

The Past as Prologue: Antiwar Coverage before the VVAW

Since August 1968, Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, has maintained a Television News Archive. Every ABC, CBS, and NBC nightly newscast has been videotaped and an outline prepared of the newscast stories and segments. The outline is *not* a transcript, and the timing is kept only in ten-second increments. The tapes themselves, however, are a valuable historical tool and are, by definition, a primary record of the coverage—a videotape time capsule of live newscasts that poured into millions of American living rooms. *Found, Featured, then Forgotten* relies on these recordings as a record of network TV newscast coverage from the fall of 1968 onward.

Link to the Vanderbilt Television News Archive,
<http://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/>

Sadly, records preceding August 1968 are scattered and incomplete, leaving researchers to piece together what they can from the recollections, surviving documents, comments about coverage controversies, and incidental references. Certainly, network television news reports of the very early antiwar protests were skeptical, if not hostile. Peter Jennings introduced an October 27, 1965, ABC report with these words: “While Americans fight and die in Vietnam, there are those in this country who sympathize with the Viet Cong.” Of course, protesters could, and did, object to the war without supporting the enemy (Streitmatter 2008).

Jan Barry, a member of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, recalls that as early as April 1968 antiwar veterans were developing a sense of the power of their visual image, making a deliberate choice to wear dress uniforms at protests. “You can imagine the effect this had upon cops and lots of other people. Holy shit! These people are for real—a whole bunch of medals” (Barry 1997a). The use of military dress was not entirely new. For instance, the documentary *Sixth Side of the Pentagon* (Marker 2007), shows Veterans for Peace members in military-style caps, clean cut, some in suits, on their way to toss pamphlets at the feet of MPs in an October 21, 1967, clash at the Pentagon.

Nancy Zaroulis and Gerald Sullivan (1984) date the first antiwar protest regarding the U.S. and Vietnam as August 1963. In Philadelphia, members of the Student Peace Union marched in front of the federal building, carrying signs protesting U.S. foreign policy regarding Vietnam. In New York City, two young members of Catholic Workers, Thomas Cornell and Christopher Kearns, walked up and down in front of the Manhattan residence of Vietnam’s observer to the United Nations. For nine days, Kearns and Cornell walked alone. On the planned final day, about 250 people from other New York peace groups joined them. ABC filmed the protest, showing the demonstration on the evening news. The authors were not specific as to whether the film aired on the New York local newscast or the network program.

Arlen (1969, 6-9, 84) described and critiqued much of that early Vietnam War coverage. He lambasted the early war newscasts for “their almost unvarying implicit deference to the importance of purely military solutions” and an emotional, excessively simple “our guys versus their guys” theme. Few people questioned bombing or “sweep” effectiveness or body counts; few asked about civilian casualties. Domestic coverage concentrated more on doubt and anxiety

than on protest or opposition. As Herbert Gans (1979, 58-59, 280) pointed out, antiwar protest was treated in the news as a social disorder question. It was a national story because of the public institution it targeted, but it would take an establishment source to lead the networks to broader antiwar questions. NBC's Sander Vanocur summarized the congressional mood at the end of 1965: "There is a kind of bipartisan uneasiness over the war in Vietnam, and it is perhaps more pronounced among Democrats than among Republicans. At the same time there is no war fever of jingoism. Congress regards the war in Vietnam as unpleasant but perhaps necessary, and it sees no honorable way out that is going to be quick and easy" (Hill 1967).

Though President Johnson frequently and loudly condemned news coverage of Vietnam, only rarely did network reports question his decision to fight. Most stories emphasized the scale and sophistication of American military technology. Johnson and his Secretaries of State and Defense were virtually guaranteed a minute or two on all network newscasts every time they gave a press conference or major speech. ABC commentator Howard K. Smith, who later became an anchorman, defended the war policies in college speeches and in a July 1966 broadcast, concluding, "It is entirely good what we're doing" (Pach 2002).

