

Iconic Photos of the Vietnam War  
and Their Influence on Collective Memory

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## ABSTRACT

The Vietnam War was defined as the “first televised war,” but it has been the still photos, the single frames, that have carved its place in history. Eddie Adams’ image of the execution of a Viet Cong member on the streets of Saigon and Nick Ut’s photo of a little girl running naked down the street after being burned by napalm are two examples of “iconic” photos as defined by scholars. These iconic photos have appeared repeatedly in the media, they have been reused and repurposed by popular culture, and they appear in history books as visual representations of the war. Previous scholars such as David Perlmutter suggest however that the public’s understanding of the circumstances captured by these photographs may be limited. If these scholars are correct, then what meanings are everyday citizens attaching to these iconic photographs? Through the use of in-depth interviews with a sample population of individuals, age 15 or older during the height of the war, oral history provided insight into the iconic qualities of the photographs and how they have contributed to collective memory of the war era. Results indicate there is a disconnect between recognition of the photos and an understanding of the details. Collective memories are shared memories, constructed by society. The photographs typically triggered memories concerning the issue of the draft and war protests occurring within the United States. None of the photographs studied focused on the American soldier, but people typically remembered how the war affected people they were close to, and how the country responded to the war. Iconic photos did not positively influence the collective memory of specific events and details of the war, instead they helped to frame the war within emotional and personal memories.

## INTRODUCTION

The Vietnam War was defined as the “first televised war,” but it has been the still photos, the single frames, that have carved its place in history. Eddie Adams’ image of the point-blank execution of a suspected Viet Cong member on the streets of Saigon and Nick Ut’s photo of a little girl running naked down the street after being burned by napalm are two examples of “iconic” photos as defined by scholars. These iconic photos have appeared repeatedly in the media, they have been reused and repurposed by popular culture, and they appear in history books as visual representations of the war.

America entered the Second Indochina War to halt the spread of communism: to stop potential “dominoes” from falling around the world. When the French pulled out of the First Indochina War on July 21, 1954, President Eisenhower feared that the region would fall to communism if there were not a U.S. presence in Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> It was President Lyndon Johnson who sealed America’s fate in Vietnam after the Tonkin Gulf Resolution passed through Congress in August of 1964, giving Johnson the authority to use military force in Southeast Asia without an official declaration of war.<sup>2</sup>

For the next ten years, the United States would be stuck in Vietnam, fighting on the side of the South Vietnamese against the North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front (NLF). When the war finally ended on April 30, 1975, the number of casualties was astronomical for both sides. The war in Vietnam was never officially declared an American war by the U.S. Congress, but it was a brutal war nonetheless.

The photographs that emerged from the war, especially the iconic photos, were also brutal. Previous scholars such as David Perlmutter suggest, however, that the public’s

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<sup>1</sup> Horst Faas and Tim Page, eds. *Requiem: By the Photographers Who Died in Vietnam and Indochina* (New York: Random House, 1997), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Spencer C. Tucker, *Vietnam* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 108.

understanding of the circumstances captured by these photographs may be limited. If these scholars are correct, then what meanings are everyday citizens attaching to these iconic photographs? For this study, a sample population of individuals, age 15 or older during the height of the war, was interviewed. Their oral histories of the photos were examined in an attempt to gain an understanding of the iconic qualities of the photographs and how those photographs have contributed to collective memory of the Vietnam War era.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This research examines iconic photos that emerged from the Vietnam War era, in order to determine if these photos are remembered by the public, and how these photos contribute to the collective memory of the war. The following literature review will examine a variety of topics, including collective memory, media and photojournalism during the Vietnam War, iconic photos, and specifically, each of the five photos chosen for this study.

### Collective Memory

“Collective memory,” a term used interchangeably with “public memory,” “social memory,” and “popular memory,” refers to recollections of the past that are determined and shaped by a group.<sup>6</sup> Memory is social because people remember collectively, publically, and interactively.<sup>7</sup> The creation and maintenance of collective memory involves the ongoing thinking and talking about an event by the affected members of society.<sup>8</sup> According to Pennebaker and Banasik, the Vietnam War affected collective memory because it was an important turning point in American self-views, producing a new generation of people who questioned America’s role in the world.<sup>9</sup>

The press has contributed to the American construction of collective memory, especially in the mass publication of newspapers and magazines.<sup>10</sup> The role of the journalist in the

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<sup>6</sup> Barbie Zelizer, “Reading the Past Against the Grain: The Shape of Memory Studies,” *Review and Criticism* (1995): 214.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Schudson, “Dynamics of Distortion in Collective Memory,” in *Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains, and Societies Reconstruct the Past*, ed. Daniel L. Schacter (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995): 360.

<sup>8</sup> James Pennebaker and Becky Banasik, “On the Creation and Maintenance of Collective Memories: History as Social Psychology,” in *Collective Memory of Political Events*, ed. James Pennebaker, Dario Paez, and Bernard Rimé (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1997): 4.

<sup>9</sup> Pennebaker and Banasik, “On the Creation,” 5.

<sup>10</sup> Janice Hume and Noah Arceneaux, “Public Memory, Cultural Legacy, and Press Coverage of the Juneteenth Revival,” *Journalism History* (2008): 157.

collective memory has been the focus of many studies.<sup>11</sup> According to Kitch, “In doing so, [journalists] extend the cultural authority of mass media as the shapers (and repository) of public memory.”<sup>12</sup>

According to Schudson, cultural artifacts are dedicated memory forms, which are explicitly and self-consciously designed to preserve memories. For this study, iconic photos will be considered a cultural artifact in order to examine the effectiveness of iconic photos in the role of triggering and preserving collective memories.<sup>13</sup> Cultural artifacts and social cues prompt the act of remembering.<sup>14</sup> According to Zelizer, media serve a “warehouse” function of storage for memories. Visual records can stabilize the fleeting qualities of memory and can aid in the recall of past events.<sup>15</sup> This study will examine the warehouse function of photographs and will explore how iconic images influence collective memories.

However, just as people remember, they also forget, therefore distortion is inevitable in memory. The passage of time causes memory distortion as memories are reshaped due to the loss of detail and the loss of emotional intensity.<sup>16</sup> Both of these factors are important to this study as the photographs were taken between 46 and 37 years ago.<sup>17</sup> The passage of time also allows for historical perspective, allowing for an understanding that might not have been possible during the time of the event. In his study of generational effects on collective memory on major American events, Schuman concluded that people sometimes make judgments that reflect primarily the perspectives of historians, but for the most part, it is the intersection of

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<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Carolyn Kitch, “Twentieth Century Tales: Newsmagazines and American Memory,” *Journalism and Communication Monographs* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 122; K. Lang and G.E. Lang, “Collective Memory and the News,” *Communication* 11, no. 2 (1989): 123-139; Schudson, “Dynamics of Distortion in Collective Memory,” 346-64; Barbie Zelizer, *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> Kitch, “Twentieth Century Tales,” 122.

<sup>13</sup> Schudson, “Dynamics of Distortion in Collective Memory,” 347.

<sup>14</sup> Schudson, “Dynamics of Distortion in Collective Memory,” 347.

<sup>15</sup> Zelizer, *Reading*, 233.

<sup>16</sup> Schudson, “Dynamics of Distortion in Collective Memory,” 348.

<sup>17</sup> At the time the interviews were conducted in September and October of 2009.



personal and national history that creates the most vital connection to the time period in which they lived through.<sup>18</sup> According to Zelizer, “Collective memory is not necessarily linear, logical, or rational.”<sup>19</sup> The unpredictability of memory is a significant limitation that has stalled the study of memory because studies are unable to foresee which aspects of the past will become a part of the collective recollection.

### **Media and Vietnam**

Foreign policy can be used to manipulate mass media, but mass media can also influence foreign policy. Prior to the Vietnam War, censorship in war reporting was used to prevent damage to the spirits on the home front as well as prevent the opposing side from gaining significant information.<sup>20</sup> According to Hallin, Vietnam was the first war in which journalists were not subjected to official censorship, for the most part because the United States government did not recognize Vietnam as an official war. “Voluntary guidelines” were implemented, creating 15 categories of information that the press was not allowed to report on. Reporters were allowed access to almost all aspects of the front, establishing the modern precedent.<sup>21</sup>

Americans were for the first time able to see images of the war on their television sets, which is why the Vietnam War is referred to as the “first televised war.”<sup>22</sup> With the media more widespread in its coverage of Vietnam than any prior conflict, war coverage was distributed at a faster pace, and was more prevalent than ever before. In January of 1968, there were 179

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<sup>18</sup> Howard Schuman and Jacqueline Scott, “Generations and Collective Memories,” *American Sociological Review* (1989): 380.

<sup>19</sup> Zelizer, *Reading*, 221.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel C. Hallin, *The “Uncensored War”* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986): 127.

<sup>21</sup> Hallin, *Uncensored War*, 127-9.

<sup>22</sup> Sidney W. Head and Christopher H. Sterling, *Broadcasting in America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982), 537-539.

American journalists in Saigon reporting on the conflict.<sup>23</sup> Americans saw television coverage of the battles, the results, and the repercussions of war, and they were more informed of the war by the press than any prior conflict.

