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QI Panel:

War Journalism from Vietnam to Gaza – How War Coverage Impacts U.S. Foreign Policy

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Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 0:23

Kelly, good afternoon. Welcome everyone. My name is Kelley Vlahos, and I am a senior advisor and editorial director at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. I also edit our publication Responsible Statecraft. We are proud to be hosting today's discussion war journalism, from Vietnam to Gaza, how war coverage impacts US foreign policy. If you don't know much about the Quincy Institute, we are an action tank that seeks to reorient failing Washington foreign policy thinking away from militarized solutions to our international problems and towards more diplomatic engagement with the rest of the world. We are part of a growing community of experts, advocates and writers on both the left and right, pursuing a new path of realism and restraint and a political ecosystem that has for too long succumbed to military intervention as a first rather than last resort.

I'd like to thank Thom Shanker for agreeing to moderate today's discussion, which is not only timely, marking the 50th anniversary of the fall of Saigon, the visceral end of the war in Vietnam on April 30, 1975 but it is critical, as the US continues to support major conflicts overseas in Europe and the Middle East today, how the media has covered us wars and how the military and government has endeavored to control and shape that coverage is no mere Sideshow in American civic life. It impacts public opinion and drives action for or against more war. I am looking forward to hearing our esteemed panelists put that point into perspective and more this afternoon.

So let me formally introduce Mr. Shanker before I hand the mic over to him. Tom was named director of the Project for Media and National Security at George Washington University in June 2021 after nearly 25 years stint at the New York Times, including 13 years as Pentagon correspondent, covering the Department of Defense overseas combat operations and national security policy, Tom reported the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan on the ground in both countries and bedding in the field with American military units throughout his time there. Most recently, it served as Deputy Washington editor for The Times, managing coverage of the military diplomacy and Veterans Affairs. He is also co author of Counterstrike, the untold story of America's secret campaign against al Qaeda, published in August 2011 and the book became a New York Times bestseller. So thank you again, Thom, and I hand it over to you for what promises to be a wonderful discussion.

Thom Shanker 3:15

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Kelley, thank you so very much for that kind introduction. And you know, needless to say, the work of the Quincy Institute is just absolutely invaluable to contributing to an informed citizenry. And I know this conversation today will be just like that, just for those who are joining us, thank you for being here. We will have a moderated discussion for the first 30-35, minutes, and then we will move into Q amp a. I'll try to get to get to as many as possible. You'll see a Q&A box at the bottom of your screen, so please drop your questions in there, and the Quincy staff will help me curate them, and we will get to as many as we can. As Kelley said, this panel will explore combat coverage, the changing nature of war, especially journalism, since Vietnam to today and what it means for the conduct of war and war policy, and more importantly, for the termination of wars fought or backed by the United States.

We're lucky to have two absolute experts, experienced articulate I know you'll enjoy hearing from both of them. Arnold “Skip” Isaacs is a former reporter foreign and Washington correspondent and editor of the Baltimore Sun. He covered the last three years of the Vietnam War on the ground, and is the author of “Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam” and “Cambodia and Vietnam Shadows: The War, Its Ghosts and Its Legacy”. He's now a freelance writer and educator. Has taught at universities in China Ukraine, and has conducted training programs for journalists and journalism students in more than a dozen countries in the former Soviet Union, Central and Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia and the Middle East. So clearly, skip is still giving back to our profession.

Our second guest is Azmat Khan. She is the Birch assistant professor, she is the Birch Assistant professor at Columbia Journalism School, where she also leads the Lee Center for Global Journalism. She has another hat as investigative reporter for both the New York Times and The New York Times Magazine. Notably, she anchored the New York Times team that was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 2022 for amazing coverage of civilian casualties caused by the US military and overseas operations. That project, of course, cut very well deserved global attention, and rightly so. And I wanted to point out that even from the Pentagon podium, the value of that reporting was acknowledged the DoD spokesman at the time your Admiral, John Kirby. You may know that he went on to be Biden's national security spokesman. Said this from the podium after the Pulitzer was announced. To quote The Times coverage, “It was and it still is not comfortable, not easy and not simple to address. We know we have more work to do to prevent civilian army. We knew that we had made mistakes. We're trying to learn. I cannot say this process was pleasant, but that's what a free press at its very best does. It holds us to account and makes us think even as it informs it changes our minds and it helps us make it helps us be better at our big job of defending this nation.”

So, Skip Azmat. Thank you for being here. Thanks for all of your work. And I think Admiral Kirby has set us up very, very well for the important themes of our discussion. As Kelley said, April 30, 1975 50 years ago, this month, the fall of Saigon, it's fair to say that Vietnam is a case of how a war gone bad, and coverage of that war going bad deeply influenced public opinion and government policy. Skip you were on the ground. Describe for us, if you would, how you saw that arc of narrative, and what was the principal factor that eroded public support, and how did that happen?