The executive producer of NBC's *Huntley-Brinkley Report*, Robert Northshield, did not like reporters using the construction "our" soldiers, ships, or planes; but reporters and even anchors routinely used it. Anchor Chet Huntley objected to his reputation as a hawk, but he did insist, in 1966, that "there is no alternative in Vietnam to fighting it out." Anchor David Brinkley insisted that he despised the war and regularly said so, but little that he said in 1965 or 1966 would lead one to that conclusion. CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite went to Vietnam in the summer of 1965 and told military briefers he "was impressed with our effort" and embarrassed by the

“rude challenges” of “younger reporters” covering military briefings (Pach 2002).

From 1965 through 1967, public opinion began to turn against the war, while most TV news reporting still favored administration policies. By 1968, however, antiwar protest became simply too big to ignore. Between January and June of that year, at least 221 demonstrations occurred at 110 colleges, and a total of 3,463 separate acts of campus protest took place. Ten campuses were firebombed. A million students boycotted classes on April 26th. The next day, a hundred thousand people marched in New York City (J. K. Davis 1997).

Perhaps the mistake of viewing television as a leading, rather than trailing, factor is influenced by memory of the power of the images themselves (Hallin 1986, 163). And not all images were used. CBS had footage of GIs cutting off the ears of a dead Viet Cong soldier, but showed footage that did not include the mutilation. NBC told the story of a Marine colonel with a shattered leg without showing his wound or surgery. But some of the images the networks chose to show are indeed haunting. CBS carried a story in September 1965 about Vietnamese civilians scavenging in a garbage dump containing live ammunition. Two months later, CBS showed a tearful widow at Fort Benning, Georgia, holding her baby and reading a letter from her fallen husband. ABC's Ed Needham wrapped up a report on a heavy-casualty battle with the image of a helmet on the ground with a hole ripped through it. “It hardly seems worth it,” he said (Pach 2002).

Television news film, of course, was a technological cousin to its predecessor, newsreels. The rapid growth of antiwar protests in 1967 coincided with the last year of Universal Newsreels (1929-1967). Newsreels were very different forms compared to television news reports. Movie production houses created newsreels for showing in theatres. No reporter was seen, just images of the serious, shocking,

and silly accompanied by the voice-over announcer and a musical score. Three surviving newsreels from that year foreshadow some of the coverage problems later faced by antiwar protesters in general and VVAW in particular.

An April 18, 1967, newsreel had the full-screen title “Peace March.” Following a crescendo of ominous music, announcer Ed Herlihy tells of a hundred twenty-five thousand people marching from New York’s Central Park to the United Nations. He describes them as “students, housewives, beatnik poets, doctors, businessmen, teachers, priests, and nuns.” Providing pictures to match, he proclaims, “Makeup and costumes were bizarre.” The newsreel shows demonstrators burning draft cards, and the narration tries to minimize the impact by first saying that demonstrators claimed [vocal emphasis on “claimed”] that two hundred cards were burned but that no accurate count could be determined and that “reporters and onlookers were jostled away on purpose.”

The narrator admits the event was mostly peaceful, but then says, “Shouted confrontations were frequent and fiery,” as the film shows a U.S. Army logo on a jacket and then pulls out to show a clean-cut young man yelling at a hooded demonstrator. Following brief footage of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. walking to the U.N. to protest the war, the newsreel shifts to fifty thousand “pacifists and hippies together” in a San Francisco protest. Protesters carry the blame as the narrator states, “Antiwar songs and speeches trigger a short scuffle between pro and con factions.” The event is described as “sponsored by a loose coalition of left-wing pacifist and moderate antiwar groups.”

The story ends with the official line and implicit threat: “President Johnson meanwhile let it be known that FBI is closely watching all antiwar activity.” The newsreel then transitions to antiwar protests in Rome where the announcer lapses into casual, almost gleeful, chatter as he describes police and firemen turning hoses on sit-down

protesters. “The solution H-Two-O applied freely under high pressure. . . . The strong water jets bowled over demonstrators one after another. They dried out in the pokey.”