Television provided visuals to go along with the reports of the war in Vietnam, making the news coverage much more vivid than previous wars. Visual details are important to the perception of war because, according to Iyengar and Kinder, there is a different understanding between knowing and seeing Americans fighting and losing their lives in Vietnam.<sup>25</sup> Television also has the power to direct views to certain features of the war and ignore others.<sup>26</sup> There was much suffering and death in Vietnam, and the media was there to record it. Chomsky and Herman found that the mass media had the ability to make the distinction between “worthy” and “unworthy” victims and could choose which to portray in their coverage.<sup>27</sup>

Through his study on the television coverage of the Vietnam War, Hallin found that television portrayed the North Vietnamese as cruel, ruthless, and fanatical. The NLF was also portrayed through a consistent theme of terrorism, showing it as a criminal unit rather than a rival government. Hallin also looked closely at television’s portrayal of the Tet Offensive and how journalistic coverage of Tet framed the war as slipping out of control.<sup>28</sup> The American press had the power to make Tet a win or loss for the administration based on its coverage.<sup>29</sup>

The groundbreaking coverage of Vietnam led to the conception that the media affected the outcome of the war. However, many studies have found that the media did not have as

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<sup>23</sup> Peter Braestrup, *Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet in 1968 in Vietnam and Washington* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1977), Vol. 1, 11-2.

<sup>25</sup> Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder, *News that Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 35

<sup>26</sup> Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder, “Experimental Demonstrations,” 848-58.

<sup>27</sup> Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

<sup>28</sup> Hallin, *The Uncensored War*, 130-73.

<sup>29</sup> Braestrup, *Big Story*, 465.

much of an effect on the outcome of the war as was once thought.<sup>30</sup> Media held power over the thoughts of Americans, but the media could not fully control those thoughts. The media cannot tell the public what to think, but it can tell them what to think about.<sup>31</sup> Herz denied that the media coverage of Vietnam caused the eventual failure, but he concluded that it did play a significant role in that failure.<sup>32</sup> “Selective perceptions” of the media’s coverage of the Vietnam War have led to an overstated conception of the actual amount of coverage.<sup>33</sup> As found in Patterson’s study, only 25 percent of television news reports from 1968 to 1973 were on Vietnam. Coverage in news magazines on the war in Vietnam was even less, at only 7 percent.<sup>34</sup> Prior research suggests that the media was not as great of a force on public opinion during the Vietnam War as the common perception suggests.

### **Photojournalism and Vietnam**

Photographs are a visual depiction of life. A photo captures a fraction of a second in time, or the “decisive moment,” a phrase coined by photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson.<sup>35</sup> Berger and Mohr wrote, “With the invention of photography, we acquired a new means of expression more closely associated with memory than any other.”<sup>36</sup> Photography is an effective

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<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., Braestrup, *Big Story*; Head and Sterling, *Broadcasting in America*; Shanto Iyengar, Mark D. Peters, and Donald R. Kinder, “Experimental Demonstrations of the ‘Not-So-Minimal’ Consequences of Television News Programs,” *The American Political Science Review* 76 (1982): 848-58; Iyengar and Kinder, *News that Matters*, 35; Hallin, *The Uncensored War*; Martin F. Herz, *The Vietnam War in Retrospect* (Washington: The Georgetown University Press, 1984); Chomsky and Herman, *Manufacturing Consent*.

<sup>31</sup> Bernard C. Cohen. *The Press and Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963): 16.

<sup>32</sup> Martin F. Herz, *The Vietnam War in Retrospect* (Washington: The Georgetown University Press, 1984): 37.

<sup>33</sup> Oscar Patterson III, “Television’s Living Room War in Print: Vietnam in the News Magazines,” *Journalism Quarterly* 61 (1984): 35-9.

<sup>34</sup> Patterson, “Television’s Living Room War in Print,” 39.

<sup>35</sup> David D. Perlmutter, *Photojournalism and Foreign Policy* (Westport: Praeger, 1998): 18.

<sup>36</sup> John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982): 89.

vehicle for reporting news because it is “presumed” that photographs represent reality.<sup>37</sup> In theory, a photograph represents exact truth, but in reality, what is *not* depicted in a single negative could be the actual truth. Memories are the “residue” of continuous experience, whereas a photograph isolates an instance and does not allow for the understanding of events that were not recorded in the frame.<sup>38</sup> According to Brothers, photographs are not evidence of history, showing incontrovertible proof, but rather they are indications of the circumstances in which they were shot.<sup>39</sup>

News photographs add greatly to the impact of words in print media, contributing to the significant role the media played in the Vietnam War.<sup>40</sup> Photojournalism can be understood through the standard themes of editorial photos. According to Joe Elbert, the *Washington Post* Assistant Managing Editor for Photography, there are four categories in the “hierarchy of editorial photographs: informational, graphically appealing, emotionally appealing, and intimate.”<sup>41</sup>

According to Perlmutter, photojournalists are “aware of their potential shock value of what falls into their viewfinder,” and it is that shock value for which they strive. Perlmutter found that there are five theorized effects of visual images; easy recall ability, ability to become an icon, aesthetic impact, emotional power, and potentially significant political impact.<sup>42</sup> All of these aspects are prevalent in the work of great photojournalists. The Vietnam War was a turning point for photojournalism. According to Robert Elegant, it was the first war in which the

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<sup>37</sup> Wendy Kozol, *Life's America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994): 5.

<sup>38</sup> Berger, *Another Way of Telling*, 89.

<sup>39</sup> Caroline Brothers, *War and Photography* (London: Routledge, 1997): 17.

<sup>40</sup> Ulf Hannerz, *Foreign News: Exploring the World of Foreign Correspondents* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>41</sup> Kenneth Kobre, “Editing for Intimacy,” *Visual Communication Quarterly* 6 (1999): 18-9.

<sup>42</sup> Perlmutter, *Photojournalism and Foreign Policy*, 20.

outcome was not determined on the battlefield, but rather in print.<sup>43</sup> According to Brothers, photographs of the Vietnam War “influenced public attitudes to the hostilities.”<sup>44</sup>

Photographs are a valuable source of information in the media because, as many studies have shown, visual images are recalled more quickly and for a longer time than words.<sup>45</sup> Mendelson found that photos are more or less significant based on the viewer’s learning styles and how the photos resonate with the individual viewer. The study showed that high visualizers are able to store information about individual news photographs, recognize news photographs to be less complex than the written word, and find photographs more appealing than those who are not visual learners.<sup>46</sup> Domke, Perlmutter, and Spratt found that images have the ability to “trigger” people’s pre-existing values, cognitions, and feelings.<sup>47</sup>

### Iconic Photos

If people have different learning styles, and some individuals are more susceptible to remembering and digesting visual images, how is it that certain “icon images” are claimed to be understood and recognized by everyone? According to Hariman and Lucaites, Nick Ut’s

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<sup>43</sup> Robert Elegant, “How to Lose a War: Reflections of a Foreign Correspondent,” *Encounter* 57 (1981): 73-86.

<sup>44</sup> Brothers, *War and Photography*, 1.

<sup>45</sup> See, e.g., John R. Anderson and Rebecca Paulson, “Interference in Memory for Pictorial Information,” *Cognitive Psychology* 10 (1978) 178-202; Gary J. Anglin and W. H. Levie, “Role of Visual Richness in Picture Recognition Memory,” *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 61 (1985): 1303-6.; Marilyn A. Borges, Mary Ann Stepnowski and Leland H. Holt, “Recall and Recognition of Words and Pictures by Adults and Children,” *Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society* 9 (1977): 113-4; John K. Burton and Roger H. Bruning, “Interference Effects on the Recall of Pictures, Printed Words, and Spoken Words,” *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 7 (1982): 61-9; Helen J. Emmerich and Brian P. Ackerman, “The Effect of Orienting Activity on Memory for Pictures and Words,” *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* 28 (1979): 499-515; Robert Gehring, Michael P. Togliasi and Gregory A. Kimble, “Recognition Memory for Words and Pictures at Short and Long Term Retention Intervals,” *Memory & Cognition* 4 (1976): 256-60; Joseph R. Jenkins, Daniel C. Neale and Stanely L. Deno, “Differential Memory for Picture and Word Stimuli,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 58 (1967): 303-7; Allan Paivio, “Imagery in Recall and Recognition,” in *Recall and Recognition*, ed. J. H. Brown, (New York: Wiley, 1976).

<sup>46</sup> Andrew Mendelson, “For Whom is a Picture Worth a Thousand Words? Effects of the Visualizing Cognitive Style and Attention on Processing of News Photos,” *Journal of Visual Literacy* (2004): 1-22.

<sup>47</sup> David Domke, David Perlmutter, and Meg Spratt, “The Primes of our Times? An Examination of the ‘Power’ of Visual Images.” *Journalism*, No. 3 (2003): 131-159.

