



Reporting from Behind Enemy Lines: How the *National Guardian* and *Liberation* Brought Vietnam to the American Left

By Michael Koncewicz

Working alongside the more freewheeling Underground Press Syndicate, the National Guardian and Liberation were two of the more notable outlets on the American Left that quickly developed a forum for antiwar journalism during the Vietnam era. In the initial years of the war, these two older left-wing publications served as vital outlets for antiwar reporting that connected generations of activists, leading to important exchanges between the Old and New Left. Figures such as Wilfred Burchett, Dave Dellinger, and several others published stories that brought their readers behind enemy lines, offering up profound challenges to traditional notions of objectivity during the war. Collectively, their on-the-ground reports played an invaluable role in shaping the later, more expansive print culture of the antiwar movement.

The alternative press explosion of the 1960s helped provide an uncensored antiwar voice to countless college campuses, bookstores, and high schools across the nation. During the Vietnam War, a new wave of publications expanded the antiwar press and served as a valuable source for critical news on US foreign policy. While scholars have examined the numerous New Left–based newspapers that made up the Underground Press Syndicate, far less attention has been paid to the antiwar publications of a previous generation that also helped shape the print culture of the 1960s. Publications such as the *National Guardian*, first printed in 1948, and *Liberation*, in 1956, though founded prior to the 1960s, actively sought to connect the Old Left with the burgeoning New Left. The two publications started at different historical moments for the American Left and were not always ideologically in sync with one another, but they both offered an independent space for news and debate for several generations of activists.

Although the *Guardian* and *Liberation* were of a previous generation, they were not bound by it. Unlike radical newspapers such as the *Militant*

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and the *Daily Worker*, the *National Guardian* and *Liberation* were not officially affiliated with a political organization. Although both publications were connected to different elements of the American Left, their political independence created a more open ideological space for their journalists and essayists. This was especially evident when it came to their coverage of Vietnam, as both publications offered uncensored firsthand accounts behind enemy lines that appealed to readers, both young and old. It was through their reports on Vietnam that the *Guardian* and *Liberation* were able to reach a new generation of readers.

Although the magazines and newspapers that made up the alternative press were fairly diverse in their politics, journalistic styles, and readerships, they were often brought together by their antiwar politics and their corresponding reports on Vietnam. From the Gulf of Tonkin incident in the summer of 1964 to the onset of the Tet Offensive in January 1968, the nation's antiwar movement had reached new heights. This three-and-a-half-year period also saw many changes within the Left as a younger generation of activists, often generalized as the "New Left," reshaped the contours of the American antiwar press while remaining in contact with segments of the Old Left. The rise of the grimmer, more counterculture-based underground papers expanded on the work of older leftist journalists, but they also challenged some of the cultural and political traditions of the Left that had been shaped by the 1930s.

Amid the numerous debates and discussions within the Left of the mid-to late 1960s, opposition to the Vietnam War was a point of unity. Antiwar politics was an intersection for reporters and readers of the alternative press who may have come from different generations and ideological groups but could agree on Vietnam. It was the forum where older progressives were in direct conversation with the younger activists, as both were interested in providing firsthand reports from Southeast Asia and radical analysis that argued for an end to the war. These reports on Vietnam laid the foundation for a new brand of antiwar journalism, one that was looser in terms of its broader ideology and often adopted a more personal style of writing. Many other publications provided reports from Vietnam, but the *Guardian* and *Liberation* were the most consistent in providing on-the-ground coverage from Southeast Asia during the early years of the antiwar movement.

The *Guardian* and *Liberation* played a crucial role in the development of a broader questioning of old journalistic standards, specifically the then-sacred notion of objectivity that had defined much of the mainstream journalism during the Cold War era. Reports from locations such as Hanoi, Phnom Penh, Saigon, and even the National Liberation Front (NLF)-controlled areas of South Vietnam shared many of the same themes that transcended the sizable ideological differences within the alternative press. Although the *Guardian* and *Liberation* were not at the forefront of the print culture of the New Left's Underground Press, it cannot be ignored

that their reports were frequently circulated across the underground press and were used to satisfy a growing hunger for antiwar journalism.

The historiography of the 1960s American alternative press includes many notable accounts of the period, works that have featured firsthand accounts of the debates, discussions, and events that shaped the New Left and what they read. Several scholars have also offered detailed examinations on the political diversity of the underground magazines and newspaper of the period, connecting the publications to various strains of the counterculture and the longer tradition of an American Left. However, many of these works have often resorted to constraining a history of the alternative press to familiar narratives on the rise and fall of the New Left. These stories are often memoirs from New Left journalists; overviews of the more explicitly radical underground press movement, written in the late 1960s/early 1970s; or accounts that were overly dependent on oral histories from those very same journalists.¹

Abe Peck, a former editor/writer for the *Chicago Seed*, looked back at the entire history of the American underground press of the 1960s in his seminal book *Uncovering the Sixties: The Life and Times of the Underground Press*. Peck provides a thorough history, covering everything from the movement's Old Left origins to the rise and fall (and co-option) of the New Left by the mainstream media. Peck's history of the underground is an impressive one in terms of its detail, but it is dominated by his personal relationships in the movement and a tone of looming disappointment over the period's failed idealism. Nevertheless, *Uncovering the Sixties* is without a doubt an overview of the underground press that best captures the interconnectedness of the movement, showing that the movement's press culture was a vital forum for debate and discussion across the American Left.²

More recently, historians such as John McMillian and Peter Richardson have provided nuanced histories on the alternative press of the 1960s. McMillian's *Smoking Typewriters: The Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America* expands on Peck's prior work to give a comprehensive history of the countless New Left newspapers that made up the Underground Press Syndicate in the 1960s. McMillian specifically emphasizes the importance of the underground press in acting as an open forum for the New Left's

¹Numerous New Left memoirs and collections of oral histories are available, but the following are some prominent ones: Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1987); Jeff Kasseloff, *Generation on Fire: Voices of Protest from the 1960s, an Oral History* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007); Paul Krassner and Ray Mungo, *Famous Long Ago: My Life and Hard Times with Liberation News Service* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970).