[CLICK TO VIEW VIDEO](#)

“Peace March: Thousands Oppose Vietnam War” by Universal Newsreel, voiced by Ed Herlihy, April 18, 1967, Public Domain (Creative Commons)

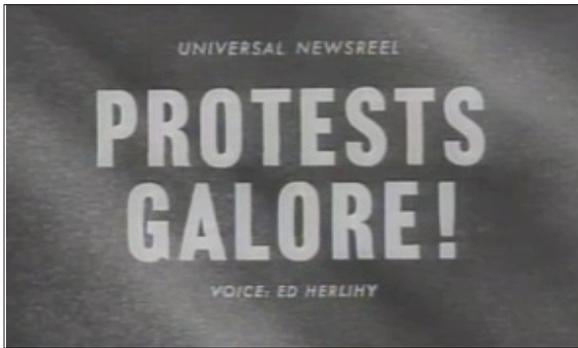
A May 5th Universal Newsreel entitled “Protests Galore!” starts in London with footage of police and crowd pushing one another as the announcer states that four thousand Londoners “were decrying British support for U.S. action [note that the word “war” is not used] in Vietnam.” The announcer admits to only a “few minor scuffles, but no arrests” and states that the demonstrators were stopped [by whom not stated] from approaching Prime Minister Wilson’s Downing Street home. The newsreel makes no mention that the home is the official residence of all prime ministers, likening the event to White House protests. That segment concludes with news that “mimics of Queen Elizabeth presented mock medals, and said the war was a wicked obscenity.”

The themes of disrespect and danger carry on when the scene switches to protests at Madrid University. Ed Herlihy bellows, “Posters, leaflets, slogans, and student speeches all carried a virulence

seldom seen here before,” a statement at odds with scenes of happy, clapping crowds. The audio and video come back into match as the copy and film both address the burning of an American flag. The announcer wraps the segment by declaring, “Both President Johnson and Francisco Franco were vilified, a new low in public protest added strain on Spanish-American relations.” The last phrase, of course, is both an unsubstantiated assertion and blatant editorializing. The segment is accompanied by alarming horn sounds.

The newsreel abruptly shifts to upbeat music and pictures of people wearing balloons and flowers. Now, viewers are in Detroit at a “social phenomenon sweeping the country.” The Love-In is a “close relative to the be-in, sort of a happy happening laced with the rites of spring.” The narration and video align in showing hippies, would-be hippies, colorful scenes, high frolic, and folks dancing. The announcer notes, “Group therapy like this outdrew the Detroit Tigers that day. The end, man.” Any protest in this “Protests Galore!” segment was missing.

The newsreel then shifts to official aerial footage of Vietnam air raids. The narration states that the bombers “blasted” communication and boat repair and “annihilated” targets, and then asserts, “Our pilots hit only military targets.” Maintaining the illusion of a front and a traditional war, the newsreel states that the jets struck close to North Vietnamese capital Hanoi once again and that ground troops moved to within ten miles of the North Vietnam border. To drive home the Cold War connection, the newsreel closes with footage of soldiers, weapons, and Soviet leaders in the annual Moscow May Day parade, complete with reference to speeches by Kremlin leaders accusing the U.S. of “criminal war in Vietnam.”



[CLICK TO VIEW VIDEO](#)

"Protests Galore!" by Universal Newsreel, voiced by Ed Herlihy, May 5, 1967,
Public Domain (Creative Commons)

The October 24th, 1967, newsreel, "Antiwar Demonstrators Storm Pentagon," starts with ominous music. Protesters carry a "Support Our Troops . . . Bring Them Home" banner, but the camera only shows "Support Our Troops . . . Bring." The narrator mentions scuffles and calls the organization a "loose confederation of some 150 groups" that "included adults, students, even children." Subtle status-quo shading can be found in both film and narration. The stand-off at the Pentagon is described as a "test of strength," an odd phrasing when one side is armed. Military police "contain" the crowd, and the MP perimeter is described as a "protective line." In the subsequent clashes, the narrator intones, "Two soldiers are injured [no mention of injured protesters] and tear gas is used" [passive voice hiding the military as the actor using the tear gas].