Accidental Napalm photograph is the defining image of the Vietnam War because “that little girl will not go away, despite many attempts at forgetting,” as it confronts U.S. citizens with the immorality of the war.<sup>48</sup> Hariman and Lucaites defined iconic images as those that are recognized by everyone, are understood to be representations of historically significant events, activate strong emotional responses, and are regularly reproduced across a range of media, genres, or topics.<sup>49</sup> Iconic photos also can motivate public action on behalf of democratic values.<sup>50</sup> Michael Griffin said the “great pictures” typically symbolize national valor, human courage, inconceivable inhumanity, or senseless loss.<sup>51</sup>

Perlmutter found that iconic images are created and kept in circulation by “discourse elites”—prominent people in politics, the media, and the academy, “from presidents to anchor people.”<sup>52</sup> Perlmutter also defined many qualities of an iconic image; including celebrity (a famous image that people can identify when prompted), prominence (how prominent a photo’s appearance is in the media), frequency (how often a photo appears in the media, measured quantitatively), profit (the icon’s value as a commodity), instantaneousness (how quickly an image achieves fame), transposability (reuse across multiple media outlets), fame of subjects (recognizability or notoriety of the photo’s subjects), importance of event (when an icon is tied to a significant social or historical event), metonymy (when a photo of a single event is used to exemplify general conditions), primordially and/or cultural resonance (when an icon alludes to a biblical or classical historical scene), and striking composition (when a photo contains superior

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<sup>48</sup> Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photos, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007): 173.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, “Dissent and Emotional Management in a Liberal-Democratic Society: The Kent State Iconic Photography,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* (2001): 4-31.

<sup>50</sup> Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, “Public Identity and Collective Memory in U.S. Iconic Photography: The Image of ‘Accidental Napalm’,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2003): 35-66.

<sup>51</sup> Michael Griffin, “The Great War Photographs: Constructing Myths of History and Photojournalism,” in *Picturing the Past: Media, History, and Photography*, ed. Bonnie Brennen and Hanno Hardt (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 131.

<sup>52</sup> Perlmutter, *Photojournalism and Foreign Policy*, xiii-xvi.

compositional or visual elements or depicts “the decisive moment”).<sup>53</sup> He said that an icon provokes a strong negative reaction, or outrage. Contrary to popular beliefs, Perlmutter found that the population as a whole is not familiar with “iconic images.”<sup>54</sup>

This research study will examine five iconic photos of the Vietnam War era. The photos include John Paul Filo’s “Kent State” (1970), Malcolm Brown’s “Self-Immolation” (1963), Eddie Adams’ “Tet Execution” (1968), Ronald Haeberle’s “My Lai Massacre” (1968), and Nick Ut’s “Accidental Napalm” (1972).<sup>55</sup> According to Sturken, all of these photos include depictions of horror, challenge ideological narratives, and have acquired far greater currency than any video footage of the war. The photos “acquired iconic status by shocking the American public and creating widespread disillusionment over the United States’ role in the war.”<sup>56</sup>

### Kent State

The Kent State Massacre occurred on May 4, 1970, when soldiers of the Ohio National Guard opened fire on students who were protesting the Vietnam War. Thirteen students were shot, killing four. Student photographer John Filo took a



photo of a girl screaming out over a body lying on the pavement and the photo went out on the AP wire later that day. That photo would become an iconic photo of the Kent State Massacre and the Vietnam War.

<sup>53</sup> Perlmutter, *Photojournalism and Foreign Policy*, 10.

<sup>54</sup> Perlmutter, *Photojournalism and Foreign Policy*, 1-34.

<sup>55</sup> These photos are defined as iconic images by Hariman and Lucaites (2007): 195, and Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997): 89-94.

<sup>56</sup> Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 89-94.

According to the categories that Perlmutter uses to define the qualities of an iconic photo, the Kent State photo is iconic because it has a celebrity quality, meaning people recognize the photo, it instantaneously achieved fame, and it portrays a significant historical event. The subject of the photo is not famous, and therefore does not fit into Perlmutter's category of fame because, as he states, only a handful of people alive today could identify the woman kneeling over the body.<sup>57</sup>

The Kent State photo has been studied excessively by scholars, resulting in findings that much of the power of the photo comes from the expression of outrage on the woman's face. According to Hariman and Lucaites, "The girl's cry is a direct demand for accountability and compensatory action."<sup>58</sup> The feeling on her face is powerful not only because of its expressiveness but also because it matches the political situation represented by the photograph.<sup>59</sup> The woman draws attention onto herself, away from the boy who is lying in front of her, presumably dead, because of her intense emotional response. In their book *No Caption Needed*, Hariman and Lucaites said, "Her scream seems to be ripping out of her heart, spontaneous, uninhibited, and unanswerable—almost if she had been the one shot."<sup>60</sup>

Hariman and Lucaites also believe that the photo has become an icon for the event because the photo is gendered. A woman is a more appropriate vessel for a public emotional response. The woman is positioned between two males, the one lying motionless on the ground and the one standing beside her, seemingly unmoved.<sup>61</sup> Hariman and Lucaites also pointed out that the Kent State girl acts as a ventriloquist for the murdered body on the pavement.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Perlmutter, *Photojournalism and Foreign Policy*, 16.

<sup>58</sup> Hariman and Lucaites, "Dissent," 9.

<sup>59</sup> Hariman and Lucaites, "Dissent," 8.

<sup>60</sup> Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, 140-1.

<sup>61</sup> Hariman and Lucaites, "Dissent," 8-9.

<sup>62</sup> Hariman and Lucaites, "Public Identity," 56.



According to Lovelace, the anguish in the woman's face is catapulted to a national level because of the anonymity of the body lying face down in the foreground of the photo.<sup>63</sup>

One of the less than praising aspects of the photo, as Perlmutter pointed out, is that this photo is technically poor; it violates the techniques of photography because "a fence post grows out of the woman's head."<sup>64</sup> This compositional error prevents it from falling into the striking composition category that Perlmutter has determined as a quality of an iconic photo.

### Self-Immolation

The "Burning Monk" photograph was taken by Malcolm Browne on June 11, 1963, when Thich Quang Duc sat down in a busy Saigon intersection and set fire to himself to protest the South Vietnamese government. A march of 300 Buddhist monks and nuns



blocked all entrances to the intersection while fellow monks poured a combustible mixture on Thich Quang Duc. He struck a match and was instantaneously engulfed in flames.<sup>65</sup> This photograph was one of the first to introduce Americans to the conflict in Vietnam and according to Dionisopoulos and Skow, "its undeniable force transfixed the attention of the American public on the dramatic events portrayed."<sup>66</sup>

According to Perlmutter, this photo is one that exemplifies the emotional reactions that iconic images incite. "Typically, the picture is annotated as one that occasioned a reaction of

<sup>63</sup> Angie Lovelace, "Iconic photos of the Vietnam War Era: A Semiotic Analysis As a Means of Understanding," *The Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications* Vol. 1, No. 1 (2010): 38.

<sup>64</sup> Perlmutter, *Photojournalism and Foreign Policy*, 18.

<sup>65</sup> George Dionisopoulos and Lisa Skow, "A Struggle to Contextualize Photographic Images: American Print Media and the 'Burning Monk'," *Communication Quarterly* Vol. 45 No. 4 (1997): 393-4.

<sup>66</sup> Dionisopoulos and Skow, "A Struggle to Contextualize Photographic Images," 396.

“shock and dismay.”<sup>67</sup> When he saw the photo for the first time, “President Kennedy’s reaction was undoubtedly similar to that of many others, as he was heard to exclaim ‘Jesus Christ,’ when the morning papers were delivered to him.”<sup>68</sup> According to Hariman and Lucaites, the photo indicated that the Saigon government was so powerless that it could not put out the flames as the body burned.<sup>69</sup>

### Tet Execution

The photograph that has become known as the Tet Execution captured the precise moment that a Viet Cong prisoner was executed at point-blank range. On February 1, 1968, Brigadier General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, chief of the South Vietnamese



National Police, shot the prisoner with a small Smith & Wesson detective pistol in front of AP photographer Eddie Adams, as well as NBC and ABC camera crews. The execution was aired on television, but it was the still photograph that captured the “decisive moment.”<sup>70</sup> According to Sturken, this photo acquired far greater currency than the video footage of the event. The photograph highlights the facial expressions, it circulated more easily due to the tangible nature of a photograph versus the reliance on the network broadcast of the event, and the video footage of the events is actually more chaotic and horrific.<sup>71</sup> The photo won the Pulitzer Prize for spot news photography in 1969.

<sup>67</sup> Perlmutter, *Photojournalism and Foreign Policy*, 20.

<sup>68</sup> Dionisopoulos and Skow, “A Struggle to Contextualize Photographic Images,” 396.

<sup>69</sup> Hariman and Lucaites, “Public Identity,” 56.

<sup>70</sup> Perlmutter, *Photojournalism and Foreign Policy*, 35.

<sup>71</sup> Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 89-94.

“Eddie Adams’ still photo appeared on the front page of most major newspapers; it was to be reprinted *ad infinitum* in magazines and books to the present day,” fulfilling both the instantaneous and prominence categories of an icon.<sup>72</sup> The photo’s prominence in the media yielded the credit of changing the course of history.<sup>73</sup> In his *Time* magazine eulogy for General Loan, Eddie Adams said, “Still photographs are the most powerful weapons in the world.”<sup>74</sup> Adams was tormented by the ramifications of his photograph. He said, “The general killed the Viet Cong; I killed the general with my camera.”<sup>75</sup> Also in the article, Adams mentioned that photographs can lie even if they are not manipulated because his photograph could not depict the good that the general accomplished during the war and it could not explain the circumstances in which the general pulled the trigger.