²Abe Peck, *Uncovering the Sixties: The Life and Times of the Underground Press* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

brand of participatory democracy, helping to create numerous activist scenes across the nation. With the benefit of historical distance, McMillian examines the detailed histories of underground publications such as the *East Village Other* and *Los Angeles Free Press* and shows how they transformed the print culture of the Left.³ Peter Richardson's *A Bomb in Every Issue: How the Short, Unruly Life of Ramparts Magazine Changed America* investigates how the alternative press culture infiltrated the mainstream media. Richardson's book tells the story of *Ramparts*, a magazine that started off as a small Catholic quarterly but eventually turned into the most influential leftist magazine in the country. With hundreds of thousands of subscribers at its peak in the late 1960s, Richardson uses the story of *Ramparts* as a case study that embodied many of the overriding themes of the 1960s counter-cultural left. Richardson also places a great emphasis on the legacy of *Ramparts*, tracing its muckraking influence all the way up to the progressive blogs of today. He writes: "*Ramparts* should be judged not only by what it published, but also by the subsequent work it made possible. By this measure, it accomplished a great deal."⁴

While scholars have not fully investigated the history of *Liberation*, some have touched on the history of the *Guardian*. As Lauren Kessler's 1984 book *The Dissident Press: Alternative Journalism in American History* pointed out, the antiwar publications of the Vietnam era fit within a longer history of dissent. More than thirty years ago, Kessler argued that the lines between the Old Left and New Left were in many ways crossed within the alternative press culture of the Cold War period. She correctly identified the *Guardian* as one of the earliest publications to provide a serious alternative to the mainstream media with regard to US foreign policy. "From its inception, the *Guardian* began covering the developments in Vietnam, reporting on the postwar betrayal of the French and the defeat of the French army." Kessler also praised the *Guardian* as "one of the few sources of independent (non-government) information about the war" during the 1950s and early 1960s.⁵ The influence of the *Guardian* on the New Left's print culture is also spelled out in Ken Wachsberger's edited volume *Voices from the Underground: Insider Histories of the Vietnam Era Underground Press*. Embedded within the book's valuable collection of essays and oral histories on various underground publications is an essay written by former *Guardian*

³John McMillian, *Smoking Typewriters: The Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁴Peter Richardson, *A Bomb in Every Issue: How the Short, Unruly Life of Ramparts Magazine Changed America* (New York: New Press, 2009), 3.

⁵Lauren Kessler, *The Dissident Press: Alternative Journalism in American History* (Berkeley Hills: Sage, 1984), 148.

staff writer/editor Jack A. Smith on the paper's coverage of Vietnam.⁶ Much like Kessler, Smith argued that the *Guardian's* reports on and from Vietnam linked the paper to a new generation of readers. Smith also emphasized the *Guardian's* political independence, but he consistently stressed the importance of the Vietnam War in defining what he felt was the paper's legacy. "The struggle against imperialism in Southeast Asia was this great 'underground' newspaper's finest moment."⁷ The same could be said of the *Liberation* and several other publications that were widely circulated across the American Left of the mid- to late 1960s.

This research builds from the numerous first-person accounts of the era and past scholarship of the alternative press to showcase the somewhat similar roles that both the *Guardian* and *Liberation* played in using antiwar journalism to link different generations of activists. Whereas McMillian focused on the New Left's underground press as an open forum for participatory democracy, this study will show that the two older left-wing publications were also dynamic forums for debate for the American Left. Although neither publication reached the borderline mainstream circulation of *Ramparts* and several of the underground newspapers, the *Guardian* and *Liberation* each contributed to the eventual mainstreaming of antiwar journalism. Daniel C. Hallin and others have shown that it was not until the end of the 1960s that the mainstream media became more receptive to critical reports on the Vietnam War.⁸ However, the narratives that eventually seized the attention of much of the American public by the end of the decade were printed regularly in movement publications such as the *Guardian* and *Liberation*.

The *National Guardian* and *Liberation*

The *National Guardian*, a weekly newspaper first published in 1948, was arguably the publication that best represented the Left's trials and tribulations of the 1950s, its survival, and its eventual transformation in the 1960s. Founded by two American progressives, James Aronson and John T. McManus, and a Briton, Cedric Belfrage, the paper was created to "capitalize on [Henry] Wallace campaign interest" during the 1948 presidential election.⁹ Within months, the paper gained a sizable readership made up

⁶Jack A. Smith, "The Guardian Goes to War," in *Voices from the Underground: Insider Histories of the Vietnam Era Underground Press, Part 1*, ed. Ken Wachsberger (Tempe, AZ: Mica's Press, 2012), 253–66.

⁷Ibid., 266.