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Skip Isaacs 7:00

Well, the first thing I'd like to point out is that that was a it was a different era. It was a very different war and journalism was completely different than it is now. So comparisons, and I'm not saying that we shouldn't think about and remember it together with wars in Gaza and other other American wars since then, but the comparisons are very complex. They're not not simple. I think that the first thing to remember about Vietnam, this is not so much remembering my time on the ground, but a more general comment, if that's okay, of course, is is to consider that the war in Vietnam was reported from from two theaters, theaters of war, not one, on the ground in Vietnam, where the shooting war was going on, and the debate at home, where over five or six years there was a constant stream of news on the American debate, on the war, on anti war, demonstrations, on draft resistance, gradually increasing political and congressional action on considering the war policy and that kind of thing. And though in the memories of that reporting in have kind of merged in our national memory with our memories of the reporting on the shooting war.

And so nothing, nothing comparable happened in any other US war that I certainly not in the post Vietnam era. So we need to be careful in not facile, in drawing comparisons. So what happens that I covered both these theaters of war in Washington? I was based in Washington from 6970 71 and the first half of 72 and I attended most of the major demonstrations during those years and wrote lots of stories focusing on the national debate on Vietnam and Congress and political campaigns in various states and around the country. And then in June 72 as the American War was really winding down, or have wound down, I was assigned to Vietnam, and I reported from there full time for the next year, plus made several more trips in the next year or so. And then I was there in the spring of 75 for the final three months of the war, first in Cambodia and then in Vietnam, until the US evacuation on the 29th of the day before the end of the war.

My sense is that I think that the the the impact of the reporting that had more impact on on on opinion, was probably more Well, it came from both places, I guess. But I wrote this about at some point, and I want to that I think the concept of war that reporters brought with them to Vietnam or to the. Discussion in the United States was, was based primarily on World War Two, and then we are I wrote somewhere that Americans are taught to think of war as a narrative, something that begins, proceeds through a succession of battles and then comes to an end. And in Viet the battles in Vietnam seemed random, random episodes of violence, not connected in any logical way. When the fighting ended somewhere, one could see the bodies in the smashed villages, but almost never any change in the war, any indication that one side was closer to winning or losing. The battles I wrote were like grenades thrown in the stream after the splash subsided and the noise died away, and the dead fish floated downstream. The stream looked exactly as as it did before, running between the same banks with the same force and the same appearance that it always had. And I think that was characteristic of the way the war was reported. People couldn't tell what what it, what it and in the end, those battles were irrelevant. That that was not what decided the course of the war.

And I think that the change in opinion responded more to the events than to the coverage. You know, the events themselves. People forget that this war went on. The American involvement in Vietnam went on for twice as long as as the whole period of engagement in World War 267, years American forces were fighting in Vietnam. During that time, the American reporters paid very little attention to the Vietnamese War, and in the end, that was the war that that was just decided how it would all come turn out. So that's, I guess, my first thoughts on this subject.

Thom Shanker 11:46

I'd like to drill into a couple of things. You said you actually anticipated my next two questions for you, so you're making my job very easy. Thank you. But there is one skip in our preparation. You had some very thoughtful comments about the interplay, and I don't like the chicken and egg phrase, but it's like there was the war was going badly. The reporting on the war reflected it was going badly and in ways that it hadn't before. But did that really influence what was going on inside the Department of Defense and in the White House? And if so, at what levels? Who affected whom the most? What were the deciding factors?

Skip Isaacs 12:28

Well, I'm not sure what period you're talking about, and I think most of the time it wasn't so much that the war was going badly, but it was just that we weren't winning. We weren't making any headway. We were fighting the same battles over and over again, and nothing seemed to change. And what? And the official policy for or word message for the first in the first three years or so was that, oh, we're making progress. We're winning. And by and large, the public accepted that. And then came, and in November 1967 General Westmoreland, the commander in Vietnam, came back to the states and gave a speech at the National Press Club in which he said, we're winning, the enemy is certainly losing, he said.

And less than three months later, the Tet Offensive that some of you will remember came came about, and it kind of exploded that optimism and destroyed the credibility of these optimistic statements. The people in the Pentagon, the people in the Defense Department and in the White House, they knew what they could tell what was happening. They didn't need the reporters to tell them what was going on in Vietnam or to show them that the optimism had been misplaced, and a lot of people in the administration had already had serious doubts about the wisdom and effectiveness of the policy, and they began they were encouraged to speak out about those doubts, but I think were much more affected by the events themselves than by the press coverage.

Thom Shanker 13:58

Thank you so much. I'd like to move to, the more current wars. Well, 20 plus, plus years current, I guess, the Forever wars. After 911 your your powerful work is focused so much on on air strikes and civilian casualties, both by remotely piloted craft called drones, as well as the legacy air platforms, the good old fashioned fighters and bombers. And I know you've made the point

before that you know this, this strike from the sky allowed the US to carry out operations with fewer troops on the ground, fewer body bags coming home. So talk about, if you would, your important reporting, and how these narratives also influence public opinion and government decision making.