The photo has a striking composition because it shows the two subjects with the gun in the center. According to Sturken, “Its simplicity is crucial—the war depicted in this photograph is man against man, not the complex war of bombs, defoliation, and unseen enemies.”<sup>76</sup> The photo “became famous for its depiction of the indiscriminate brutality of the war,” wrote Sturken.<sup>77</sup> The executioner’s businesslike manner and lack of emotion indicate that this situation is routine.<sup>78</sup> And the Viet Cong’s expression of the unknown creates an empathy with the viewers. Hariman and Lucaites describe the Viet Cong’s expression as one that might be seen in a dentist’s office.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Perlmutter, *Photojournalism and Foreign Policy*, 36.

<sup>73</sup> Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 93.

<sup>74</sup> Eddie Adams, “Eulogy,” *Time*, July 27, 1998, 17.

<sup>75</sup> Adams, “Eulogy,” 17.

<sup>76</sup> Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 93.

<sup>77</sup> Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 93.

<sup>78</sup> Hariman and Lucaites, “Public Identity,” 56.

<sup>79</sup> Hariman and Lucaites, “Public Identity,” 56.

## My Lai Massacre

On March 16, 1968, the men of Charlie Company under the command of First Lieutenant William Calley expected to find the Viet Cong. They found no enemy soldiers, only old men, women, and children, but they still killed them all in what would later be referred to as the



My Lai Massacre. Army photographer Ronald Haeberle accompanied the troops to My Lai that day and turned in a few black-and-white self-censored photographs of the infantrymen and Vietnamese huts. However, on his personal color film camera, he took photos of the atrocities and murders that occurred that day.

Eight months later, on November 20, Haeberle gave the exclusive rights to the photos to *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* and an unusually large photo of a tangle of bodies, that were clearly women and children, was printed at the top of the front page. The photos were later reproduced in newspapers and magazines around the world, including in the *New York Post* and the *New York Times*.<sup>80</sup> The photo became known as “And Babies?” and was used as evidence during the court proceedings that resulted in the conviction of Calley.

Scholars have studied the photo, and Sturken claimed that it “acquired iconic status by shocking the American public and creating widespread disillusionment over the U.S. role in the war.”<sup>81</sup> Sturken also said that the photograph “depicts terror and American atrocities in

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<sup>80</sup> Vicki Goldberg, *The Power of Photography: How Photographs Changed Our Lives*, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991): 229-36.

<sup>81</sup> Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 94.

intimate detail.”<sup>82</sup> According to Goldberg, “The ‘And Babies?’ photograph got loose in the culture as an easily recognized symbol of what was wrong with America.”<sup>83</sup>

### Accidental Napalm

The Accidental Napalm photo was taken by Associated Press photographer Nick Ut on June 8, 1972, near Trang Bang in South Vietnam. The photo shows children fleeing in terror, with the focus on nine-year-old Phan Thi Kim Phuc, in the center, who ripped off her burning clothes after she



was splashed by napalm. There was a brief editorial debate about whether to print a photo involving nudity, but it was subsequently published all over the world the next day.<sup>84</sup>

According to Hariman and Lucaites, “The photo violates one set of norms in order to activate another; propriety is set aside for a moral purpose. It is a picture that shouldn’t be shown of an event that shouldn’t have happened.”<sup>85</sup> Sturken claimed that the young, female, naked figure represents the victimized, feminized country of Vietnam.”<sup>86</sup> Lovelace argued that her nudity represented her innocence, an innocence that was taken from her by the war.<sup>87</sup>

There is a stark contrast between the soldiers and the children, the soldiers’ business-as-usual attitude contrasts with the girl’s pain and terror. The soldiers show that this seemingly

<sup>82</sup> Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 93.

<sup>83</sup> Goldberg, *The Power of Photography*, 236.

<sup>84</sup> Hariman and Lucaites, “Public Identity,” 39.

<sup>85</sup> Hariman and Lucaites, “Public Identity,” 41.

<sup>86</sup> Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 93.

<sup>87</sup> Lovelace, “Iconic Photos of the Vietnam War Era,” 42.

rare event is not all that uncommon. The soldiers are supposed to be protecting the children, but they are merely herding them down the road.<sup>88</sup>

This photo ignites a strong emotional response. According to Hariman and Lucaites, “The dramatic charge of the photo comes from its evocation of pity and terror.”<sup>89</sup> Pain is the central frame of the photo. “The photograph projects her pain into our world.”<sup>90</sup> The child that is closest to the camera, in the foreground, also has a look of terror on his face, resembling Eduard Munch’s famous drawing of “The Scream.”

Sturken claims this photo is one of the most famous images of the Vietnam War and among one of the most widely recognized photographs in American photojournalism.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Hariman and Lucaites, “Public Identity,” 43-4.

<sup>89</sup> Hariman and Lucaites, “Public Identity,” 43.

<sup>90</sup> Hariman and Lucaites, “Public Identity,” 40.

<sup>91</sup> Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 90.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

### **RQ1: Can iconic photos of the Vietnam War era be identified by the general public?**

According to Perlmutter, who defined an “icon of outrage,” an iconic photo is not commonly identified by the general population. However, this conclusion was based only on an informal survey Perlmutter conducted with his college students.<sup>92</sup> When Perlmutter described a historical event, and asked his student to describe or draw a famous photograph, the results were vague descriptions or answers drawn from Hollywood movies. When he reversed the experiment, showing the students the photos and asking them to describe the event in history, most students could give vague descriptions of the period in history, but very few could provide a detailed description of the context or circumstances of the photo. Perlmutter concluded that photographs of events that his students experienced through the media during adolescence or early adulthood (the Gulf War photographs in his study) were more likely to resonate with the students, which is consistent with collective memory studies.<sup>93</sup> He determined that iconic photos do not translate across generations. The purpose of this research question was to determine through in-depth interviews if members of the general public, who were alive during the war era, could identify iconic photos of the Vietnam War, and to what degree.

### **RQ2: Which qualities of an iconic photo resonate with the general public?**

The interview subjects were asked what qualities make the photos memorable to determine if the general public is able to recognize the same qualities of an iconic photo that scholars have identified. Perlmutter defined many qualities of an iconic image; including celebrity (a famous image that people can identify when prompted), prominence (how

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<sup>92</sup> Perlmutter, *Photojournalism and Foreign Policy*, 10.

<sup>93</sup> Howard Schuman, Robert F. Belli, and Katherine Bischooping, “The Generational Basis of Historical Knowledge,” in *Collective Memory of Political Events: Social Psychological Processes*, ed. James W. Pennebaker, Dario Paez, and Bernard Rimé (Mahway, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1997): 44-77.

prominent a photo's appearance is in the media), frequency (how often a photo appears in the media, measured quantitatively), profit (the icon's value as a commodity), instantaneousness (how quickly an image achieves fame), transposability (reuse across multiple media outlets), fame of subjects (recognizability or notoriety of the photo's subjects), importance of event (when an icon is tied to a significant social or historical event), metonymy (when a photo of a single event is used to exemplify general conditions), primordially and/or cultural resonance (when an icon alludes to a biblical or classical historical scene), and striking composition (when a photo contains superior compositional or visual elements or depicts "the decisive moment"). The purpose of this portion of the study is to determine how the public sees a photograph that is considered iconic as opposed to how scholars and photographers view the same photographs.

**RQ3: How do iconic photographs contribute to the collective memory of the Vietnam War era?**

This study examined how iconic images of the Vietnam War era influenced collective memory and triggered emotions and memories in people as they were confronted with the images. According to Hariman and Lucaites, Filo's Kent State photo is iconic because it is not only a record of the event, but also engages the viewer's emotions and raises questions of policy, influencing not only the collective memory of the era, but also the future possibilities for civic action.<sup>94</sup> Throughout their interviews, participants used oral history to express their memories of the Vietnam War era. This study examined the relationship between their memory and the historical context of the photo. By studying what respondents chose to speak about when viewing the photos, we can gain a greater understanding of how the collective memory of the Vietnam War is constructed.

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<sup>94</sup> Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, 147-8.



## METHODS

The chosen iconic photos were used during the in-depth interviews to determine if the photos are recognizable by the general public and what emotions and memories the photos trigger. The interviews were then studied through the constant comparative method of qualitative analysis to draw conclusions about the photos' relationship with the collective memory of the Vietnam War era.

### Interviews

To examine the research questions, 10 interviews were conducted with subjects who were age 56 or older. This age was determined so that they were at least 15-years-old in 1968, at the height of the political turmoil surrounding the Vietnam War, and so that they were experiencing their adolescence or early adulthood during this time period. Studies have shown that people between the ages of 12 and 25 will be most effected by major national events, and those events will typically have the greatest impact on this group's collective memory.<sup>95</sup>

The subjects were volunteers solicited through Elon University and First Baptist Church of Elon. There was a total of 10 participants who were interviewed for this study; six were men, four were women. One man was drafted into the Army and fought in Vietnam; his wife also participated in the study. Another man was in the Air Force and was stationed in Japan from 1967 to 1969. Another man was in the Army Reserve for six years, but was never called to duty. The participants ranged from age 58 to age 75. Three participants were in their late 50s, four were in their early 60s, and three were in their 70s. The majority of the participants lived in North Carolina during the 1960s, but the remaining participants were scattered across the country, living in California, Wisconsin, New York, Indiana, and Georgia.