⁸Daniel C. Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

⁹Cedric Belfrage, "Founding of the National Guardian—Internal Memo," 1948, Cedric Belfrage Papers, box 9, folder: Founding of the National Guardian—Internal Memo, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

of progressives and radicals who had grown weary of the Truman administration. In 1950 the paper reached a peak circulation of 75,000, a number that would dwindle to 47,000 by 1953 because of the McCarthyism of the early 1950s.¹⁰ Questioned by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1953, Belfrage was deported in 1955 for his support of leftist movements both in the United States and around the globe.¹¹ Although the paper continued to print on a weekly basis under the leadership of Aronson, readership kept dropping, eventually leveling out to around 28,000 in the mid-1960s.¹²

Nevertheless, the paper maintained its status as one of the more renowned publications on the Left during the early to mid-1960s. The *Guardian* was known for its coverage of foreign affairs, and one of its most frequently cited writers was Wilfred G. Burchett, a veteran Australian reporter who filed reports from National Liberation Front (NLF) territories starting in the early 1960s. Burchett was highly regarded among the Left but vilified by many mainstream reporters for his stories about Hiroshima soon after the dropping of the atomic bomb and his dispatches from Moscow during the 1950s. After the Gulf of Tonkin incident in the summer of 1964, when US involvement in Vietnam swiftly escalated, Burchett's reports and their images of the NLF would be one of the mainstays of the paper during a time of change for the Left and particularly the *Guardian*.

One of those changes was the rise of New Left activism in the mid-1960s, a movement that Aronson sought to appeal to through the paper's claims to political independence. In his memoir, Aronson wrote that because of their "resistance to the more obvious conformities of the older radical movement, and particularly the Communist Party, the young radicals seemed to trust us."¹³ In an October 10, 1964, editorial commemorating the paper's sixteenth anniversary, Aronson focused on the paper's younger readers, boasting that "new student subscriptions have doubled over a year ago," and that he was

¹⁰James Aronson and Cedric Belfrage, *Something to Guard: The Stormy Life of the National Guardian, 1948–1967* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 157. Estimate is based on articles that appeared in the *Guardian*, such as "Report to Readers: The Guardian Reaches Out," *National Guardian*, February 26, 1966, 2; Jane McManus, "Guardian Now Owned, Run by Staff," *National Guardian*, May 6, 1967, 3.

¹¹Belfrage was deported from the United States for belonging to the American Communist Party under a false name. After the release of Soviet records in the 1990s, most historians who study Cold War espionage believe that Belfrage was an important double-agent who worked for both the British and the Soviet Union. For a summary, see Gordon Corera, "Cedric Belfrage, the WW2 Spy Britain Was Embarrassed to Pursue," *BBC*, August 21, 2015.

¹²Estimate is based on articles that appeared in the *Guardian* such as "Report to Readers: The Guardian Reaches Out," *National Guardian*, February 26, 1966, 2; Jane McManus, "Guardian Now Owned, Run by Staff."

¹³Aronson and Belfrage, 320.

proud that “our younger readers place on information and interpretive comment rather than on polemic and special reading.”¹⁴ This commitment to an independent American Left was an important selling point for certain New Left activists such as Todd Gitlin, former president of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), who in his memoir credited the *Guardian* for being an important source of information during his formative years. “I liked the fact that the *Guardian* was undisguisedly dissident,” and that “from reading the *Guardian*, I doubted,” remembered Gitlin.¹⁵

The bridge between the two generations of activist journalists was even more evident in the pages of *Liberation*, a publication that explicitly sought to bring together a range of radical perspectives into a monthly magazine. Created in 1956 by radical pacifists Dorothy Day, David Dellinger, and A. J. Muste, *Liberation* served as an open forum that emphasized the need for self-criticism within the movement. In the magazine’s first issue, Dellinger and Muste published an essay titled, “The Tract,” which argued for more open dialog across the Left. It stated: “In trying to liberate mankind from economic slavery,” the Left had “failed to see the looming horror of political slavery,” and “a truly radical movement today must take these ethical problems much more seriously than many nineteenth-century thinkers did.”¹⁶

Even though *Liberation* encouraged more nuanced analysis, that did not preclude the magazine from taking strong stands against US foreign intervention. The staff of *Liberation* had little use for the mainstream press’s adherence to impassioned objectivity, and instead carved out a space for a powerful form of advocacy journalism. *Liberation* writer Paul Goodman once wrote: “Reuters might cover a bomb test in the Sahara as news, but an editor of *Liberation* was with Africans trying to stop the test.”¹⁷ While *Liberation*’s circulation never reached the levels of other alternative publications, usually hovering around 10,000, the magazine maintained its reputation as an important movement publication. In a glowing review of the magazine that appeared in the *Guardian* in 1965, Smith wrote that *Liberation* is “one of the most important magazines in the country for those concerned with peace, civil rights and freedom.”¹⁸

The magazine continued to maintain its status into the late 1960s, as Dave Dellinger became somewhat of an elder statesman for the New Left. Born in 1915, Dellinger was a longtime activist who drove an ambulance in Spain during the Spanish Civil War and was a conscientious objector

¹⁴James Aronson, “Report to Readers: This Is Vol. 17, No. 1,” *National Guardian*, October 10, 1964, 2.

¹⁵Gitlin, 67.

¹⁶“The Tract,” *Liberation*, March 1956, 3–6.

¹⁷Murray Kempton, “Ten Years of Liberation,” *Liberation*, March 1965, 44.

¹⁸Jack A. Smith, “A Magazine for Peace: The Seeds of Liberation,” *National Guardian*, July 17, 1965, 7.

during World War II. He was involved in socialist political circles within the United States but maintained a degree of separation from sectarian politics. Dellinger gained even more notoriety in his fifties as one of the defendants in the infamous Chicago Seven Trial, a symbolic moment that displayed his strong connection to the New Left. As a leading voice in *Liberation*, Dellinger continued to expand on the magazine's antiwar reports into the latter half of the 1960s, providing readers with numerous dispatches from Vietnam.

