaining the crisis; responding to it decisively, looking like the leader of the tribe when danger threatens from without. He didn't do that. Instead for two months he made almost, well he
did not make one single nation-wide television speech of the kind Kennedy made during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the kind that Nixon made in 1972 when Hanoi attacked again. Lyndon didn't do that. Instead, he kind of hunkered down in the White House and sought to buy time, trying to figure how he was going to get out of this scrape. Trying to satisfy both the hawks who wanted a bigger war and the doves who wanted a little war within his own administration. Sure, he gave some sermons, he said, "We shall persist" he had said that for three prior. He said, "We shall not withdraw, America's will is firm." It was almost as if he was protesting too much and then finally on the 31st of March after two months in which he left this vacuum he gets on television and says I'm not going to run again, there's going to be a bombing clause(?) I'm going to send a few more troops but it was not except for his the drama and surprise of his decision sort of to advocate from the presidency in order to seek peace cast himself from the role of a disinterested above the politics president who was interested in seeking peace. Aside from that which boosted his ratings in the Gallup Polls right afterwards, he did not really make great decisions about the war. He tried to buy time with that speech for more of the same middle-of-the-road policy. He gave a bombing clause but he didn't say this is the end of the bombing. He sent only a few more troops but he didn't say this is the end of our commitment. There's a buying time, that's kind of what he did all through the war. So he was not reacting decisively and yet, in retrospect, the media and so on have portrayed Lyndon Johnson as having decided then and there that he had to change his policy in a dramatic way. That's the second myth or cherished assumption that has been destroyed or seriously damaged
at least, by the historians going to work.

CULBERT: Peter, in your book you have, I think, some fun with a good phrase "Định Bịnh Phủ syndrome" relating to Khe Sanh. What do you mean by that phrase and how about using it in the beginning of your answer?

BRAESTRUP: Well, the Định Bịnh Phủ syndrome was kind of a typical journalistic response to a threatening melodramatic situation in this war. Essentially what people did, what journalists did, especially Walter Cronkite of CBS, CBS in particular were fascinated by a historical analogy which they did not quite understand. That is that the plight or the situation of 5,000 Marines in the northwest corner of Vietnam surrounded by mountains and by the north Vietnamese army were in the same situation as the French garrison of Định Bịnh Phủ in 1954 when they were surrounded by the essentially North Vietnamese army during the French-Indo-China War. What happened at Định Bỉnh Phủ was that, the French were overrun. It was the great climatic disaster of the French-Indo-China War and helped end that war. Well, the parallels were there for all to see as Walter Cronkite said.

Unfortunately, neither Cronkite nor the majority of newsmen including, I'm afraid to say, me, fully understood the differences between Định Bình Phủ and Khe Sanh. The differences were that the United States Air Force was not at Định Bình Phủ but was at Khe Sanh. It dropped 100,000 tons of bombs on the North Vietnamese, the equivalent of five Hiroshimas in two months, which must have discouraged the North Vietnamese. Secondly, the North Vietnamese were not hammering as hard at the Marines as they had hammered at the French. They were not sending in 3,000 rounds of artillery but something on the average of 300 rounds.
a day. The difference may not seem like much on camera. The explosions looked fantastic on film but to the Marines at Khe Sanh there's a real difference between 300 shells coming in at you a day and 3000. The great thing about Khe Sanh was that it served journalistic ends especially television. There were only four American planes shot down during the siege but they were all easy to photograph. They looked terrific on film. The TV journalists could fly into Khe Sanh, do a stand-upper in front of the same wrecked aircraft and say things like here we have a graveyard of twisted airplanes. You could have a CBS correspondent said, the sense of doom. Famous stand-upper I think in front of the same graveyard of airplanes the four planes that were shot down, you could have a CBS correspondent stand up and say very early in the siege that North Vietnamese determine who lives or dies at Khe Sanh. Obviously, if the North Vietnamese had their druthers there would have been nobody left alive at Khe Sanh and our casualties were very low. The whole thing was a kind of television melodrama and it was predictable it was something you could count on it was sure-fire and they exploited it to the hilt.

CULBERT: Peter, if you could say something about most-beloved myth of conspiracy. Was their a conspiracy by the media to destroy the war.