Azmat Khan 14:41

Thank you so much Thom, and it's an honor to be here with you. Skip I, I my work primarily focuses on these sort of draw down years until present in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and and the war against ISIS in. In Iraq and Syria, and I continue to do reporting today related to Gaza and the West Bank and what we're seeing in the Middle East. But the shift that you're talking about is one in which you know, after the the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which were deeply unpopular with the American public over time, particularly as American troops were dying in these wars, we saw a shift in approach to those wars, whereby, particularly under Obama, we began to see bringing troops home and substituting, essentially support of foreign forces on the ground, Allied forces through the use of air strikes, and that air campaign did a number of things. These different air campaigns did a number of these things. In particular, though, I think they took away many of the political costs for Americans of these wars.

So what you would have is, for example, in operation, Inherent Resolve the war against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. More Americans died by suicide, more American service members died by suicide than in hostile death in that operation. And what that means is that you have fewer American soldiers dying than would ordinarily happen in our wars on the ground previously, which is a good thing, but it also meant that traditional restraints things that would wake up the American population, which was what was happening, for example, during the Vietnam War, traditional restraints, like Americans coming home in body bags, an awareness of what we're paying for and what we're doing was further and further distanced from populations. And you could essentially have these wars that would continue with very little oversight.

And you can see, you know, these trends that emerge that, for example, it was October of 2017 when four US service members were killed in an ambush in Niger, that suddenly Congress was asking, What are American service members doing in Niger? There was very little accountability or oversight before that, but when American soldiers were killed, it was a very different story. In August of 2021 when you know, 13 US service members were killed in an attack at Abbey gate at the Kabul airport in Afghanistan during the draw down, I saw a huge shift in news coverage. And suddenly organization, news organizations, podcasts, people that wouldn't normally contact me for interviews wanted to talk about Afghanistan. There were also, you know, more than 100 uh, Afghan civilians who were killed in that operation. But what we've seen in sort of the public's attention in terms of restraint, accountability, even awareness that these wars are taking place are often as a result of Americans being killed.

I would say that, you know, today we've seen actually one difference, which is that the American public is has been forced to be very aware of the war in Gaza, in large part, even though we're not, you know, personally paying the costs. Americans there are, there are Americans who've

been killed in Gaza. There are Americans you know, who you know, people with dual citizenship and others who've been killed. But that's not the reason why the world is sort of forced to confront with that coverage. I would say in this case, it's, it's a strong movement. You know, we've I sometimes will scroll Tiktok, and I'll see kids, young people, Gen Z people explaining what a Hellfire missile does, telling you about what a 2000 pound bomb can do. And in the previous years, I was not seeing this. There was no there was very little mainstream awareness or attention on how our wars are playing out, the weapons being used.

And the difference, I would say, is that you know, activists, you know pushing for Palestinian liberation have really been strong in educating the world and informing the world and introducing some of these, these realities. But I would say more than that, I think a lot of Palestinian journalists, which you know, we can talk about, you know, at length, I'm sure, but a lot of Palestinian journalists, this is a very small enclave in Gaza, and journalism is, you know, career there. The way that when you ask young people here, what do you want to be when you grow up, and you hear people talk about wanting to be a firefighter or a teacher, journalism is a response you would get in Gaza if you were talking to young people about what they wanted to be. There is such a cultural commitment to documentation. The values of journalism are deeply espoused in culture. There a desire to record, a desire to bear witness.

And there are so many journalists in Gaza who have genuinely been trained as journalists and have genuinely spent incredible time documenting the realities of war as it unfolds around them. You can really see Palestinian journalists who are paying these costs firsthand, whose family members who've been killed, many of their colleagues and loved ones who've been killed, and they continue to report despite some of the most extreme circumstances I've seen for journalists. And I would say that one of the reasons why the public is informed about ground realities, given the lack of access for foreign journalists to go into Gaza unembedded, is undeniably Palestinian journalists who are paying really incredible costs with their lives.

Thom Shanker 20:47

Thank you for that, and thank you for mentioning social media. We'll get to that next. But I did want to follow up on one thing you said, which is the access question. In The Forever War, since 911 there's been unilateral reporting borders on the ground, there's been embedded reporting in the largest numbers since World War Two, probably. And then there's been long term investigative work, like what you did Azmat, talk a little bit about sort of the differences, the values, and I don't want to say professional risks as in danger, but the downsides.

Azmat Khan 21:18

This is a great question. We were just talking about it in my course at Columbia Journalism last night, just about the range of different kinds of embedded or non embedded, unembedded reporting that can take place, and the different ways in which, you know, these can be dangerous, you know, especially when reporting is conducted in the silo. And you know, looking at, you know, they're incredible reporters who, you know, as the war in Afghanistan, for

example, increasingly became doomed, you know. And as people were more aware of it, to understand that you would largely to spot it in real time, you would really have to be following a lot of these unembedded journalists. There are so many journalists, you know, from Anand Gopal to others who were unembedded on the ground and reflecting realities you would not have seen from embedded coverage. And that was where you would actually get that early understanding that would only become, you know, understood in the mainstream later, that this war was America was not winning this war, that American officials even later that we would learn in the Afghanistan papers and elsewhere, that they knew it was they were not winning this war, and that their prospects for winning it were dim. But to know that, you would have had to have been unembedded.