Reporting from Vietnam

The *Guardian* and *Liberation* helped bring antiwar journalism to a readership that was younger, less bound by ideology, and interested in getting firsthand reports from Vietnam. Both Burchett and Dellinger's reports from Vietnam highlighted the vital presence of an older generation within the antiwar press of the 1960s. Along with several others, their respective forms of on-the-ground journalism brought together a dynamic blend of the Old and the New Left. Burchett's numerous dispatches from Cambodia, Hanoi, and zones controlled by the NLF allowed readers their first glimpses of America's enemies. Dellinger and his fellow staff members' trips to Hanoi added to Burchett's findings, giving readers more nuanced depictions of civilian life in North Vietnam. While North Vietnamese and NLF propaganda efforts often shaped these accounts, their stories and images still transcended their political limitations by presenting a radically different narrative of Vietnam, one that highlighted the brutality of American intervention in Southeast Asia.

For the *Guardian*, the escalation of the Vietnam War in many ways confirmed their arguments about the war, dating back to their coverage of America's support of French rule. Immediately following the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964, the *Guardian* labeled the United States' response as "a blatant act of war" and the result of "twenty years of brinkmanship."¹⁹ Throughout the initial years of the war, the *Guardian* used photographs that focused on the plight of Vietnamese civilians, making sure to consistently remind its readers of the moral implications of the war. One issue from 1965 showed then Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara alongside a photograph of a Vietnamese father holding his wounded son. Underneath was a caption that read, "Two Aspects of the War in South Vietnam—McNamara's Grin and a Father's Grief."²⁰

Burchett's reports from Cambodia and Vietnam fit within this moralistic narrative, but also offered a story of determined resistance from both the NLF and the North Vietnamese. While other stories and photographs stressed

¹⁹James Aronson, "A Blatant Act of War and the Reasons Why," *National Guardian*, August 15, 1964, 1.

²⁰Appeared in *National Guardian*, July 31, 1965, 1.

America's failure to reach the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people, Burchett's reports focused on the US military's failure to break their will. In a January 16, 1965, report titled, "Vietnam NLF Leaders Expecting a Long Fight," Burchett described the confidence of the NLF in the face of American military might. "I found the NLF military and political leaders more confident of a clear-cut victory than they were a year ago," because of their growing awareness of the "political bankruptcy in Saigon."²¹ This high level of confidence was a repeated theme throughout the dispatches, intended to balance the destruction caused by the American military with descriptions of the NLF's methods of survival.

In a report published February 6, 1965, Burchett took his readers deep into the South Vietnamese jungles to witness the NLF's training exercises. In this first of a series of reports that captured his stay with the NLF from November 1965 to January 1966, Burchett wrote, "The guerrilla patrols, noted for their night attacks, make the most precise and minute preparations for each military action." He later witnessed the soldiers "rehearse [an] attack, step by step, so that each man knows exactly what he must do" and continued to emphasize the NLF's overall preparedness. Later in the story, he described being with the NLF during an American bombing raid where NLF soldiers made sure to cover him with their bodies to protect him, placing him all the way at the bottom of a trench.²²

In addition to the informational value of the reports, the consistent insertion of Burchett's voice added to the drama and emotion within the stories. This is especially true when he interviewed some of the people of Vietnam who surrounded him. By including these interviews, he gave the NLF a new sense of humanity for curious readers who knew little about the movement. For instance, a report from early 1965 featured a picture of an ordinary-looking NLF soldier with the caption, "One of the Mortar Men in Bien Hoa Raid: He Helped Wreck \$25 Million Worth of Planes." Burchett identified the man as "Huynh Minh" and described him as a "tough, slight, and merry peasant," who was "perhaps the last person one would expect to credit with one of the most extraordinary military victories of all time." Minh was responsible for "the destruction of 21 jet bombers, and a dozen or so other planes and helicopters," all without losing a man or a plane, during an attack by the American military that occurred on October 31, 1964, just nineteen miles from Saigon on Bien Hoa airfield.²³ Although Burchett was not at the battle, he used NLF soldiers as witnesses to a story that may have very well

²¹ Wilfred Burchett, "Vietnam NLF Leaders Expecting a Long Fight," *National Guardian*, January 16, 1965, 6.

²² Wilfred Burchett, "On the Spot Report of How the NLF Liberation Forces Operate," *National Guardian*, February 6, 1965, 1.

²³ Wilfred Burchett, "How 21 US Jet Bombers Were Destroyed at Bien Hoa," *National Guardian*, February 6, 1965, 6.

been exaggerated, but nevertheless served for *Guardian* readers as a powerful account of resistance.

