

TV GUIDE 6 OCTOBER 1973 (4)

VIETNAM: WHAT HAPPENED
VS. WHAT WE SAW

WE LOSE OUR INNOCENCE

In 1968 the enemy's
Tet offensive
shattered long-held beliefs
of television—and of Americans

Second of Three Parts

By Edward Jay Epstein

Before 1968, the war in Vietnam was portrayed on television mainly as a series of American military initiatives. When large numbers of American ground troops arrived in 1965, television focused on their progress. Night after night, on all three networks, the standard scenario depicted American troops descending on an "enemy-held" area and bombarding a mostly invisible foe in the far distance; then there was a display of captured supplies or some other evidence of victory, accompanied by a tally of enemy casualties. This picture was reinforced by constant reports on the arrival of new and superior American weapons and by film, supplied by the Pentagon, that showed the bombing of the North.

Interspersed occasionally between the stories showing military progress were stories suggesting that the Americans were also rebuilding South Vietnam. For example, after showing such a story on NBC's *The Huntley-Brinkley Report*, Chet Huntley added, "The central truth of that report needs underscoring," and went on to describe the American forces in Vietnam as "builders" rather than destroyers.

There were, of course, notable exceptions to this standard fare, but in re-examining the nightly newscasts of this period, the dominant impression is one of continuous American successes and mounting enemy losses. And the dominant opinion of the public during that same period was one of support for the U. S. Government's war policies. This was constantly indicated in the polls. TV was just one of many forces influencing that opinion, but it does seem reasonable to infer that the nightly newscasts were—and are—a significant factor in shaping people's attitudes.

The televised picture of gradual progress in the war was abruptly shattered by the Communist offensive in early 1968. On Jan. 29, while the South Vietnamese celebrated Tet, the lunar new year, Vietcong units launched co-ordinated attacks on every major city in South Vietnam. Within 48 hours the Americans found themselves besieged, and Saigon turned into a battlefield for the first time.

Until Tet, television correspondents and camera crews were shepherded by military liaisons to preselected battle sites and were almost entirely dependent on military transports to reach combat zones. Now, however, the military had no such control over the movements of the press. Merely by stepping outside their hotels, correspondents found themselves willy-nilly in the midst of bloody fighting. There was no way that the attacks in broad daylight on

such landmarks as the Presidential Palace could be concealed from television cameras.

Correspondents rushed unedited stories of desperate street fighting on the first available plane to Tokyo, where they were relayed almost instantly by satellite to the networks in New York. Rather than showing the usual carefully edited view of an orderly, controlled war, they depicted a totally chaotic situation. Instead of a constant series of American initiatives, American troops were shown on the defensive.

Moreover, network producers in control rooms in New York had neither the time nor the opportunity to shield American viewers from the grisly close-ups of wounded Americans, body bags and death. On Feb. 2, NBC News producer Robert J. Northshield was advised by telex that an NBC cameraman in Saigon had taken "startling" color film of the offhand execution of a Vietcong suspect by a South Vietnamese general, including a close-up described this way in the telex message: "The VC falls, zoom on his head, blood spraying out." Northshield immediately telephoned the Tokyo bureau, where the film was being developed and prepared for transmission via satellite to New York, and requested that the bloody close-up be edited out for reasons of taste.

Less than 10 minutes before the NBC evening news went on the air, the edited version of the exclusive film, flashed halfway around the world by satellite, was received in New York and recorded on video tape for the broadcast. It was still "too strong," in Northshield's opinion. But there was no time for re-editing the tape; all Northshield could do was order that the sequence be ended when the Vietcong suspect fell to the ground.

Still, as far as Northshield could recall, "It was the strongest stuff American viewers had ever seen." And although body counts had listed hundreds of thousands of Vietcong killed in the seven-year war on television, Americans for the first time actually saw a gun pointed at a human head, then blood, and a real corpse.

For the next two months, while generals in Saigon and officials in Washington claimed a military "victory," television continued to show scenes of fighting and devastation, and openly suggested that the Government statements were examples of a "credibility gap," as NBC correspondent Sander Vanocur and others put it. In his fine book, "Tet," Don Oberdorfer describes in convincing detail how the Vietcong insurgents lost virtually every battle and suffered irreplaceable losses in terms of both manpower and prestige, yet paradoxically won a decisive psychological victory in America. After witnessing on television, year after year, an almost continuous series of putative American military successes, and hearing repeated claims of a vanquished enemy, the American public was unable to digest the unprecedented violence and gore they saw during Tet.

One of the most telling results of the Vietcong's psychological victory was the conversion of America's most influential newscaster, Walter Cronkite. Shocked by what he saw on television and in the screening rooms at CBS during Tet, Cronkite flew to Vietnam to personally assess the American involvement there. A few years earlier,

when he made his first trip to Vietnam, Cronkite had publicly supported the objectives of the war and praised the American commitment as "courageous." In the wake of Tet, Cronkite was greatly disappointed by what he saw and heard. "It was sickening to me," Cronkite is quoted by Oberdorfer as saying. "They were talking strategy and tactics with no consideration of the bigger job of pacifying and restoring the country." The "commitment . . . for a generation" he had endorsed in 1965 no longer seemed worth the price. In a CBS special broadcast on Feb. 27, Cronkite concluded the program by calling the war "a bloody stalemate" and saying, "It 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 . . ."