There's a really great report I always referenced from that era, I think, by Jeremy Starkey in The Times of London, where he'd received a Pentagon press release about, you know, honor, and apparently, some Taliban members who'd been killed after they had, you know, by Americans after an honor killing of women. And they he essentially journeys to this site, and what he learns is that these are actually US backed, you know, one of them had been a police and US allied police force, that these were not the Taliban members, and that actually American soldiers had killed the women and then, dubbed, essentially, tried to dig the bullets out of these women's bodies in order to cover it up. And had he relied on that press release, or had he relied on an embed. You know, this would not have been a story you would have been exposed to, and there are countless examples of that. You know, there are cases in which embedded journalism can tell you an important story that is, you know, a specific story about the experiences of American soldiers.

People often refer to Restrepo as an example, you know, a film that really documents, you know, I think, a platoon in Afghanistan in real time, and tells the story of what they endured as they were doing what they were doing. And if you're trying to tell a specific story like that, it might make sense, I would say, like, there are so many powerful examples of embeds in which, and I'll give an example of Ali Arkady, who was an Iraqi photojournalist who during the war against ISIS, embedded with emergency forces, emergency Iraqi forces, and he was with them for a while and photographing. And what he documented was some of the most extreme torture, you know, examples in which people were bound and tortured. And had he not done that embed, the public would not have known the extent to which torture was taking place by us allied forces. Chris Hondros, who during the war in Iraq, in 2005 during an embed at a US checkpoint in Iraq and Tel afar Iraq, took the first images of this family who were killed at a checkpoint. He quickly left and uploaded those photos in real time he left. He managed to get those photos out, and it changed the world's perception of that war. These iconic images of a bloodied girl whose family has just been killed. I woke the world up to checkpoint killings, which were happening frequently.

I think in this current moment, in in the war in Gaza, there's a huge access problem, and that is that foreign journalists are not allowed to enter Gaza on embedded both Israel and Egypt have denied them access to doing so. That means that, from a lot of our American publications, coverage that they're doing themselves with Western correspondence is coming either from

embeds with the Israeli forces, which do have rules. You know, often there are censorship requirements, there is photo approval requirements. There are, you know, different restrictions that come with an embed. And you know, if you look at, for example, major news organizations that went to Al Shifa Hospital on embeds, you know, after, after the Israelis had raided Al Shifa, you would get a very particular and you can look at these stories, you will get a very particular and narrow understanding of what happened at Al Shifa. Then, if you had interviewed doctors, civilians, survivors, or turned to Palestinian journalists, some of them were present in Al Shifa and documenting the realities there.

And I think that's where this lack of access has had extremely dangerous consequences for the information environment, for our understandings of the war, and especially for accountability journalism that exposes wrongdoing. I think that news organizations have raised concerns about their lack of access, but at the same time, you know, they have not fought this fully to the capacity that they can. I do know about some court cases where they are challenging this. You know, in Israel, they're challenging this access, but in terms of the ability to really shape that and to also take other measures. I personally have a rule, for example, that I follow, which is that I will not go on an embed to a place unless I can also go unembedded. So, for example, during the wars against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, I did do an embed at the US Air Base in Qatar, and it was extremely fruitful for understanding the targeting process, but I was willing to do it because I could also go on the ground, and it was accountability journalism for me.

So my rule is that I won't do one if I can't do the other. And yet, we're in an information operating environment where mainstream press often is even though, even if they're being transparent about the restrictions they may be placed under. They're not necessarily doing their due diligence to show you what they are not getting when they are going on these sort of curated tours, in many respects, you know, obviously there, there are exceptions to that, but if you look at a lot of embedded journalism. You know, this has had a dramatic effect. And I do think that there are, there are consequences in terms of US foreign policy, there are consequences in terms of our understanding of what's happening in real time. And one of the things that I think is really dangerous about this, because sometimes you might just think, well, when we're allowed access, when it's safe to go, we're going to go, and we're going to do this reporting, and we'll do it safely. A lot of evidence is being wiped out. Both, you know, physically, bulldozers are going through places and destroying evidence in very recent examples, for example, the killings of medics in Gaza.

You know, you actually have, you know, this unraveling story that the Israeli government has provided about what happened and how these ambulances and paramedics were killed, many of them shot in the head, some of them with their hands tied behind their backs and buried and their ambulances bulldozed. And when a video finally materializes by one of those paramedics, showing you know what he saw in the moments before he was shot and killed. That contradicts the Israelis narrative. You know that they had not, that these ambulances had not been running their headlights, that they had not you know that they were advancing suspiciously when there is that direct confrontation, you start to see this unravel. And you also hear the Israelis now

saying, well, they were buried because we wanted to make sure that dogs didn't eat their bodies. That's why we buried the ambulances on those bodies.

And when you see that fall apart, I think it's a really strong example of how many stories did we not hear because there was not a phone that managed to survive being buried and bulldozed. And I think that every journalist who goes on an embed needs to ask themselves those questions about what they're doing when they're choosing to undertake that embed, what they're missing. Mean, and whether they're really trying hard enough to understand what they're not getting.