Other reports from the NLF zones included profiles of individual guerrilla soldiers that explored their motives for fighting alongside the communist rebels. In one story, Burchett interviewed a South Vietnamese man named Lieutenant Vinh Cuu, who recently left the South Vietnamese military for the NLF. Cao told Burchett, "I joined because I thought Diem was a sincere nationalist and despite my family connections I was against the feudal, kow-towing regime of Bao Dai." He ultimately defected months after concluding that the regime in Saigon itself was rotten," and he insisted that "As an educated officer, I felt that the Liberation Front forces were on the right road."²⁴

Along with these individual stories of resistance, Burchett often included images of himself in the jungle, occasionally dressed up in his rather limited peasant disguise, which failed to cover both his relative tall frame and European features. In one photograph, Burchett sat with NLF president Nguyen Huu Tho in the jungle for an interview, while another showed the journalist on a bicycle with a typewriter strapped on the back of the bike. In addition to these more casual images, Burchett highlighted the NLF's efforts to establish some sense of normalcy and peace for its members. For instance, in one photograph from 1965, Burchett captured a concert performed by NLF members under cover of the jungle with the caption, "There's Time for Fun, Too."²⁵

Burchett's stories emphasized the ability of the North Vietnamese to rebuild and recover from bombing raids. In a report from the spring of 1966 from Hanoi, he examined the attacks on, and subsequent reconstruction of, the Ham Rong Bridge in Thanh Hoa province. He wrote that the bridge had "been the target of bomb, missile and rocket attacks for more than a year, but it still stands or did when I passed over it for the eighth time during my visit on March 4 [1966]."²⁶ The emphasis on defense and reconstruction was supplemented by stories such as an October 8, 1966, piece that gave a first-hand view of NLF soldiers who resided on the outskirts of the American stronghold of Saigon. For Burchett, the city was "a seemingly impassable cratered desert, a zone of death raked by artillery fire," but for his guides, "it was their home ground in which even bomb craters were signposts." The guides told him, "Had I been their size and color, they assured me, they could

²⁴Wilfred Burchett, "Why Lt. Vinh Cuu Cast His Lot with the Guerrillas," *National Guardian*, March 6, 1965, 6.

²⁵Wilfred Burchett, "There's Time for Fun Too," *National Guardian*, February 6, 1965, 7.

²⁶Wilfred Burchett, "How North Vietnamese Fight off US Bombers," *National Guardian*, April 2, 1966, 9.

have smuggled me into the capital and out again unscathed, without any real risk.”²⁷

As the Vietnam War continued to escalate, the *Guardian* consistently promoted Burchett’s reports as one of the paper’s proudest accomplishments. In an early 1966 editorial, James Aronson summarized the true reach of his paper, specifically focusing on Burchett’s reporting as a notable success story. “The most widely quoted *Guardian* correspondent is Wilfred G. Burchett whose dispatches ... have been reprinted and quoted in more than a score of prominent US and Canadian papers and have been quoted on radio and TV.” His articles and images also found a place within the pages of other alternative publications in the United States, especially in the pages of the Underground Press Syndicate publications. In the pages of an early 1967 issue of the *Los Angeles Free Press*, a photograph of Burchett on a bicycle in the jungle of South Vietnam was the only visual in an advertisement for the *Guardian*. Underneath the photograph was a caption: “Wilfred Burchett takes you behind the lines with his exclusive first-hand reports from the liberated areas of Vietnam.”²⁸

Burchett’s dispatches from Vietnam became one of the more widely used sources of information for the alternative press, but they did not escape criticism from those who wanted a more complete depiction of the war. In a review of a collection of Burchett’s work that appeared in the *Guardian*, Tom Hayden both praised and critiqued the journalist. He lauded Burchett for his ability to recognize that Vietnam is not only a site of great tragedy but also “a stage for the great drama of national revolution.” Hayden was far less comfortable with what he felt was Burchett’s overemphasis on the Vietnamese high morale, arguing that Burchett’s report painted too rosy a picture in the middle of a devastating war. He also critiqued Burchett for his lack of coverage on the cultural and political diversity both within the NLF and in North Vietnam. Hayden wrote that he understood why “There is little or no discussion of possible debates or crises within the Hanoi hierarchy” but argued that Burchett should have included “this Vietnamese silence while still probing into problems with his own rich knowledge.”²⁹ Hayden’s review reflected a broader dissatisfaction among parts of the Left regarding some of the more simplistic and propaganda-tinged forms of analysis from older journalists such as Burchett.

Liberation struck a slightly different tone than the *Guardian* in its coverage of the war, as reporters tended to spend more time covering the sheer violence and tragedy of American bombing raids. Whereas Burchett’s reports

²⁷ Wilfred Burchett, “Even in Saigon Itself, There Are NLF Zones,” *National Guardian*, October 8, 1966, 8.

²⁸ Advertisement appears in *Los Angeles Free Press*, January 27, 1967, 3.

²⁹ Tom Hayden, “Burchett on North Vietnam,” *National Guardian*, December 31, 1966,

always focused the high morale of the Vietcong and the NLF, Dellinger and others who wrote for *Liberation* placed a heavier emphasis on the immorality of the war. The magazine also tended to allow for looser standards of journalism, as it often included anonymous reports and first-person accounts that made little effort to substantiate facts in the stories.

Despite their differences in tone and style, *Liberation* replicated some of the same images and themes that appeared in the *Guardian* as part of its own coverage of the Vietnam War. In a November 1964 essay, "Report from Vietnam," by Sidney Lens, *Liberation* published its first of several articles from Vietnam. The piece contrasted the recent history of bombings in the city with the relatively peaceful life that Lens encountered in Saigon. From his hotel, where other American reporters were staying, Lens wrote that the "street below is as serene as Des Moines, Iowa, or Madison, Wisconsin," and that nearby were "the black-market street peddlers selling Luckies, Pall Malls, Camels, American-made toys and innumerable knickknacks." Based on his first impressions of Saigon, he argued, "The grimness in people's hearts after twenty-five years of occupation, war, revolution, and guerrilla fighting is not visible to the naked eye."³⁰ However, after he took a helicopter ride with the US military to Can Tho, a town eighty miles from Saigon, Lens witnessed a massive bombing raid. During the trip, he saw "thousands of square miles of flat paddy-land, interrupted here and there by small hamlets of thirty or fifty homes." He then interviewed an American military man who was next to him on the helicopter ride. "The same American military man, who told me the Viet Cong survives because of terror, also concedes that the Vietnamese peasant has no feeling of loyalty to the government."³¹