The interviews began with a series of questions establishing the subjects' socio-

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<sup>95</sup> Pennebaker and Banasik, "On the Creation," 17.

economic status during Vietnam, their family ties with the war, and their media consumption habits during the time period. In the next segment of the interview, the subjects were shown each iconic photo individually, beginning with Kent State, and then following with Self-Immolation, Tet Execution, My Lai Massacre, and Accidental Napalm, in that order. The order of the photographs was decided on so that the participants were not confronted with the most graphic of the images first, potentially causing them to become disturbed or question the purpose and intent of the study. They were shown Kent State first because it was the only photo that was taken in the United States and it was hypothesized that it would be one of the photos that was easiest for the participants to relate to and talk about, and then the order of the photographs continued chronologically. The participants were asked to identify and describe it, and they were asked questions to derive emotional responses about the photos. In the third segment of the interview, the subjects were shown all five photos together and asked how the photos represented the Vietnam War era as a whole.<sup>96</sup> The duration of the interviews varied depending on the personality of the participant, ranging from 30 minutes to an hour and a half.

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<sup>96</sup> Go to Appendix B for the interview transcript.

### Constant Comparative Method

The constant comparative method (CCM) was originally used as a means of qualitative analysis in grounded theory developed by Glaser and Strauss.<sup>97</sup> It involves the constant comparison of data (the interviews in this research project), categorizing the data, and finding relationships among that data. This method allows for change in the hypothesis, constantly raising new questions as it cycles through old questions.<sup>98</sup>

Each interview was studied to find comparisons within the interview. Open coding was used to tag key words within the interview. Comparing the interview as a whole allowed the determination of consistency within the interview and for a greater understanding of the interview.

The next step in CCM was to compare between interviews. As soon as more than one interview was conducted, they were compared.<sup>99</sup> First, fragments of the interview that share the same themes and were given the same codes were compared (axial coding), then the interviews as a whole were compared to one another.<sup>100</sup>

These two steps together produced patterns of categories. The next step in the CCM method was to create rules or propositions that describe the underlying meaning that defines the category. Finally, the method looks for meaningful connections in the rules, which led to a coherent explanation in the research and an understanding of the interviews.<sup>101</sup> All 10 interviews were thoroughly studied to reach an understanding of whether or not these images

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<sup>97</sup> Barney G. Strauss and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967).

<sup>98</sup> Hennie Boeije, "A Purposeful Approach to the Constant Comparative Method in Analysis of Qualitative Interviews," *Quality & Quantity* 36 (2002): 393.

<sup>99</sup> Boeije, *A Purposeful Approach*, 397.

<sup>100</sup> Boeije, *A Purposeful Approach*, 397.

<sup>101</sup> Joseph R. Dominick and Roger D. Wimmer, *Mass Media Research: An Introduction* (Belmont: Thomson Higher Education, 2006): 117.

act as iconic images of the Vietnam War era and how iconic images contribute to the collective memory of the Vietnam War era.

## RESULTS

### **RQ1: Can iconic photos of the Vietnam War era be identified by the general public?**

This study did not specifically mimic Perlmutter's informal study, instead, it only followed the second half of his experiment where he showed the iconic photos to his students and asked them to describe the events in history. This study showed five iconic photos of the Vietnam War to participants and asked them if they were familiar with the photo, and then asked them to describe the historical significance of the photo. In order to establish whether the participant understood the context of the photograph, their responses were coded as yielding no understanding, a general understanding, or a sophisticated understanding. No understanding meant that they responded incorrectly, or they did not attempt to describe the circumstances, oftentimes responding with, "I have no idea what this is of," or, "I don't remember this photograph." A general understanding response vaguely, but correctly, described the photograph. The final category, a sophisticated understanding, meant that the participant responded with specific, correct details of the context, circumstance, or the subjects of the photo. The interviews yielded the following results, organized by each photo.

#### **Kent State**

Of the five iconic photographs that were examined in this study, the photograph taken at Kent State by John Filo was understood best by participants. All 10 of the participants had a general understanding of the photograph, meaning that they were able to verbalize a general description of the photo, that this was a protest of the Vietnam War that got out of hand. Seven of the participants were able to identify that it took place at Kent State, demonstrating a sophisticated understanding of the photographs. When asked if they had seen the photograph

before, seven participants also indicated that they had seen it, however, these were not the same seven participants that demonstrated a sophisticated understanding. There was one participant who was not sure if she had seen the photograph before, but still knew that it was a photograph portraying the shooting at Kent State.

Of the five photographs that were studied, the Kent State photograph was the only one that took place in the United States. The great understanding of the photo could be due to it taking place in the U.S. and people being more in tuned to events that took place in their own country. There was not the same detachment that could have occurred with the events that took place overseas. The Kent State shooting took place on a college campus and was tied to the draft, a topic that Americans were very much tuned in to at the time.

### **Self-Immolation**

When participants were asked to describe Malcolm Browne's photograph of Self-Immolation, seven participants had a general understanding of the photograph, often responding with vague descriptions, one such description was "this is a protester setting himself on fire." Four of the ten participants showed a more sophisticated understanding of the photo, verbalizing more specific details, including that it was a Buddhist Monk that was committing suicide in protest.

Of the ten participants, nine indicated that they had seen the photo before.<sup>102</sup> The two participants who said they had seen the photo before, but did not have a general understanding of the photo said that they believed it was a photo of the Ku Klux Klan. They talked about the people lined up in the background who were all wearing white robes. This is an interesting

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<sup>102</sup> Three of those participants said that they had seen similar photos of the act of self-immolation, but were not sure if they had seen this specific photo.

misconception and could be indicative of the overlapping Vietnam War and Civil Rights Movement that was occurring in the U.S. during the same time period.

This photo was taken in 1963 before “official” U.S. involvement in the war and it was one of the first photographs to introduce the Indochina conflict to Americans. When asked when the photo was taken, the closest response was “middle 60s.” Most responses were “late 60s or early 70s.” Participants thought that this photo took place during the height of the war, they did not know that it actually took place prior to official U.S. involvement.

### **Tet Execution**

When shown Eddie Adams’ photograph deemed the Tet Execution, eight of the ten participants said that they had seen the photograph before and the same eight indicated a general understanding of the scenario taking place in the photo. However, only two participants demonstrated a sophisticated understanding by verbalizing the specific detail that this photo took place during and was a defining photograph of the Tet Offensive. A disconnect was prevalent between the recognition of the photograph and the understanding of the event that it represented. Six participants knew that it took place in Saigon, which could be indicative of the event, but also could be due to the urban setting of the photograph.

An important aspect of the photo lies in an understanding of the two main characters in the foreground of the photo, the Vietnamese general and the accused Viet Cong prisoner. Only five people interviewed were able to correctly identify the players and two people expressed confusion between the two sides, switching back and forth before ultimately being unable to make a final decision. This result indicates a metonymy of the situation and confusion within the Vietnam War. One participant expressed this by saying, “And the Vietnam War can be confusing. I mean, which side were we on?” This confusion between the two sides can be traced back to the way the execution scenario has been played out in popular movies. The 1978

Oscar winner for best picture, *The Deer Hunter*, successfully reversed the role of victim and victimizer, executing American POWs. According to Franklin, “one sequence even replicates the blood spurting out of the victim’s right temple.”<sup>103</sup> This reversal was repeated again and again during the 1980s, also appearing in the 1986 movie, *P.O.W.: The Escape*.<sup>104</sup>

### **My Lai Massacre**

The photo of the My Lai Massacre was drastically lower in the number of participants (4) who said they had previously seen the photograph. Many said that they thought that the graphic content would have prevented it from being widely published, but that argument falls flat when considering the graphic content in both the photo of the Tet Execution and of Self-Immolation. The photo also might not of been as memorable because of its composition – it lacks a dominant subject – which is present in all of the other iconic photos in this study.

Even though only four of the participants indicated that they had seen this photo, six people had a general understanding of the event and five people had a sophisticated understanding, specifically indicating that it was the My Lai Massacre. This result could be due to the controversy of My Lai and the large amount of media coverage of the trial and conviction of Lieutenant William Calley. It is also important to note that this photo is the only one that was not published immediately after the event occurred. It did not emerge until eight months after the massacre took place, and therefore did not have the instantaneous quality of an iconic photo like the other photos in this study.

Hariman and Lucaites defined iconic images as those that are recognized by everyone, are understood to be representations of historically significant events, activate strong emotional

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<sup>103</sup> Franklin, “Vietnam,” 17.