Newsreel coverage of the second day begins with a crowd kicking around garbage that looks like books or pamphlets and with a campfire. The narrator notes that the fires are to hold off the autumn chill, while the footage shows a smaller crowd, focusing on a bearded protester and a clean-cut MP. As the music changes to an upbeat swell, the narrator talks about nationwide demonstrations supporting GIs

in Vietnam taking place the same weekend. Abandoning any pretense of objectivity, Ed Herlihy concludes, “The two-day protest ends with over six hundred arrested and the widespread opinion that the demonstration made everyone a loser.”



CLICK TO VIEW VIDEO

“Anti-War Demonstrators Storm Pentagon” by Universal Newsreels,
voiced by Ed Herlihy, Oct. 24, 1967, Public Domain
(Creative Commons)

British Pathe’ newsreels of the Pentagon protests, unfortunately retained as silent footage, present two of the same protest days with some intriguing differences. The British film of the October 1967 protests uses more extreme long shots showing the large size of the gathering in front of the Lincoln Memorial. Like the U.S. newsreel, Pathe’ 71984 shows minor scuffles and arrests. Unlike the American counterpart, the British film shows the entire banner “Support Our G.I.s . . . Bring Them Home.” The British newsreel also notes that “[A]t the same time a peaceful anti-Vietnam demonstration [is] taking place in San Francisco. Ex-army organizations take part along with ordinary public.” The video appears to be standard parade-formation of American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars members and their flags, and may actually be a pro-war parade.

Link to British Pathe’: <http://www.britishpathe.com/>

The British Archive erred in its listing regarding the April 1967 protests, mistakenly listing them as 1966. Once again the British used wider shots than Universal Newsreel had done to show the large crowds. Universal only showed Dr. Martin Luther King walking toward the U.N., while Pathe' 83341 showed him speaking to microphones and cameras. The first moments of the newsreel, however, give a lot of time to the counter-demonstrators, their placards visible in medium shots and close-ups. One demonstrator calls the protesters cowards. Another proclaims, "Victory, Bomb Hanoi," and another echoes "End Hanoi Sanctuary." Some antiwar signs are seen in long shots, only one quick medium shot shows an antiwar sign, which reads: "Vietnam for Vietnamese. Let's Get Out." Later, the Pathe' film does show large numbers of people marching, and viewers see additional placards in the San Francisco march. That footage also shows the large Kezar Stadium crowd, but a "Support Our Men in Vietnam" banner is center screen.

British Pathe' Newsreels also had footage and sound of several British antiwar protests: a March 21, 1968, demonstration that ended in chaos and became known as the Grosvenor Square riots (45122); a March 28, 1968, "Mothering Sunday" march (45136); color footage [all other newsreel footage examined is black and white] of a July 25, 1968, demonstration in front of the American Embassy (45365); an October 31, 1968, march to Downing Street (45509); an April 1969 Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament march (45754). The newsreel archive also contains a color collection of "offcuts, selected scenes, out-takes, [and] rushes" from various Vietnam demonstrations (45366).

The Grosvenor Square narration had such strong editorializing that the archive added a "[c]ataloguer's note: commentary very biased in favour of police—in contrast with the actual footage showing shocking examples of police brutality." Indeed, the footage begins

with the most inflammatory posters: Mao, a hammer and sickle, and Ho Chi Minh. The film devotes attention to the presence of actress Vanessa Redgrave. Then the narrator warns about hate-makers, hard-core troublemakers, determined to “drag the majority of well-intentioned demonstrators to their sickening level.” As snare drums increase tempo, viewers hear, in passive voice, “Riot was being incited.” The footage then just offers natural sound and shows incidents of tear gas, demonstrators wrestled to the ground by groups of police, and at least one instance of police kicking the prone demonstrator. The narrator concludes with praise for the police restraint.

In contrast, the “Mothering Sunday” march was presented with fewer machinations, though the peaceful march to the U.S. embassy was paired with a Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament youth anti-war rally in Trafalgar Square. The narrator reminds viewers of the previous week’s violence, and as footage shows police pushing back against the crowd, the narrator opines, “The police had reason to fear another flare-up.” He concludes with the glib statement, “London had not suffered more violence in the cause of peace.”