Although *Liberation* did not send another reporter to Southeast Asia until 1966, the magazine often included gut-wrenching letters from both American soldiers and Vietnamese civilians that captured the emotional turmoil of the war. These letters often came from other antiwar publications, anonymous sources, or even small-town newspapers, but they collectively demonstrated that the magazine was always interested in presenting firsthand accounts from Vietnam. In September 1965, the magazine featured a letter from Marine Corporal Ronnie Wilson, 20, of Wichita, that was written to his mother and described horrific acts committed by American troops. "Mom, I had to kill a woman and a baby," writing that during their search of dead Vietcong soldiers, he shot a woman who had run out of a cave. "I shot her and before I knew it I had shot about six rounds. Four of them hit her and the others went into the cave and must have rebounded off the rock wall and hit the baby." Wilson ended the letter asking his mother, "Why must I kill women and kids?"³²

³⁰Sidney Lens, "Report from Vietnam," *Liberation*, November 1964, 20.

³¹*Ibid.*, 22.

³²*Liberation*, September 1965.

Vietnamese Perspective

Stories from the Vietnamese perspective were also regularly present within the magazine, as a September 1965 essay by Dellinger included an account of a US aerial attack from a woman named Mrs. Boi. The story opened with Boi's family enjoying a meal when "American planes swooped down on our village," and "The first bombs exploded with an infernal din." After the bombing Hoi heard a child's voice scream, "Help my younger brothers. I am wounded." Boi's son then lifted his neighbor out of the wreckage, but the boy's wounds were far too great, and he died. Boi abruptly concluded the story with a recording from the United States as she wrote, "That evening I heard the Voice of America repeating once more ... that Mr. Johnson was ready to grant a billion dollars to enable the little Asians to go to school."³³

Dellinger's firsthand reports from his time in North Vietnam posed yet another challenge to the Johnson administration's presentation of the war, as he produced numerous detailed stories of Vietnamese civilians who had suffered from American bombing raids. Appearing on the front page of *Liberation* in December 1966, Dellinger's "North Vietnam: Eyewitness Report" was accompanied by a picture of a bombed-out street in Nam Dinh. The piece opened with Dellinger asking the reader a series of questions such as, "What does an American say to a young Vietnamese mother who hands him such a snapshot and says: 'We Vietnamese do not go to the United States to fight your people. Why have they come over here too kill my children?'" Later in the story Another Vietnamese woman exclaimed, "Ask your President Johnson if our straw huts were made of 'steel and concrete?'"³⁴

The reports were further enhanced by Dellinger's photographs of children who had suffered from aerial bombs. They featured Dellinger posing with young Vietnamese children and a young mother standing by the corpse of her child. Like Burchett, Dellinger also made sure to highlight the determination of the North Vietnamese, for example, including a photo of a US jet that was shot down by a local self-defense unit, and described the reconstruction of a bridge that had just been destroyed. Unlike Burchett, Dellinger stressed the catastrophic damage that had been done in the region, especially in the last line of the piece: "Unfortunately, though the bridges could be quickly restored, at least to a rough but serviceable state, the houses and especially the people could not."³⁵

This last section of Dellinger's essay aptly demonstrated the strong similarities in content and method as well as the notable differences in tone not only between himself and Burchett, but also within the antiwar press. The

³³David Dellinger, "Account from Vietnam," *Liberation*, September 1965, 5.

³⁴David Dellinger, "North Vietnam: Eyewitness Report," *Liberation*, December 1966, 3.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 14.

determination and plight of the NLF and North Vietnamese would be a common theme that would run throughout most antiwar journalism of the period, but the political analysis of a reporter would not always be the same.

Dellinger's trip to North Vietnam coincided with the *New York Times*' reporter's groundbreaking trip to Hanoi. After years of failed attempts to report from behind enemy lines, Harrison Salisbury finally managed to obtain an invitation from the North Vietnamese government in December 1966. Salisbury, who was then associate managing editor of the *New York Times*, became the first mainstream American reporter to report from North Vietnam, a turning point in the mainstream press's coverage of the war. His reports appeared in the *Times* from December 1966 to January 1967, setting off a wave of debate on the effectiveness of American bombing raids. Although Salisbury's stories avoided the more heated language and analysis of the *Guardian* and *Liberation*, his findings often echoed the work of Burchett, Dellinger, and other antiwar journalists of the period.

Salisbury's first story from Hanoi appeared in the *Times* on Christmas day, sending shock waves throughout the mainstream media with its descriptions of Hanoi as a determined, but battered, city. After reporting on the numerous civilian casualties, he wrote, "Hanoi residents do not find much credibility in United States bombing communiqués."³⁶ Published just two days later, his second piece offered even more details on the effects of bombing raids through an interview with Nam Dinh's mayor Tran Thi Doan, the same official Dellinger had previously interviewed. He reported the same statistics about the city's destruction from the mayor as Dellinger did, leading to the same conclusion of American guilt. "President Johnson's announced policy that American targets in North Vietnam are steel and concrete rather than human lives seems to have little connection with the reality of attacks carried out by United States planes."³⁷

Like Burchett, Salisbury made sure to mention the high morale of the North Vietnamese. In one of his reports, he was astonished to see local waitresses picking up rifles without any hesitancy during an American bombing raid. During the raid, the waitresses ran out to fire at American planes while Salisbury and several others left the building and were rushed to a bomb shelter. In the shelter, Salisbury "by curious coincidence" ran into "four members of an American peace delegation," one of them being "Miss Barbara Deming of *Liberation* magazine"³⁸ This brief mention of *Liberation* is quickly dismissed as a coincidence, but it nevertheless demonstrated that the trips of antiwar activists were intersecting with Salisbury's own historic trip.