Thom Shanker 30:04

Thank you. You've actually anticipated some of the questions from the audience, which is about access issues, but before we go to lots of those, I do want to drill a little bit deeper into the social media issue, because clearly, from the time skip was in Vietnam to today, the technology for filing your stories from a conflict zone has changed immensely, and today it's almost as if, whether Ukraine, Gaza, Iraq, Syria, anywhere, every citizen is a reporter because they have their their iPhone camera and video. So since the theme of today is the impact on policy? How has this incredible increase in, you know, availability of images from conflict zones that were never available before? How does it affect policy? Skip, I'd like to start with with you on that.

Skip Isaacs 30:57

Well, I don't know that I can answer that. I'm I'm not a user of most of this modern technology. And of course, in Vietnam, there wasn't even any internet. You know, we sent our stories back by telex, which is a technology that I imagine a lot of people listening to this don't even know what it is, and photographs were until very late in the war, there was no way to transmit photographs right away or or Television Film that went, it went, was shipped by air to Tokyo or Bangkok and then broadcast to the to the home. So most of the television shots that you saw were 24,36, 48 hours after they were actually taken. If I could go back to a different, somewhat different point. No, okay, never mind. I'll leave it. I'll leave it at that. I have something else I want to say, but I'll say it. I'll save it for later.

Thom Shanker 31:59

You know, even like you said, that you weren't on point, you actually were, because the delay in getting out those news stories and the film and video actually slowed down the need of the government to respond quickly and immediately. I mean, as Asmat said, you know, well, the impact in Ukraine and Gaza is is visible to us every day.

Azmat Khan 32:21

Yes, yes. And if, if I can add, I just want to share a kind of exception to some of this, which is Afghanistan, where there's very little internet penetration. In areas where this war was most

fought, these battlefield provinces, the areas of these very rural areas where there's not even just no internet, largely, there was also a very few phone lines in most of these places. And when I would be investigating incidents there, there was sometimes I would receive videos from sources on the ground, but the likelihood of my ever, you know, going online and being able to find those videos surfacing somewhere was extremely low. It was very like direct to contact, and I think that that had a profound and sad and tragic impact on coverage of the war, especially as fewer journalists were going to those areas.

And to be clear, they were deadly places to go during the war. Like these are places where I remember I would often ask people to meet me in in Kandahar City, from Helmand, from dangerous parts of Kandahar, because my going there felt like certain death. You know, I wouldn't be allowed to so I just want to paint that, that juxtaposition for a second. And I also want to talk about Ukraine and Gaza, and the imagery and videos that we saw come out in real time, and with Gaza, I want to say specifically that if you are watching there are really two kinds I'm seeing a bifurcation in the news environment where there are especially young people that are watching a lot of that imagery unfold in real time. They're watching lives. You know, I remember a journalist in particular. There are many journalists that they follow, but one in particular was Motaz Aziza, who would would essentially run to the sites of these air strikes, running his Instagram account live.

And there is undeniable, you know, the footage that they saw, literally, the bodies hanging from trees as he approached, you know, people being pulled out. It was not constructed. It was not fake. It was not, you know, some scene that had been set up. He was running live, and people were seeing for the first time what the impact us weapons were having on the ground, and they were profoundly moved by that. And the interesting thing to me is that young people can tell you these very iconic images of this war, of the girl who cried as she said she knew that the body behind her was her mother's because she recognized it by her hair. You know the boy. Who Walked through flood waters with his sibling in his arms. You know, there are countless examples, the boy with the eyeball, I won't say more than that, if you know it. You know it.

There are these iconic images that are that have been rendered into artwork. You know, where, like a beheaded child will have a flower coming out of his head like they're iconic. People know what you're referencing when you see this, but only if you've been watching. And then I've sometimes had conversations, and I want to be careful about what I say, because some of these conversations were not on the record with editors. Or I've asked them, you know, I've asked them, Do you know about you know, sometimes I'll ask them about specific hostages who were killed, and they would recognize them, you know, I'd be like, Do you know the girl on the motorcycle who was kidnapped by Hamas? And they're like, yes, that's Noah agarmini, you know. I will ask them then, like, Do you know the girl who recognized her mother by her hair? And they're like, No, I don't know what you're talking about, you know?

And I think that distinction, it's not just editors, it's the public as a mainstream you know, there are two different groups now. There's young people who are following this, and there are other people who get their news primarily from news outlets that sometimes sanitize it, but are also

slower to show it. You will see, for example, in the days after the paramedic attacks, the ambulance attacks that I just talked about, that that very quickly surfaced in Palestinian media, and that the Red Crescent and others were talking about this in real time, and it took a while for it to materialize in a lot of papers, and particularly with the level of detail that had been documented by others, there is a lag, and then there's also often extreme differences in what is told and how it is told. And one of the things impacts that is having is that it is creating a great deal of distrust among those people who are watching live in a lot of mainstream news organizations, and that distrust, I think, will be an enduring legacy for every major US paper, every legacy news organization, and something that I think there's a reckoning that will be coming, with respect to.

Thom Shanker 37:15

Thanks. I have a dozen more questions. I do want to get to the audience, but skip. I also want to be respectful. You said that you had a related thought that you wanted to share, please.