The spectre of an American defeat was kept before the public for the next two months by a spate of stories from Khe Sanh, a remote Marine base near the Laotian and North Vietnamese borders. In that Feb. 27 special, Cronkite ominously suggested, "Khe Sanh could well fall, with a terrible loss of American lives, prestige and morale." The networks, especially CBS, focused on the besieged American Marines at Khe Sanh, under ceaseless Vietcong bombardment, who were now frequently depicted as holding the initiative.

Other aspects of the situation were often neglected. Howard K. Smith of ABC bitterly complained about the networks' coverage during this period: "That terrible siege of Khe Sanh went on for weeks before newsmen revealed that the South Vietnamese were fighting at our side . . . and the Vietcong casualties were one hundred times ours. But we never told [the public] that. We just showed pictures day after day of Americans getting the hell kicked out of them. That was enough to break America apart."

Although in reality Khe Sanh never fell, and never suffered militarily the "terrible loss" that was predicted, the nightly portrayal of American soldiers on the brink of disaster apparently had its effect on public opinion. By April 1, the day that a column of American armor easily broke the "siege" of Khe Sanh, public-opinion polls showed a dramatic deterioration of support for the war, and for the first time a majority of Americans now were opposed to the war. At almost that precise moment, President Johnson, always responsive to public opinion, dramatically announced that he would not seek a second term as President.

The Communist offensive ended at Khe Sanh. And the networks returned to their more routine modes of coverage—rather than using satellites, which cost as much as \$5000 then for each feed, filmed stories were shipped back to New York by air freight. In the first few days of Tet, ABC had used the satellite three times, NBC six times and CBS 10 times; in the last six months of 1968, less than one per cent of the film from Vietnam was relayed by satellite. The executive producer of ABC's evening newscast, Av Westin, advised the network's correspondents: "The satellite is simply one tool of transmission and I have decided to use

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AVIATION WEEK 1 OCTOBER 1973 (4)

Senate Votes F-14 Funds

By Katherine Johnsen

Washington—Senate approval last week of a \$693-million Fiscal 1974 procurement authorization puts the Navy/Grumman F-14 advanced fighter project back on track and headed toward a total program buy of 313 aircraft at an estimated total cost of \$6.3 billion. The vote was 66-26.

The way was cleared for the Senate's action by an Aug. 30 letter from Deputy Secretary of Defense W. P. Clements to Sen. Howard W. Cannon (D.-Nev.), chairman of the Armed Services tactical air power subcommittee, reporting that negotiations with Grumman Aerospace Corp. were completed and a new contract drawn (AW&ST Sept. 3, p. 11).

The Armed Services Committee earlier had reduced the F-14 Fiscal 1974 authorization to \$198 million because of the lack of the contract between the Navy and Grumman. It was signed the day before the Senate vote.

The House approved \$702 million for the program July 31. In concluding the Grumman contract, the Fiscal 1974 requirement was revised downward by \$9.6 million to \$693 million.

The F-14 action was the highlight of the Senate's first week of consideration of the \$20.4 billion Fiscal 1974 authorization for major weapons systems. It was \$1.5 billion below the Administration's \$21.9 billion request, and only \$4 million more than the measure voted by the House (AW&ST Aug. 6, p. 22).

The additional F-14 funding wiped out almost half of the \$1.5-billion reduction by the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Numerous senators were awaiting the final hours of debate with amendments making over-all reductions, such as an across-the-board percentage reduction of the imposition of an arbitrary ceiling.

If floor actions bring the bill's total authorization beyond the \$20.4 billion proposed by the Armed Services Committee, the support for these amendments was expected to be strong.

Other amendments to the authorization measure included:

■ **Air Force/Fairchild A-10.** A proposal by Sen. Harold Hughes (D.-Iowa) to terminate this close-support aircraft program was defeated 64-20. Senate Armed Services reduced the \$142 million asked by the Air Force by \$50 million, including the entire \$30 million requested for production, to \$92.4 million. Sen. Hughes said the \$92.4 million should be used to purchase LTV Aerospace A-7s for the Air National Guard.

Some support for Sen. Hughes' amendment was staved off by an Air Force announcement at the outset of Senate debate that a flyoff between the A-10 and A-7D would be conducted. Senate Armed Services Committee had unsuccessfully urged this for more than a year.

■ **Air Force/Rockwell International B-1.** Another Hughes amendment providing \$5 million for a full-scale study of alternatives to the B-1 was defeated 59 to 25. Armed Services Committee cut \$100 million from the Fiscal 1974 request of \$473 million (AW&ST Aug. 6, p. 23).

■ **Independent research.** Sen. William Proxmire (D.-Wis.) withdrew an amendment that would have limited funding for independent research and development to \$350 million a year, half the \$700 million Defense Dept. now authorizes, after obtaining commitments from the leadership of the Armed Services Committee for action next year. In the meantime, the General Accounting Office is to complete

a comprehensive study.