<sup>104</sup> Franklin, “Vietnam,” 17.



responses, and are regularly reproduced across a range of media, genres, or topics.<sup>105</sup> The photograph of My Lai was recognized by less than half of the participants in this study, but participants did indicate that the photograph was historically significant. These results raise the question of whether or not the photograph of the My Lai Massacre, taken by Ronald Haeberle, should be considered an iconic photograph.<sup>106</sup>

### **Accidental Napalm**

Sturken claims that the Accidental Napalm photo is one of the most famous images of the Vietnam War and among one of the most widely recognized photographs in American photojournalism.<sup>107</sup> Participants also indicated that this was a popular photo saying “this was a very famous picture” or “this is world famous.” All ten participants said that they had seen this photo before, some even described the photo and indicated that it was a famous photo from Vietnam prior to being shown the photo during the interview process. However, only four of the ten participants expressed a correct general understanding of the photo. And only three participants demonstrated a sophisticated understanding, correctly relating this photo to the use of napalm. Two participants thought that the photo was from My Lai, and some were confused by the girl’s nudity, wondering if it was related to rape or other inappropriate actions by the American soldiers.

When the photo was originally published by the media, it was often times accompanied by the text “Accidental Napalm.”<sup>108</sup> This text could have been the link that created the understanding that the girl was being burned by napalm, without the text, it is possible that the

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<sup>105</sup> Hariman and Lucaites, “Dissent,” 4-31.

<sup>106</sup> The My Lai photo was deemed “iconic” by Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 93-4. Sturken claimed that it gained iconic status by “shocking the American public and creating widespread disillusionment over the U.S. role in the war.”

<sup>107</sup> Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 90.

<sup>108</sup> Hariman and Lucaites, “Public Identity,” 40.

photo loses much of its intent and purpose. This disconnect between the recognition and understanding of the photo's details could also be related to the repeated use of the photo as war propaganda. This photo became synonymous with atrocities of the Vietnam War even though the details of the situation seem to have been lost along the way.

### **Research Question 1 Discussion**

Participants for this study were required to be of a certain age so that they were at least 15 years old during the height of the Vietnam War in 1968. This age was set so that the participants were in the stages of adolescence or early adulthood when the iconic photos were widely published, and were more tuned into the social and political turmoil than someone who would have been in their childhood. As in Perlmutter's study, the participants typically indicated a general recognition of the photo, but could only provide vague details of the photo's importance. In Perlmutter's study, he concluded that photographs of events that people experienced through the media during adolescence or early adulthood (Gulf War photos in his study) were more likely to resonate with people, which is consistent with collective memory studies.<sup>109</sup> However, this study showed that even among people who were within that age range, and therefore would have likely been exposed to the photographs through the media, there was still a lack of detailed descriptions of the context or circumstances of the photos. There were also a few misconceptions of the photos, which could be due to the reuse of iconic photos in popular culture and the lack of historical knowledge that the participants expressed while discussing the photographs.

This lack of memories of the details of the photographs indicate that the purpose of an iconic photo could change over time. When the photos were first published an importance was placed on the details and circumstances of the photographs, but over time, as the photographs

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<sup>109</sup> Schuman, "Generational Basis," 44-77.

were solidified in their status as icons, they established a greater importance than the events that they portrayed. The details of the photographs faded out of the collective memory as the greater importance of the photographs as representations of the political and social atmosphere of the Vietnam War was established.

## **RQ2: Which qualities of an iconic photo resonate with the general public?**

The interview subjects were asked what qualities make the photos memorable in order to determine if the general public is in tune to the qualities of an iconic photo that scholars have identified. Perlmutter defined many qualities of an iconic image; including celebrity, prominence, frequency, instantaneousness, transposability, metonymy, primordially and/or cultural resonance, and striking composition.<sup>110</sup> The purpose of this portion of the study is to determine how the public sees a photograph that is considered iconic as opposed to how scholars and photographers see it.

### **Kent State**

When discussing the Kent State photograph, almost all of the participants recognized the photo, therefore supporting Perlmutter's celebrity category. When shown the photograph, one participant immediately responded, "Yes, of course, it's Kent State," indicating an instantaneous recognition of the photograph. Participants also recognized the prominence quality of the photograph, one said, "I would be shocked if it wasn't in *Time* magazine." The frequency of the photograph, or the amount of times it was published, was mentioned by multiple participants. "I just remember seeing it many times," is an example reference of a participant commenting on the frequency of the Kent State photograph. The instantaneousness of the photograph was also commented on when a participant said, "I would bet I saw it later that day."

Perlmutter's category of metonymy refers to when a photograph of a single event is used to exemplify general conditions, or when one photo represents a greater event. A participant recognized that this photo of Kent State was a metonym for the event. He said, "It

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<sup>110</sup> See Perlmutter, *Photojournalism and Foreign Policy*, 11-20 or return to pages 21-22 of this study for explanations of the categories.

was the photo to evoke the sense of grief and outrage and frustration of that moment.” The category of primordality and/or cultural resonance is considered one of the most illusive. It is when a photograph alludes to a biblical or classical history reference. While discussing the Kent State photograph, one participant noticed that the woman was kneeling in “...kind of a religious position, almost like the Pieta, or something like that, you know, classic position of grief I guess you would say.” The categories of an iconic photograph that participants failed to recognize when viewing the Kent State photograph included profit, transposability, fame of subjects, and importance of event.

### **Self-Immolation**

Some participants recognized the Self-Immolation photo, indicating its celebrity standing, but some participants implied the opposite by saying that they had never seen the photograph before or that they did not remember it in the context of the Vietnam War. The only time that a participant spoke about the instantaneous category in regards to this photograph was in saying that the photograph did not have the quality. She said, “I believe I saw that when I was in college, not immediately after it happened, but within a few months when we were having student discussions of what was going on.”

One participant related this photograph of Self-Immolation to the suicide bombings that are taking place in the Middle East today. He said, “...it’s a religious form of expression to kill yourself, now the difference in the Middle East today is the people killing themselves are doing it as weapons of violence.” This mimicry of the photograph into a present-day situation falls into Perlmutter’s category of primordality and/or cultural resonance. As Perlmutter points out,

this relationship is not unilinear, “Once we make a picture an icon, it too becomes a frame to which newer images will be compared.”<sup>111</sup>

None of the other categories of an iconic photo were recognized by the participants in regards to this photograph of the burning monk. This result could possibly indicate that the general public was not able to identify iconic qualities denoted by scholars or that this photograph is not viewed by the public as one meeting the standards of an iconic photograph.

### **My Lai Massacre**

Many participants said that they did not recognize the My Lai Massacre photograph, or that they had never seen this photograph before, indicating that it does not meet the criteria for the celebrity category. A participant touched on the frequency category when he said, “Well I don’t know that I saw this photo many times.” However, even though participants indicated that they had never seen the photograph before, they did know that it was the My Lai Massacre, showing the great importance of the event within history, one of Perlmutter’s categories. One participant said, “That became such a significant event.” The only category that received a positive response by participants was the importance of event category, bringing into question the validity of the My Lai Photograph as an iconic photograph.

### **Tet Execution**

When shown the photograph of the Tet Execution, participants hit on many of Perlmutter’s key categories, including celebrity, prominence, frequency, instantaneousness, metonymy, and striking composition. Upon seeing the photograph, one participant immediately responded, “I remember seeing this picture before, obviously,” indicating with the use of the word “obviously” that it was a very well known photograph. Another participant said, “I figured

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<sup>111</sup> Perlmutter, *Photojournalism and Foreign Policy*, 18.

this would be in there,” knowing that this photograph would emerge in a study on Vietnam photography. Within Perlmutter’s category of prominence, he also speaks of the use of an iconic photo in history textbooks, one participant also noticed this by saying, “There’s almost no history of the Vietnam War that does not include this photograph.” Many participants also spoke about how often they saw the photograph, one such individual said, “It kept appearing and reappearing in newsreels and on television, in magazines and the newspaper.”

Throughout the interviews, participants hit on the transposability of this photograph across mediums into film. One participant said, “You know, there’s so many violent movies now, that they do this, this is a typical Hollywood stunt now, somebody’s talking and boom, they turn around and shoot the unexpected person.”

### **Accidental Napalm**

Of all five photos, participants mentioned the celebrity quality of this photograph the most. They said things like, “Yes, yes, this was the most poignant photo from the war. The most memorable from Vietnam.” Another participant said, “That one I recognize.” And one more participant said, “This is world famous.” They also commented that it had a large prominence, one said, “all the magazines ran it.” However, the only two participants to mention the instantaneous quality indicated that it was not instantaneous in their opinion, saying, “This may have been a photo that came out after in some of the documentaries,” and “If I had to guess, I did not see this originally.”

While viewing this photograph of Accidental Napalm, they also commented on the transposability, fame of subjects, and metonymy categories. One participant mentioned that the photograph was used as propaganda against the war (transposability). Another thought that the little girl was “like a celebrity” (fame of subjects). And another said, “this was a photo that told us that there were effects, there were losses, that there was a cost to what we were

doing,” (metonymy). The primordially and striking composition categories were also briefly mentioned.

### **Research Question 2 Discussion**

Perlmutter outlined the defining qualities of an iconic photograph.<sup>112</sup> Throughout the interviews, participants mentioned a few of Perlmutter’s categories, but not all of them. During the interviews, participants spoke about some of the qualities profusely, some qualities were mentioned sparingly, and some not at all.