The march from Trafalgar Square to the U.S. embassy on July 25, 1968, followed a similar route and a similar pattern of newsreel coverage. It begins with the narrator describing the protesters as young and sincere, withholding the implied and condescending term “naïve.” Most of the banners shown are ones with Soviet or communist icons. At the embassy, the mood shifts abruptly as viewers are warned that there are “hawks, aggressors, troublemakers, and anarchists” in the crowd. Their offense appears to be stepping over some bushes and a small garden-style mesh fence about a foot tall. As police grab offenders and push them back, strong editorial narration begins: “There are those who complain that the police use undue violence. Others more likely compliment them on their restraint when faced with thugs, bullies, and flaunters of the law. How can

anyone ever hope to have pleas for peace seriously considered when their terms are so violently and wrongly presented?" The film ends with a musical flourish and the burning of an American flag.

The October 31, 1968, demonstration shows the large crowd as the narrator tells listeners what side they were on: "It was a day that many Londoners had dreaded for many weeks. Past experience had shown that bitter violence could take control." Viewers see an Australian flag in flames as the narrator says, "Flag burning hurts national pride, but breaks no heads." After praising police and the majority of demonstrators, the camera follows a breakaway group that the narrator at various times calls "fringe fanatics," "self-described Maoists," "troublemakers," "hooligans," "anarchists," and "an uncontrollable faction." This newsreel spends 60 percent of its time on clashes between this group and police, the narrator boldly asserting, "Nobody, not even the troublemakers themselves, could condemn the police for standing their ground and giving as good as they got." The narrator concludes that the other protesters thus "lost some of the sympathy and understanding they might have earned."

The April 1969 CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) rally took place on Easter weekend. The crowd at Trafalgar Square looks larger than the narrator-provided number of five thousand. The narration praises the march to the square as done by "orderly sober citizens." A handful of young anarchists who "tried to stir up trouble" were "quickly dealt with before the mass reached Trafalgar Square." How? Viewers are not told. The crowd heard from the woman who was the North Vietnamese delegate to the Paris Peace Talks. Viewers see her at the microphone, but do not hear her in this newsreel. The crowd shots include one with a banner of Marx, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao.

The newsreels provide coverage clues for all antiwar protesters, but they highlight news habits particularly informative for U.S. antiwar veterans:

- Reporters will assume all veterans support the war and that only pro-war demonstrators “support the troops.”
- Negative actions by police will be lessened by blaming the victim or by using passive voice—no subject doing the negative action.
- Conflict, no matter how unrepresentative or minor, will get a lot of camera time.
- Default news themes for antiwar protests are ones of protester disrespect and danger to the community.
- Reporters will seek out a pro-war speaker, even if only a few are present or if one who did not attend has to be found for a quote. These pro-war speakers almost invariably will equate war opposition with cowardice or support for an enemy.
- Great effort must be sustained to separate highly credible voices such as antiwar veterans. The news tendency will be simply to list participating groups.
- No matter how well organized the protest may be, it likely will be presented as a convenient, if naïve, casual assemblage of groups.

News coverage generally will comment often on the behavior of the protesters rather than on the merits of the protest’s argument. Thus, the news conundrum for social movements is established and maintained. No threat of conflict likely means little coverage, but if conflict occurs, the conflict gets covered instead of the group and its message.

Highlights

Since August 1968, Vanderbilt University has maintained a Television News Archive, making it possible to search for stories by topic and to examine actual video of every ABC, CBS, or NBC evening newscast from that point forward.

Records from before August 1968 are sporadic and often anecdotal, but generally point to coverage relatively uncritical of Administration war policies. The dying gasps of the newsreel industry certainly reacted negatively to early antiwar protests.

The early coverage gives clues to the news obstacles to be faced by VVAW. Reporters initially tend to assume all veterans groups support the war and that only pro-war demonstrators “support the troops.”

Conflict, disrespect, and danger are default protest coverage themes, and protest generally will be treated as a confusing social disorder.