Skip Isaacs 37:25

I was going to say that the other thing is, speaking now about American reporters covering covering the war that I attended in Vietnam, it was a question of what they went and looked for in those days. You know, you weren't going to go someplace and find video tape of the effects of war, and there was very little attention paid to the Vietnamese experience of the war. There were and but when I got there in June 72 as I say, the American War was just about wound down. And then the next six months later, there was the ceasefire that resulted in a complete withdrawal of American ground forces. So the reporters were, for the first time, going, going in the field with Vietnamese troops. But still, the notion that we have that war reporting war meant reporting on battles, on soldiers on the ground, and that that that was the meaningful reporting, and it was not the experience of the people who lived through it.

And one of my colleagues, who was also my brother in law, is a reporter named David K Shipler for The New York Times. And Dave has just published a book that came out, I don't know, week or so ago, called The Interpreter, and it it's a novel, but it's based on his real experience. And if you read it, you would read things that you had would almost never have have read during the war about the experience of Vietnamese, Vietnamese villages on all kinds of circumstances, not just atrocities, but the impact that the war had on their lives, and it reminds you of how little that was recognized or appreciated, and when and when reporters did report on it. It didn't get much play in the US, a friend of mine, or not a friend, but a acquaintance of mine named Martin Stewart Fox, who was an Australian who worked for UPI and then later became a scholar, mostly specializing on Laos, but But Fox wrote some one, one place that the news agencies and others did report on South Vietnamese politics, for example, and even military activity, but not a lot was printed in the US. There was simply no interest in the Vietnamese side of the war from time to from the time that US Marines landed in Da Nang, Vietnam was portrayed as an American war to win or lose in. Uh. And yet, at the end, it turned out that what the Vietnamese

the Vietnamese War, was the one that determined the outcome and the future of Vietnam, and it was very, very badly covered, very, very intermittently and sketchily covered.

Thom Shanker 40:20

Thanks. In fact, one of the questions in the queue goes to the same thing about in Iraq and Afghanistan. So my last question, I ask this every time I talk to the journalists, because there are some student journalists and working journalists now, and because we're timed at the end of the war in Vietnam, Tim O'Brien wrote a fantastic book of linked short stories from Vietnam called The Things They Carried. And my question is not, what do you carry, as far as books and granola bars and meaningful things, but what do you think reporters need to carry into conflict in their heart and in their soul, because we've all spent time in combat, a certain kind of bravery is important, yes, but I'd say also curiosity, empathy, the need to be an aerobic listener so you can give voice to those who cannot speak, and to try to put a little bit of Justice back in the world. But when the two of you go out and risk your lives to cover these stories, what do you carry in your heart and in your head? Azmat, we'll start with you.

Azmat Khan 41:26

Such a beautiful question. You know, a genuine willingness to listen and to learn, a desire to understand, particularly from traumatized populations, but not to do so at the expense of their health or their sanity. I spent a lot of time interviewing survivors of war who it always perplexes me when they agree to talk to me, because doing so inevitably, means opening up a chapter of of their life that is the worst experience for them to ever think about again, and they do it in the hopes that their voices will make a difference. And so there's a deep sort of respect and gratitude for that. I carry that with me.

Also you know that that contract, I guess you have is also then to to also do all of the other reporting that I need to do. That means with the US government or with other governments who are involved, meaning like I will fight for that embed so that I can understand the process behind it, but also so that nobody can just cast off this story and say she didn't even look at this targeting process. Same with, you know, my efforts to get information through the government using the Freedom of Information Act and lawsuit, so that I will really bring that rigor to every part of whatever story I'm doing. And then I hope, I hope a humility too, that I have a lot to learn from anyone and everyone, and that the way I was raised and intellectual curiosity are at the forefront of whatever it is that I do. And lastly, truth, truth, whatever the consequences might be. And I think that, I think journalists are are sort of seeing that sort of play out for them in ways we haven't seen before in this era.

Thom Shanker 43:37

Thank you, Skip, to answer Tim O'Brien's question, what are the things that you carried?

Skip Isaacs 43:43

I'm not sure how to answer that. I think maybe what I think about now is that we ought to be clear about what war is. That war, what we're covering, is not just a series of battles, but it's an event that happens to people, and that that's that should never be out of our mind. Not all our stories would chronicle that in the same way, the official announcements and communiques and press releases and all that are also part of the news. I mean, we have no, no way to report on, say, casualties that we can't count them ourselves have to depend on somebody else's count. But I think that, and it's a little hard to recapture. You know what I thought at the time? I guess I just thought My job was to go out and find something that was important and not lose sight of what the setting the context of what I was reporting, and try to make that clear when in my reporting.

Thom Shanker 44:51

Great, thank you so much. First question that really caught my eyes from Doug, and Doug says I was drafted and served as a combat correspondent for. The US Army in Vietnam 1970 and 71 I had great faith in the fourth estate, witnessed the Pentagon Papers and later Watergate. But with an all volunteer military and corporate journalism, the public is personally disconnected from America's wars and has no viable source of truth in war reporting. How do we turn this around, reintroduce a draft, restrict corporate ownership, somehow.