The only category that was mentioned for every photo was that of celebrity, or a famous image, which is appropriate in a study examining iconic photos. Frequency, or the amount of times the photo was published, was mentioned in regards to all but one of the photographs. The instantaneous quality was also mentioned in all but one of the photographs, with the exception of My Lai, which is appropriate considering the photo did not emerge until months after the event, when the massacre was brought to light.

Some of the categories that participants were tuned in to, but were not necessarily mentioned for all of the photographs, include prominence, metonymy, primordially and/or cultural resonance, and striking composition. Finally, participants rarely spoke of a photograph in terms of transposability, fame, or importance of event. The only category that was never mentioned was profit, indicating that the general public does not view an iconic photo as a commodity.

It is important to note that this portion of the study focused on the participants’ tendencies to notice and speak about qualities of an iconic photograph. These results came from the entirety of the open-ended interview, including when the participants were specifically asked “What qualities of this photo are the most striking to you?” for each of the five

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<sup>112</sup> Perlmutter, *Photojournalism and Foreign Policy*, 11-20.



photographs. These results do not indicate whether or not the photographs actually fall into Perlmutter's categories, but rather how the general public understand and contextualize these five iconic photos.

**RQ3: How do iconic photographs contribute to the collective memory of the Vietnam War era?**

Scholars such as Hariman and Lucaites suggest that iconic photos engage the viewer's emotions and raise questions of policy, influencing not only the collective memory of the era, but also the future possibilities for civic action.<sup>113</sup> Throughout their interviews, participants told stories of personal memories, such as friends or family members that fought in Vietnam or how the draft affected them, as well as memories about the time period that they learned through the media. The use of oral history showcased the importance individuals placed on different aspects of the war era and how those memories contributed to the collective memory of the Vietnam War.

**Coding the participant interviews**

In order to code for research question 3, all of the participant interviews were initially tagged for memories throughout the entirety of the interview. Every time that a participant spoke about the past, whether relevant to the Vietnam War or not, the memory was tagged. These memories ranged from long, rambling stories, to matter-of-fact references. After all of the interviews were tagged for memories, each interview was reread and the constant comparative method was used to code for topics. When a topic appeared within the memory, it was coded. Some of the topics only appeared in the one memory, but more commonly, the topics appeared over multiple interviews and then were compared to each other to draw conclusions.

A total of 17 different memory topics emerged from the interviews. Five of those topics only appeared in one individual instance, while the other 12 appeared multiple times across

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<sup>113</sup> Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, 147-8.

interviews. Some of the most prominent categories that emerged were war today (9), political attitudes (8), friends/family (8), draft (7), protests (6), and cultural references (6).<sup>114</sup>

### **The relationship between the photo and the memory**

During the portion of the interviews that was specific to the individual photos, participants were shown a photograph and then were asked open-ended questions about the photo. During this portion of the interview, the memories that emerged were sometimes related to the specific photo and sometimes not. Among the 10 participants, 43 memories emerged during the individual photo questions. Nineteen of those memories were related to the photo that the participant was looking at (44.2%), while the remaining 24 memories did not relate to the photograph.

Some of these related memories were very specific to the photo, for instance, the memory that was coded as “propaganda.” The participant said that the Accidental Napalm photo was “used very much as a propaganda against the war and did an awful lot of harm in our country in making a split between certain people.” Other memories related to the photograph more generally. For instance, three participants spoke about protests they remembered when they were describing the Kent State photo. Two participants spoke about suicide bombers today when they were examining the Self-Immolation photo. And two participants spoke of stories they remembered about Vietnamese children when they were looking at the Accidental Napalm photo. The remaining 55.8% of memories that were expressed during the individual photo portion of the interviews did not relate directly to the photo that was in front of the participant.

The 28 memories that emerged during the interviews came up during the final stage of the interviews when the participants were shown all of the five photographs together and were asked if the photos created an accurate history of the Vietnam War era, and if not, what was

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<sup>114</sup> Go to Appendix C for a table of all of the categories.

missing? For most of the participants, this time allowed them to speak more freely, tell more stories of their personal experiences, and go off into many varying directions and tangents.

### **Friends/Family in the war**

During the Vietnam War, news traveled through the media, but the media could not tell the whole story. Television news covered the battles, it reported on the results, but due to deadline constraints, concerns for objectivity, and the journalists' concern for safety, much of the story of Vietnam, including the soldiers' experiences, was left out. The soldiers who returned from the war have since then filled in the rest of the story. With thousands of men fighting overseas, many people back in the United States knew friends or family that they cared for and worried about. It was these people that came up many times in their memories as they examined the iconic photos throughout the interview process. They spoke about friends and family members who fought in the war and came back with stories of the war, both good and bad. Memories of friends or family members came up a total of eight times, with five of those memories emerging when participants were shown all of the photos together.

One participant was worried about her husband who was fighting in the infantry in Vietnam. She said, "It was a tough time for both of us because I was worried about him and hoping that he would come home." While he was overseas, she found out where he was and what he was doing through letters that they sent back and forth to each other. She said, "I have every letter that he ever wrote me, I have every single one." She remembered going to the mailbox everyday when she got off work to look for his letters. She said sometimes she received two or three letters a week, and when they did not come for a few weeks she would get anxious and worry about him. She also talked about how they would send cassette tapes to each other so that they could talk to one another. She said, "We used to send cassette tapes back and forth and in the background you could hear a lot of bombings and things, and he'd always say, 'don't

pay any attention to that, that's not what you think it is,' and it really was what I thought is was, so we quit doing that."

Her husband (who was also interviewed as a part of this study) said that now he is open to discussing his time in the war, but back when he first returned home, he did not want to talk about the war with his wife. He said, "I didn't discuss things with her. I was very quiet, and she kept asking me what was wrong, and [I would say] just leave me alone, just I don't want to talk about it, and it took a long time for her to accept that." The Vietnam War was an important aspect of their marriage and their time apart is a memory that they both share and expressed in both of their respective interviews.

The infantryman's wife learned about the war through the stories that her husband brought home. She told stories of the Vietnamese children and the day-to-day life of the soldier and also unknowingly repeated stories about his deployment that he also shared during the interview process. This indicates that the experiences of the men who fought in Vietnam are not only present in their memories, but also thrive in the memories of their loved ones, which is an important aspect of the viability of oral history.

Americans that did not fight in Vietnam typically learned about the war through the media. The television news coverage oftentimes reported on the brutality and the carnage of the war. In the years after the war, people who did not experience the war firsthand learned about it through speaking with the men that did fight. One participant recalled speaking to friends about the day-to-day tasks they encountered in Vietnam. He said, "I have lots of friends who were in Vietnam, if you ask them what their experience was really about, they'll say mostly sitting around." He also mentioned that they told him about doing a lot of military maintenance.

One participant spoke about his older brother who did two tours in Vietnam. When his brother returned home from the war, he returned to school and made friends with college

students who were fairly ignorant when it came to the war. During the interview, the participant told a story of his brother's friends asking about the war. He said, "They would ask him to tell them about Vietnam, they were very curious, and he would not tell them. And finally they would beg and beg him so he started telling them, and they begged him to stop. So it's pretty horrific stuff. I know for a fact that he has lifelong scars, terrible scars." He also spoke about how their relationship changed because of the four years his brother spent in the Navy, returning home and becoming friends with younger people because he returned to college after his service.

Another participant had a brother who also fought in Vietnam. He was overseas when she was in college. She remembered that she had mixed feelings about the war because her brother was serving. She said, "I had the loyalty to my brother and what he was fighting for, and then, I was surrounded by these students in college who had far more liberal views than my family held."

Around the country, there was a great divide in the feelings about the war. One participant remembered a friend who was very outspoken about the war and became a folk singer. The participant remembered, "He was very much into that crowd of protests, but so many of the people that were protesting went into folk music and started writing a lot of these songs and singing them and it got a lot of people's attention." Unfortunately, the story ended bitterly as the man was tragically killed in a motorcycle accident.

Two more tragic memories emerged out of the interviews as participants remembered people they knew who lost their lives in Vietnam. One story was of a nurse who went to Vietnam as a missionary. She was captured and taken as a POW during the Tet Offensive. She provided medical care of her fellow prisoners as well as her captors. The participant spoke highly of her, she said, "She not only ministered to them physically but she was encouraging to

them and tried to help them to keep a good outlook about things.” There was a book written about this woman by a fellow POW. The book, just like the true story, ended sadly with her death. The participant said, “... she didn’t survive, she died, eventually, towards the end of it before the others were released or freed and both the doctor and the service men said that they wouldn’t have lived if it weren’t for her.”

Another tragic story that a participant told during the interview was a story of going to a Naval hospital with a friend who was visiting his brother who had what would be a fatal head wound. He said, “I will always remember that, just being with his brother and just seeing this, I think he was a Marine, just lying there, just knowing there would be no recovery for him. I think that was one memory I will always carry of that time.” Whether memories of tragedy, triumph, or everyday activities, people can be the vessels of memories. Participants in this study told of memories that they carry about family and friends that were directly affected by the Vietnam War.