³⁶Harrison Salisbury, "A Visitor to Hanoi Inspects Damage Laid to US Raids," *New York Times*, December 25, 1966, 1.

³⁷Harrison Salisbury, "US Raids Batter Two Towns: Supply Route Is Little Hurt," *New York Times*, December 27, 1966, 1.

³⁸Harrison Salisbury, "Hanoi during an Air Alert," *New York Times*, December 28, 1966, 1.

In the eyes of many establishment reporters, Salisbury had taken a side in war and had left the realm of objective journalism. In a January 6, 1967, article by *Time*, Salisbury's reports were not applauded for their insights, but merely placed within the recent propaganda efforts of the Communists. Telling readers that "The US has scrupulously sought to avoid harming civilians," *Time* argued that "Salisbury's stories only show that the North Vietnamese are trying to push a distorted picture, to reinforce the widely held impression that the US is a big powerful nation viciously bombing a small, defenseless country into oblivion."³⁹ The *Washington Post* was arguably the harshest critic of Salisbury as it publicized the fact that the statistics Salisbury had used were exactly the same as a North Vietnamese propaganda pamphlet. This fact, which was presented as a scoop, led Arthur Sylvester, spokesperson for the Pentagon, to more confidently criticize Salisbury, stating that he "found it very interesting" that the two sources had such similar figures.⁴⁰

After the *Post*'s report on his dispatches, Salisbury became much more explicit in identifying his sources while still maintaining the same critical but measured tone of his earlier pieces. Salisbury's reputation would be damaged but not destroyed, as his reports became a part of mainstream political discussion on the war. Despite the reach of Salisbury's reports from Hanoi, recent scholars such as Mark Lawrence have depicted the wave of criticism that followed Salisbury in early 1967 as a case study that showed the limits of Vietnam War reporting. Lawrence argued that instead of creating a new discussion on Vietnam, "the Salisbury episode demonstrates the formidable obstacles that blocked such a reorientation."⁴¹

While Lawrence was correct in highlighting the very real constraints within the mainstream press, his argument overlooked Salisbury's connection to the then rapidly expanding alternative press movement. Even before the reports were published, both Burchett and Dellinger conversed with the North Vietnamese government about the merits of different American reporters as each later claimed that they recommended Salisbury as a fair reporter. Years later Burchett wrote that he had been in contact with Salisbury for "a couple of years" and that when it came time for Salisbury's visit, he was sure that "he would also have the courage to write things as he saw and heard them."⁴² The two journalists were in Nam Dinh shortly after an American bombing raid. Burchett claimed that upon seeing the state of the city, Salisbury said, "I'm going to have words about this with Arthur

³⁹"The War, the Presidency, Flak from Hanoi," *Time*, January 6, 1967.

⁴⁰"Hanoi Dispatches to Times Criticized," *New York Times*, January 1, 1967, 3.

⁴¹Mark Atwood Lawrence, "Mission Intolerable: Harrison Salisbury's Trip to Hanoi and the Limits of Dissent against the Vietnam War," *Pacific Historical Review* 75, no. 3 (August 2006): 459.

⁴²Wilfred Burchett, *Memoirs of a Rebel Journalist: The Autobiography of Wilfred Burchett* (Sydney: University of New South Wales, 2005), 572. David Dellinger, *From Yale to Jail: The Life Story of a Moral Dissenter* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 235.

Sylvester when I get back to New York.”⁴³ In the January 7, 1967, issue of the *Guardian*, Aronson defended the *Times* reporter from conservative attacks. Arguing that his dispatches had “underscored the validity of the reports sent to the *National Guardian* by Wilfred Burchett,” he also praised the series, believing that “They have shown that the press, once it removes government-imposed and self-imposed censorship and acts venturesomely in the true public interest can be a powerful and effective instrument for good.”⁴⁴

Growing Pains

As the antiwar movement and its print culture began to expand in 1967, the movement and its tenuous alliance between the Old and New Left began to experience growing pains. Martin Luther King Jr.’s decision to publicly oppose the war, larger broad-based demonstrations that received more mainstream coverage and the rapid expansion of the counterculture and its vague sense of antiwar politics increased the movement’s profile within popular culture. As the antiwar press escalated its role and became more influential, the role that it played as an open forum for the Old and the New Left began to diminish in the late 1960s.

Although *Liberation* more or less remained the same in terms of its editorial content, the *Guardian* underwent a period of profound transformation in 1967. Whereas Dellinger became an elder statesman to the New Left, Aronson and Belfrage became isolated from a new generation of activists/journalists. In the same week that one of Burchett’s reports was reprinted in the *New York Times*, Aronson and Belfrage formally resigned from their leadership positions because of internal divisions within the paper.⁴⁵ Tensions between Aronson and much of the younger staff had been building since the 1964 election, when the *Guardian* endorsed President Johnson largely based on the threat it believed Barry Goldwater posed to the nation. According to staff writer/editor Jack Smith, Aronson’s decision set off “what was in essence a ‘New Left’ versus ‘Old Left’ disagreement.”

