

Walter Cronkite Editorial (Page 1 of 2)

Background: Several years after the war in Vietnam was "escalated," American military officials and government leaders continued to tell the public that a victory over the Communists was within sight. However, in the early months of 1968, in what became known as the Tet Offensive, the North Vietnamese Army conducted a coordinated attack of dozens of major cities in the South. Television cameras recorded American and Vietnamese soldiers fighting in this gruesome seemingly guerilla style of urban warfare. Watching these scenes on television disturbed many Americans. Although the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces were able to defeat the North, the battles damaged American support for the war; in the days and weeks after Tet many Americans came to believe that the war



Vietnam. Walter Cronkite of CBS interviewing Professor Mai of the University of Hue., 02/20/1968. Source: National Archives, ARC Identifier 532481.

could not be won and that it was therefore not worth fighting. Below is an editorial from Walter Cronkite, a popular journalist who served as anchor of CBS News for from 1961 to 1981, who was voted the "most trusted man in America" in 1972. He wrote about his perceptions and conclusions about the war, which influenced the way many felt about it. An excerpted audio recording can be listened to here: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=106775685> and clips from the report with commentary is available here: <http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=2827337n>

"Tonight, back in more familiar surroundings in New York, we'd like to sum up our findings in Vietnam, an analysis that must be speculative, personal, subjective. Who won and who lost in the great Tet offensive against the cities? I'm not sure. The Vietcong did not win by a knockout, but neither did we. The referees of history may make it a draw.... On the political front, past performance gives no confidence that the [South] Vietnamese government can cope with its problems, now compounded by the attack on the cities. It may not fall, it may hold on, but it probably won't show the dynamic qualities demanded of this young nation. Another standoff.

We have been too often disappointed by the optimism of the American leaders, both in Vietnam and Washington, to have faith any longer in the silver linings they find in the darkest clouds.... For it seems now more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate. This summer's almost certain standoff will either end in real give-and-take negotiations or terrible escalation; and for every means we have to escalate, the enemy can match us, and that applies to invasion of the North, the use of nuclear weapons, or the mere commitment of one hundred, or two hundred, or three hundred thousand more American troops to the battle. And with each escalation, the world comes closer to the brink of cosmic disaster.

Walter Cronkite Editorial



A man and a woman watching film footage of the Vietnam war on a television in their living room, Warren K. Leffler, Photographer. February 13, 1968. U.S. News & World Report Photograph Collection. Source: Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2011661230/>.

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

Source: *Reporting Vietnam: Part One: American Journalism 1959-1969* (1998), pp. 581-582.
http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active_learning/explorations/vietnam/cronkite.cfm

Questions for Group Discussion:

1. In this address, to whom do you think Cronkite was talking?
2. According to Cronkite, who won the recent battles during the Tet Offensive? Why was there uncertainty surrounding it?
3. How does Cronkite think the war will end? Why?
4. What did Cronkite mean when he said "mired in a stalemate?"
5. In general, what impact do you think television can have on the public's perception of war? What role do journalists play in public opinion?