■ **AWACS.** An amendment by Sen. Thomas F. Eagleton (D.-Mo.) blocking use of \$11.7 million in Fiscal 1974 funding for long-lead production items until the General Accounting Office has completed a cost-effectiveness study of the airborne warning and control system was accepted on a voice vote. The GAO evaluation deadline is Dec. 31.

■ **Economic Conversion.** An increase in Fiscal 1974 funding for Defense Dept.'s Office of Economic Adjustment to \$50 million was accepted on a voice vote. The office, charged with softening the economic impact resulting from Defense program changes, was budgeted for only \$386,000. The amendment was sponsored by Sen. George McGovern (D.-S. Dak.).

■ **Aerial performance teams.** A ban on demonstrations outside the U. S. and its territories by the Air Force Thunderbirds, Navy Blue Angels, and Army Silver Eagles and the Army Golden Knights was approved 54-28. It was proposed by Sen. Hubert Humphrey (D.-Minn.) who said: "How many times have I asked for them [to perform] in my home state and they said that they could not come. They will get more recruits from Minnesota than they will from Brazil."

■ **Contractor assistance.** An amendment requiring Congressional approval of any special-type financing by Defense Dept. in excess of \$20 million was voted without dissent. Sen. Proxmire, sponsor of the provision, said it was aimed at such techniques as loan guarantees and advance or emergency payments that have been used by the Defense Dept. to keep contractors solvent.

The conclusion of contract negotiations had spurred activity at Grumman's Long Island, N. Y., facilities. "Grumman has added 300 people to its two final assembly plants, bringing the work force there to about 3,000," Sen. Cannon told the Senate. "They are working two shifts, 10 hr. each a day, and a six-day week in order to get production up to five planes a month. This involves substantial overtime, and I hasten to add that these are Grumman and not government incurred costs."

In addition to the \$693 million in procurement funds, the Fiscal 1974 budget includes a non-controversial \$57 million for F-14 research and development, of which \$40 million for the F-14A and \$17 million for the F-14B, or a grand total of \$750 million.

The new fixed-price-incentive contract for 50 F-14As to be produced during the May-December, 1975, period sets a target cost of \$281 million. The target fee is \$25 million, or 8.9%, making a total target price of \$306 million. The ceiling price is \$325 million. Grumman must assume all costs over this ceiling.

Under the standard 80:20 cost-sharing ratio, for every dollar spent by the con-

VIETNAM CONTINUED

it only when the expense is absolutely warranted . . . the show is running within its budget and that is achieved by making some very hard decisions on using the satellite."

The use of air freight meant that most filmed stories would arrive in New York three to five days after they had occurred and been reported by the print media. To avoid the appearance of having stories look dated, correspondents were instructed by producers at NBC to concentrate on "timeless pieces," such as "helicopter patrols, prisoner interviews, and artillery barrages," and to "be careful" about filming events that "might date themselves." Since these procedures also allowed more time for advance screening and editing of stories, producers were again able to expunge scenes considered "too gruesome" for the dinner-time audience. And with most producers assuming that the war was now a "stalemate," correspondents were discouraged from taking excessive risks. They were told, once again, to cover "the technology of the war," as an NBC producer later described it. As in the period before Tet, the military scene was depicted as a series of orderly American actions against an unseen foe; except now they were described in the rhetoric of stalemate, not victory. In late 1968, Jack Fern, a field producer for NBC, suggested to Robert J. Northshield a three-part series showing that Tet had indeed been a decisive military victory for America and that the media had exaggerated greatly the view that it was a defeat for South Vietnam. After some consideration the idea was rejected because, Northshield said later, Tet was already "established in the public's mind as a defeat, and therefore it was an American defeat." In a very real sense, he was correct. If the Government (and networks) had not projected for years the image of invincible American progress in Vietnam, Tet might not have been viewed, with equal hyperbole, as a disastrous defeat.

tractor over the \$281 million target, the government pays 80 cents and the contractor pays 20 cents.

This means, Sen. Cannon told the Senate, "If Grumman's actual costs exceed the current estimate of \$281 million by 10%, their fee will be cut to 5%. If their costs are 15.4% over the \$281 million, they will not make 5 cents on these 50 aircraft."

The \$306 million target price equates to an airframe unit production price of \$6.1 million per aircraft. Under the \$325 million ceiling it would be \$6.5 million.

The total program unit cost for each of the 50 aircraft being funded in Fiscal 1974, including research and development funding, is \$14.7 million.

In addition to the \$325 million for Grumman airframes, the \$693 million for Fiscal 1974 procurement includes \$97.8 million for production of 240 Hughes Phoenix missiles and Pratt & Whitney TF30-P-412 engine financing.

Sen. Cannon presented this summary of the F-14 program:

■ The \$3.5 billion appropriated in prior years included \$2 billion for the purchase of 134 F-14As, starting with six in Fiscal 1969 and ending with 48 in Fiscal 1973. The remainder was for R&D.

■ The total program cost to buy 179 additional aircraft is now estimated at \$2.8 billion. This would make the total program cost for 313 aircraft \$6.3 billion. The program unit cost for each aircraft would be \$20.1 million.