Skip Isaacs 45:29

I will answer that, or in a point that I've raised with you a while ago or before this program, that the journalists who went to Vietnam were products of the post World War Two, or World War Two era and the draft era. Most of the, I think the majority, probably of the male correspondents, had been in the service. I wasn't, but it was a much it was much closer. There was a much less of a gap between civilian life and the military life. And now, I think it's a huge gap soldiers, the soldier's life is completely separate from the life that most journalists have lived. And I think that that that we lived in the same world to some extent, getting drafted for Vietnam was not the same thing, very different from getting drafted into the peacetime army, but it gave you some common basis of experience. So not sure that answers your question, but I think that. But that's what, what occurs to me to say.

Thom Shanker 46:29

Azmat?

Azmat Khan 46:30

I can't comment on whether or not the US should bring back the draft, but I do think a lot about how asymmetry and who's paying the costs of war dramatically impact coverage. And I had a prevail, you know, I had a view for a while, I think until I would say October 7, that the only way the public would really pay attention or follow wars was when there were, there was, like close loss of life, for Americans when they felt that. And I think we've seen the war in Gaza challenge

that I think we've seen the public again. I can't really emphasize how interesting it has been to see like young people in particular, be extremely informed about us weaponry in a way that they were not previously and and what that can be attributed to, which is those Gazan journalists on the ground and sort of that desire to document and some of the larger movement trends that that you can see. So I I don't know, I don't have a prescriptive answer, but I really appreciate your sharing that story. It was powerful.

Thom Shanker 47:50

Thanks. Next question. Question comes from Siddharth. It's one close to me. It goes to the power of narrative, because, as we've said several times here, there are facts, but they have to be into a narrative. And Siddharth asked both of you, can the wounds of war be at least partially healed through storytelling? What has your experience been when it comes to war reportage in terms of this dimension? What are your thoughts?

Skip Isaacs 48:18

In terms of?

Thom Shanker 48:19

The wounds of war. In other words, just telling the story and reporting the story skip. Is that a way to help heal the psychological wounds of war, or even the wounds, the wounds to a nation?

Azmat Khan 48:39

You know, I think storytelling plays a profound role in our understanding of wars, and that oftentimes that great storytelling reaches people in a way that, you know, I often have to publish in different forms, so I'll do like a newspaper investigation that is very hard hitting and way too many facts, but it's an investigation, and it's accountability reporting, and it's a tough it's not a pleasant read, right? And then I'll do you know a magazine story, or I'll do you know an episode on the daily where storytelling is the means through which we approach those and really in ways that really make people want to listen. And you may not get every single fact in, but there's a beautifully crafted narrative. And I've seen those types of stories reach people in a way that much deeper, harder investigative reporting never could.

And I do think that there is, you know, a real need for translation of these events that go beyond a mirror chronicling of facts, but a narrative that brings people in and allows them to feel and understand emotions that render the lives of the people we cover meaningful, that portrays what they see and hear and that that's a responsibility we have. Honestly, I hate writing. I hate it so much. It's my least favorite thing in the world. World. I love writing, but I know that I have to tell good stories in order to reach people. And I think reach people is the first part of what you're talking about, which is like healing from the wounds of war, which, you know, I don't have prescriptive answers on, but I do think, you know, reaching people in that way and bringing

those emotions and that clarity really depends on great storytelling and of fairness and accuracy.

Thom Shanker 50:23

Here's one from Amir that I know you both can answer. He, of course, says, thanks to you both for sharing your perspectives in looking at war from Vietnam to Gaza. It's it's terrible and heartbreaking. Yes, that's the definition of war. But if you're passionate about the topic, which both of you are, does it ever become challenging to remain independent, neutral in your professional work? Skip, was it ever hard for you in Vietnam to like not?

Skip Isaacs 50:55

And I want to go back to the previous question first, if I may, of course, that when people go through traumatic experience, almost everybody, I think, what you have, you have a need to try to make sense of it. You have to need to explain why this happened to you and what what happened to you and why it happened. And so you could construct a narrative. But that narrative doesn't, this doesn't have to be a true narrative. Lots of people explain things to themselves within a false narrative. And I'm not.

I think that journalism, I mean, I felt that my job was to try to tell the truth as far as I could, and recognizing the limitations that journalism had, but that I'm not sure many, many people don't want it done what don't want to believe that truth that I found and find comfort in a truth the different truth that they that they believe. So I'm not sure that the journalism is an answer to that. It is to those people who are receptive to the facts that you report. I think of I usually talk about facts, not truth, because truth is sort of a big, big word, but a lot of people aren't receptive to it, and if they can find healing in themselves. You know, I thought Vietnam was a terrible waste of life, but if I were a parent who had lost my kid in Vietnam, and I wanted to explain it to myself as dying in a just cause I'm not going to go and tell that that parent that they're wrong. What you know that's not my job. My job is to tell the truth to anybody who wants to listen. And sorry, what was your second question?

Thom Shanker 52:36

Yeah, same question is how hard…war is, is ugly, it's brutal, it's vile. You obviously have feelings about it. How hard is it to be passionate in your reporting, but not let that passion influence the reporting and writing?