Smith and others who worked at the *Guardian* felt that Aronson and Belfrage were too defensive in their politics, shaped too much by the red scare of the 1950s. Soon after the controversial endorsement, Smith and others were pushing Aronson to “adopt an explicit stand in favor of the more radical movements for social change in the United States, and open support for socialist revolution around the world.” By the spring of 1967, Aronson was

⁴³Wilfred Burchett, *At the Barricades* (London: Quartet Books, 1981). This book includes an introduction from Salisbury, who writes that Burchett is a “a well informed, useful source and a warm and decent friend” (vii).

⁴⁴James Aronson, “Dr. Strangeloves and Salisbury,” *National Guardian*, January 7, 1967, 1.

⁴⁵Wilfred Burchett, “Burchett Reports Damage on Visit to Haiphong,” *New York Times*, April 26, 1967, 6; *National Guardian*, April 29, 1967, 2.

dealing with a full-blown staff revolt. The New Left–based staff members were demanding major changes at the paper, including a more collaborative editorial process and a shift away from a subscriber-based model. Looking to the success of the Underground Press Syndicate, the younger writers believed that the paper should pay more attention to bringing in new sources of advertising revenue.⁴⁶ In the middle of the debate, Belfrage wrote to the staff from Mexico and insisted that the paper needed Aronson. Belfrage argued that the *Guardian* “would not now be in existence” without Aronson’s leadership and called the staff’s desire for more advertising to make the paper profitable “a dangerous delusion.” He concluded, “I cannot see a bright future for the *Guardian* under the guidance of those responsible for the letters.”⁴⁷

Aronson rejected their proposals and resigned. Belfrage followed his lead and, days later, sent in his official resignation. The *Guardian* soon declared that the paper was “Now owned” and “run by staff.”⁴⁸ In the subsequent months, the paper dropped *National* from its name, adopted a style that resembled the more freewheeling underground papers, and increased its coverage of New Left politics and youth culture.⁴⁹

In the aftermath of the resignations, the outgoing editors were crestfallen that they were not able to bridge the generational gap that had emerged within the paper. In a letter to Aronson, Belfrage even speculated that the CIA that may have played a role in the paper’s civil war.⁵⁰ Burchett was also disappointed by the news, reporting to Belfrage that his friends in Vietnam were “terribly glum when I told them what was happening.” The longtime contributor to the *Guardian* also told Belfrage that he was considering ending his relationship with the paper, but that he changed his mind after a conversation with Aronson, who suggested that he send in reports from Vietnam at “a reduced flow.”⁵¹

Burchett’s reports from Southeast Asia continued to appear in the paper and often on its front page. While he may have been upset about the resignations, the paper’s new regime saw the importance of his dispatches and asked for more of them. In the end, Burchett chose to stay on as a regular contributor, and his reports were also used by the new-look *Guardian* to attract new subscribers. Burchett’s prominent role was especially evident in

⁴⁶Smith, “The Guardian Goes to War,” 258.

⁴⁷Cedric Belfrage, April 2, 1967, Letter to Guardian Staff, Cedric Belfrage Papers, box 9, folder: C. B. and Jim Aronson’s Resignation from the Guardian Correspondence, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

⁴⁸Jane McManus, “Guardian Now Owned, Run by Staff.”

⁴⁹*National Guardian*, February 10, 1968, 1.

⁵⁰Belfrage, May 13, 1967, Letter to Jim Aronson, Cedric Belfrage Papers, box 2, folder: Belfrage to Aronson 1959–69, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

⁵¹Wilfred Burchett, April 22, 1967, Letter to Cedric Belfrage, box 3, folder: Wilfred Burchett Correspondence 1965–76, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

an October 21, 1967, call for new subscribers, when the Australian journalist was prominently featured as the paper's main attraction and the only staff member with a photograph.⁵² Burchett may have been unsettled by the resignations of Aronson and Belfrage, but his Old Left approach to reporting on the war was still an important part of the new *Guardian*. His work was able to transcend the Old–New Left divide within the *Guardian* and the antiwar press as it moved in a different direction by the end of the 1960s.

Conclusions

Although the bridge between the Old and New Left began to weaken, the antiwar journalism of the late 1960s was still shaped by a dynamic period of cross-fertilization between the two generations. Debates and discussions on exactly how to merge the counterculture with radical politics continued throughout the alternative press for years to come, sometimes creating conflict and even some irreparable rifts within the antiwar movement. While different parts of the movement were not always completely in tune with each other, they were consistently linked through promoting and covering the same antiwar demonstrations, sharing the same writers, printing the same articles, publishing the same images, and placing an emphasis on firsthand accounts direct from Vietnam.

The reporting of Burchett, Dellinger, and, later, Salisbury showed that antiwar journalism was a crucial link for the American Left of the 1960s. Their reports, along with the work of many others, contributed to the eventual mainstreaming of antiwar reporting by the end of the decade. As the work of Hallin has shown, the mainstream media did not depict the movement in a somewhat favorable light until the very end of the decade, well after the Tet Offensive.⁵³ While the mainstream media were catching up with the growing antiwar movement, antiwar newspapers and magazines were crafting their own powerful narratives about the war that were widely circulated and eventually picked up by segments of the mainstream press. As alternative sources for information, both the *Guardian* and *Liberation* acted as important open forums for the movement, especially in the initial years of the Vietnam War. The history of the two publications in the mid-1960s demonstrates that the exchanges between the Old and New Left were perhaps as important as the fissures between the two generations when it came to antiwar journalism. Their reports show that activists/journalists from a previous generation played an invaluable role in shaping the later, more expansive print culture of the antiwar movement.

⁵²National Guardian, October 21, 1967, 3.

⁵³Hallin, *The Uncensored War*.

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