How Did Larry Burrows’ Photojournalistic Work of the Vietnam War Reflect Cold War Ideology?

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The Vietnam War was not officially censored by the United States government because it was not declared an official U.S. war. Relatively unrestricted by government interference, television portrayed the North Vietnamese as cruel, ruthless, and fanatical, and framed the Tet Offensive to portray the war as slipping out of control (Hallin, 1986). According to Hallin, many reports out of Vietnam were dripping in Cold War ideology, often times referring to a “battle for democracy” and “the fight against communist aggression.” This study examines whether print media, specifically through photojournalism, also upheld Cold War themes that were prevalent during the Vietnam War. Specifically, this study looks at the photojournalistic work of Larry Burrows that was published in Life magazine from January 25, 1963 until February 19, 1971. A content analysis similar to that of Griffin and Lee (1995) was conducted on the 138 published Burrows photographs of the Vietnam War. These photographs were coded for topic and size to determine which themes were most prevalent and whether those themes upheld Cold War ideology. Some of the topics, which were coded for, included dead, wounded, prisoner of war, military leader, forces, and civilian. Then they were coded for size to determine which topics were most prominently presented to Life’s readers. Findings showed that Burrows began his coverage of the war showing the superiority of the United States military and its willingness to rage war on communism. However, as the war droned on, he shifted his focus to the human elements of the war, specifically how the war was affecting American soldiers and the Vietnamese people. Burrows’ photographs as a whole were not subjecting the American public to graphic images, supporting Hammond’s theory (1989) that there is a misconception concerning the amount of death coverage from Vietnam. The early coverage of the war through Burrows’ photos upheld Cold War ideology, but later shifted, no longer focusing on those philosophies.