Skip Isaacs 52:54

I didn't. I didn't find it hard. I mean, I, I guess I don't know. Maybe I'm maybe that's a reflection on my character. But fairly simple, you know, to me, to try to figure out what, what were the facts, and what I what I could say and what I could write that would be truthful and or be accurate, and what I could write that wouldn't be accurate. And to make sure, and this is when I

teach journalism. I always teach journalists that the first thing you have to understand is to know what you don't know. And I think most journalists who make mistakes make mistakes because they don't know what they don't know. And I always tried to be aware of that, but, and that's not always that easy, but I, I guess I I never did trust ideology, and I never did trust anybody with an ideology, whether I like, whether I proved it or not. But that's not the way to find reality, and so I never interpreted what I was seeing in any kind of ideological way.

Thom Shanker 54:01

Azmat?

Azmat Khan 54:01

Yeah, I think that's one of the reasons why I'm an investigative journalist, specifically, is that it is systematic, and it is, you know, a type of inquiry. So it's not like, you know, I start a story with, I believe this thing, and let me go see it's, here's something, here's a question. I want to test it. Can I do a sample? What is every argument that could be made against this. Let me understand where I might be. You know, these findings might not match up, but I really appreciate that inquiry. It is true that investigative journalists, you know what, what they focus on is injustice or harm, and you know they have to meet a certain threshold in order for that to become an investigation and and I think that's there, and I will say that, of course, you will have feelings, and it's how you channel them.

You know, I am moved by a lot of them. You can probably listen to the daily and hear me cry, you know, as I talk about survivors, I've interviewed and spent time with. If you know, clearly, it does affect me, but I see that that emotion is, you know, a part of processing what it is that I'm doing, it is not a driver of the approach that I take, or the standards that I have to meet, or the systematic nature of investigative journalism. You know, there's a reason why. You know, I sued for 1000s of pages of military records and spent years analyzing them and going on the ground and spent years and years doing that work before I published right like there is a threshold you have to meet. And I think I always urge myself like I don't get angry at myself for being, you know, emotional or having feelings, you know, in my you know, in my own presence. But how am I using that wisely, and am I meeting the thresholds and standards that every investigative journalist should.

Thom Shanker 55:51

Thank you. Quincy will probably never ask me back again, because I'm going to take us a minute or two over. We also started late because the last question is from, let's say a ringer. Anthony Borden, who's the founder of the Institute for war and peace reporting, knows so much about this asks a fantastic question, which will be our last one today, could the panel compare the evolving impact of disinformation and conflict? Is propaganda the same as ever, or is it evolving? Is there a specific aspect of active measures, hybrid warfare, aiming at deeper impacts and more strategic influence over your reporting and therefore over shaping policy?

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Azmat Khan 56:34

I will say that yes, we can see efforts to thwart journalism through disinformation. I mean, propaganda has always been a part of any part of war. But I think in in recent years, I think we're seeing, you know, a number of organizations that are and movements that are approaching it in a more systematic manner that I've ever seen. You can see it in watchdogs, or so called watchdogs, that police reporting out of interest for a particular state or a people. You can see it in, you know efforts to docks and you know you can see it even journalists are now being put on Canary mission. You know, journalists who are merely covering the protests, student journalists who are merely covering the protests here at Columbia, you can see it at, you know, a site that that weaponizes, you know, accusations.

And there are really just, I think, disinformation that's coming in the form of, you know, overt, AI, videos and other kinds of means of manipulation. Certainly, social media plays a role, but it is not relegated only to those sorts of fields. It is also in very sophisticated news organization, very sophisticated operators, you know, who, who will will go through kind of extreme measures, I think, to influence newsrooms so it can take place. You know, propaganda is always a part of war, and there are people on multiple sides fighting it in Star jobs as journalists to stick to the truth and to try to see through it, everywhere we can, wherever.

Thom Shanker 58:22

Skip is someone who's devoted so many decades to work going back to Vietnam, I will give you the last word, anything on your mind you'd like to say?

Skip Isaacs 58:30

I think that, yes, that. I think there's a huge difference now. And the difference to me is that there's such a volume of stuff of and available instantly while you're sitting in your in your at your home, in front of your computer or your phone. I guess anybody who wants to believe anything can go online and in 10 minutes find 50 sources that support that belief that didn't used to be the case. I mean, in my time, when I was at the years I was in Vietnam, there was the mainstream media was really the only source of news. There were, there was hardly. There were, you know, there were sort of underground newspapers, but there was negligible. So people who didn't want to believe what we reported didn't, didn't have the support of hundreds. They had word of mouth, but they didn't have support from any other sources or the erroneous things that they they preferred to believe that, that we, that we reported, were not true. I think, I think truth has a much, much more difficult to get through now than it was then.

Thom Shanker 59:39

Thank you. So just to wrap up and we're only a minute over, I don't feel so bad. Skip, Azmat, thank you for sharing your insight and wisdom. Thank you to all who are tuning in to those who

have such great questions. And a special thanks to the Quincy Institute. What you do to help elevate and inform citizenry is so valuable. Thank you all.