BRAESTRUP: I'd be (?) There's become an unfortunate tendency both on the right wing of American politics and on the left wing of American politics to see conspiracies everywhere. With regard to Vietnam, the right wing critique of the media performance which I regard as totally unjustified is that there was a conspiracy, a liberal left conspiracy among the managers and reporters and pendants of the New York and Washington based major news organizations to do in Lyndon Johnson at worst and to turn the public against the war.
This analysis, while comforting to those who hold it, is extremely simplistic. I argue in my book that neither at Tet nor before Tet was there any kind of systematic ideological approach to the war. Journalism in the United States is not I'm going to rephrase that. Newspeople in the United States are certainly affected by subjective reactions to events. But my argument in the book is that their biases are operational: that is TV likes fires. The joke in Vietnam was that if there's smoke in the picture, I can sell! That was also true of free-lance still photographers. They like disasters, fires, floods. Look at any TV news show, that's what they like. They like action, melodrama, "disaster? Those are the biases of TV, not ideological biases. They have other operational biases too, but those were the biases that operated at Tet most glaringly in which is kind of an inadequate information medium because it cannot handle complexity and the simplistic story of Tet was "disaster." The thematic story that came over on TV was a disaster. That's the way they cope with complexity by simplifying down to simply a kind of habitual disaster story. So the conspiracy theory which is the theory of a conspiracy among Walter Cronkite, Eric Severeid, and the other network luminaries in my mind doesn't hold water. The problem is much more serious than conspiracy. At Tet it was a kind of emotional, sophomoric reaction to what the President was saying and wasn't saying and to the visual melodrama of what the TV people were seeing on their own TV screens. The problem was much more serious than conspiracy. It was kind of a chronic simple-mindedness.
CULBERT: Peter, what was the impact of the general Loan photograph as far as defining popular perceptions about the South Vietnamese government.

BRAESTRUP: Well, that has been discussed. A photograph was taken on the third day of the Tet offensive. It was kind of a bonanza for everybody. In journalistic terms, it was fantastic. It is not often that a television cameraman or a still cameraman for that matter gets on film happening right there before your eyes one man blowing another man's brains out. There's a famous Life magazine photograph which appeared in many of the anthropologies of one man pointing a pistol directly at the photographer and that picture gets many prizes. And the Loan got many prizes. Why? Because it was kind of the supreme melodrama—one man killing another right there before your very eyes. It was kind of super pornography, a kind of a super atrocity photo. It evoked strong reactions among those who saw it apparently. Professor Lawrence Lichty has discussed the reaction as perceived as evidenced in letters to NBC television concerning the Loan shooting. Journalists right away regardless of political persuasion. The New York Daily News ran the picture on page 1. The Washington Post ran the picture on page one and there was considerable argument over whether they ought to balance the picture of an atrocity committed by an allied officer against the Viet Cong with a picture of a South Vietnamese officer carrying his daughter who had been slain by the Vietcong. Well, it was kind of conventional bipartisanship on page 1—two atrocities balancing off one another. I would argue that that picture conveyed less information about the Vietnam War or about the Tet offensive or about the South Vietnamese.
CULBERT: I recall, what I need to have you sort of feed in on is a sense of the final part of what you were saying concerning the impact of that particular photo.

BRAESTRUP: OK. We have nobody has worked out any has done an adequate study in my to my knowledge you know of what people, how people reacted to that film in terms of how it affected their attitude toward the war toward the Vietnamese, whatever. The picture it seems to me conveyed very little information about either the Tet offensive, the South Vietnamese, the war, Americans involvement or anything else. Yet, in journalistic circles it was regarded as a great film, a great piece of film. I think it was regarded as a great piece of film and the fact that it was regarded as a great piece of film tells you a lot about journalism. It was a kind of superb piece of theater in a grotesque way. It was a kind of ultimate horror story that you captured in living color. But in terms of information it told you almost nothing. That's the chronic problem especially for television and for still photos the difference between drama and information.

CULBERT: Peter, I'll let you run over after one last question.

One of the criticisms you make in your book, in fact it's a diatribe is no more microcosms and yet, implicitly you're saying out of this that we in the press cannot distinguish between drama and information and how about addressing yourself to what you mean by the slogan "no more microcosms?"

BRAESTRUP: One of the serious journalistic problems especially true on television is that the television camera has a very narrow focus. Essentially, television news, at least under the present format and in contrast to the documentary form, because
of pressures of time and other pressures takes little snippets of selected reality, combines them into kind of the most dramatic and compelling form and then in a very short time-span takes what essentially is an anecdote, a soldier getting wounded and going on a helicopter, a bombing raid, a burning house, an exchange of fire, the helicopters landing. It's kind of almost a ritual in a repeated pattern almost as ritualistic as a classic shoot-out in a western movie. Over and over again these would appear slightly modified on the evening news. In order to give that a kind of significance after all the random events. The war in Vietnam was kind of a random war. You could not select one day's action and see its inherent importance say the fall of a town or the capture of the hill. So what television did in particular was to make these little bits, these little isolated chunks of film that they were able to get that day into microcosms of the whole war. It was kind of symbolic journalism. Through the device of the commentary by the reporter or by the anchorman make an isolated event like the siege of Khe Sánh a "microcosm" of the whole war. It was like taking one little selected sliver of reality and making it represent the big picture. They did it over and over and over again. And of course, inevitably, they distorted the big picture by taking the little picture and telling you that it in effect represented a fair cross-sample of the big picture and it almost never did. And this is what they did over and over again at Tet. It was giving a kind of artificial importance to whatever the television crews managed to get on film and whatever the executive produced back home managed to squeeze in to a very
A 30 short news program.