### **Draft**

Another topic that was brought up many times during the interviews was a topic that fueled many feelings of fear and uncertainty as well as anger and dissent—the draft. The topic of the draft came up four times when participants were shown all of the photos together, twice when shown the photo of Accidental Napalm, and once when shown the Kent State photo. One participant explained the draft as an aspect of life that changed her generation. She said, “I think about the kids that I was in school with and the choices that they made with their lives that had this not been going on, they probably would have made other choices.” She talked about people who went to college to avoid the draft, people who got married to avoid the draft, and people who enlisted as soon as they got out of high school because they thought that was

the heroic thing to do. She ended by saying that she thinks about “how my generation changed so much as a result of the Vietnam War.”

Many participants expressed their personal feelings about the draft and recalled the way that they felt about the possibility of being drafted during the time. The one participant in this study who was drafted said that he did not regret fighting and that he did not know any better at the time. He said, “The United States needed me as a soldier, a soldier goes to war. And that’s what I did and I did it with integrity. I did it with the knowledge what I could take a life and my life could be taken.” He said, “There were too many guys that went to Canada and then came back free, with amnesty that didn’t have to go through what a lot of us did, especially in the infantry in Vietnam.” However, looking back on his experience, he also said, “If I’d had a son back during the Vietnam War who was eligible for the draft, I’d have sent him to Canada by any way, shape, or form.” For this man, he was drafted into the Army and forced to fight for his country, but it was not an experience that he would have allowed his son to go through.

Another man, who received a student deferment, talked about his internal turmoil and beliefs about the draft during his interview. He said, “I think back of coming of age as a late teenager and deciding if I were drafted, would I go to Vietnam.” He remembered that “to go and die was the easier choice. To leave the country and go to Canada, or something like that might have been smarter, but much, much harder.” Fortunately for him, he never had to make that decision because he was in college at the time and had a student deferment. However, he was very opinionated about the student deferments during the Vietnam War. This is how he explained student deferments, “Translated, we’re going to take people that aren’t in college, which means you’re not in college because of your demographic, socioeconomic, or race, you’ll go first, and you had a higher presence of blacks that went to Vietnam and people who weren’t



college bound. Is that a good plan or a bad plan? I didn't make those rules, I liked it just fine, it kept me out."

One participant spoke about a discussion he remembered having with a friend about the draft and the possibility of being called up. He remembered the conversation with his friend and being surprised by the brusqueness of his friend's response. He replayed the conversation in the interview, "I said, 'I don't want to go over there and shoot people, I don't want to go kill people,' and he looked at me like I was crazy. And he said, 'I don't want to be killed!'"

Finally, one participant who joined the Army Reserve to avoid being called up spoke about his memories of the draft. While in the reserve, he remembered that he was much more interested in the news because he wanted to know about what was going on in case he was called to war. He described watching the three networks that they had at the time on a black and white TV, and said, "I knew that I could very well end up in this." The draft was a memorable topic for Americans, especially the individuals that participated in my study and were in the age bracket that was eligible for the draft. It is a topic that stays with them till this day.

### **Protests**

Another topic that was mentioned frequently was that of protests. The majority of the memories about protests came up when people were viewing and discussing the Kent State photograph. One participant said, "There was a lot of noise, a lot of protest, it was always the lead story on the news at that time." Other participants spoke about specific memories of protests that they witnessed first-hand.

One participant who was in a fairly liberal university at the time remembered many protests on his campus. He said, "The university I was at had a number of student protests and the National Guard, and tear gas, and students running through the hallways yelling, 'shut it

down, on strike, shut it down.” He described his role in the protesting, “I wasn’t an active protester, I did go to some of these things a little bit, but not with a great intensity ... I got tear-gassed a couple of times.” He spoke about how after a while the protests became redundant and lost their appeal. He said, “It was a very disruptive time, almost to the point of being tiresome because I was there to learn lots of other subjects and the war really was there in a big way for a long period of time.”

Another participant was working in the business world in New York City during the Vietnam era and he remembered the protesting that went on in Manhattan. He said, “I was working in banks in the financial district, the Wall Street area, and [protesters] would come out in the hundreds and march down the street, blocking the traffic and be singing some of the folk songs of the day, such as, ‘Where Have All of the Boys Gone?’” He recalled one specific instance when the construction workers or “hardhats” confronted the protesters, shouting and calling them names. He said, “There was a real dichotomy between [the protesters and the construction workers], and in some cases it ended up in fights.” He also spoke with a bit of disdain in his voice when he described the protests at universities he was familiar with. He said, “And many of the [students] that were marching were in the middle of getting a very good education at Columbia University...They held sit-ins in the university and then came out and burned a lot of the rooms in the university, tore up a lot of books and things.”

Both of the participants who shared their memories of protests, shared these memories after they were shown the photograph taken at Kent State. The photo of the protest that got out of hand and ended tragically spurred their memory of protests that they experienced during the same time period.

### **Memory as a conception of the media**

This study yielded the understanding that people formed and maintained memories about the Vietnam War era from their own personal experiences, but the study also reflected that they maintained memories from the events and information that were fed by the media. The participants in this study talked about the media in many of its various forms as well as specific events or popular culture that they learned about from the media.

The Vietnam War veteran who participated in this study spoke about journalists who accompanied him on operations during his time in Vietnam. He said that for the most part, the soldiers did not interact with the journalists, but that there were news reporters from *Stars and Stripes*, the official newspaper of the U.S. Armed Forces, and the BBC around. His memories of the media during the war were very different than those of other participants who watched the news in the evening or read about the war in the newspaper. The veteran said, "They were just there to do a story and they were certainly hoping we would make contact with the enemy so they could get their photos and get their stories, but we weren't wishing that as an infantryman." He was fairly indifferent about the media being around, but he did say, "They listened to us, they would try to get their stories and photos, but...most of those guys didn't carry weapons or anything, they were just out there with a camera and a notepad and pen, so it was up to us to protect them."

On the other end of the spectrum, in terms of experiencing the media, one participant, who was in high school at the time, remembered seeing photographs of the war in *Time* magazine. He said, "I remember at the time, how hard it was as a high school kid to come home from school, find *Time* magazine, and almost hate to turn the page, almost be afraid to turn the page." He remembered being confronted with "this kind of honest, gritty, depiction of life and death, of misery, of terrible times, of violence," and finding it difficult to look at the photos. He

said, “the photos particularly, were really the shocking introduction to me of what was happening in a place like Vietnam because, you know, we saw some things on TV, but the photos, the still photos tended to be stronger than what we saw on television.” He even described his introduction to the war through the photographs as a “maturing process.”

Another participant spoke about his memories watching the nightly news, but said that he did so because he was facing the possibility of being drafted. For him, the media was truly a source of news that could affect his life. He said, “...I knew that I could very well end up in this.”

While examining Eddie Adams’ Tet Execution photo, a participant thought about another form of media, film. He described the photo as what is now “a typical Hollywood stunt.” He talked about how it was a very horrific thing to know that this person was executed in the street, but that it now seems like there are many violent movies that recreate scenarios like this. He said, “this is a typical Hollywood stunt now, you know, somebody’s talking and boom, they turn around and shoot the unexpected person.”

Some participants made very specific references to events, people, or forms of entertainment from the Vietnam time period that they learned about through the media. One participant related the horrific news that he saw of the Vietnam War to other shocking things that media was also showing during the time. He described his view of how news was changing during the time period. He said, “For example, as they started showing more films live...President Kennedy getting shot starting back in the ’60s, and then pictures of people being hosed down with fire hoses or chased and attacked by dogs, and these things are mounting to where you can witness an actual execution right in front of your very eyes.” He finished by saying, showing these things on television “can pollute your thinking.”

Television, movies, and the photographs that people are consuming can influence them. One participant compared the heroics associated with enlisting in the Army to the heroics that

young men had seen in John Wayne movies. She said, “Kids who grew up on John Wayne movies who thought this was the heroic thing to do. This was the first thing they did was enlist as soon as they got out of high school. “

One participant spoke of the controversy that surrounded Jane Fonda and her opposition to the Vietnam War. This participant was married to a man fighting in Vietnam and she spoke about remembering the shadow Fonda cast on the troops. The participant supported her husband’s participation in the war by saying, “They were drafted and so they were all willing to spend their time doing what they were asked to do for this war that nobody seemed to understand. They just needed more support than I think they got.”

Many Americans whose voices were suppressed during the Vietnam War era let popular musicians write the words for them. Many people turned to songs about the war as a way to express their confusion or disdain. One participant said he was stuck in the middle of feeling like he should support his country, but not wanting to overlook what was going on around him. He used a popular song to describe how he was feeling. He said, “There was a Moody Blues song that came out that said something like, ‘I’m searching for someone to save my life. I’m searching for someone who is going to come forward and tell me what is the appropriate way to respond to this stuff?’ How am I supposed to be? Am I just supposed to give up all of the training and curiosities of my life to be a radical running around the streets, calling for the end of the war, but on the other hand, how can I overlook what’s going on?” He remembered being confused during this time in his life and he used a popular song that he had kept with him since then to explain those feelings.

One participant remembered that seeing the movie *Woodstock* changed his perception of the Vietnam War. He said, “I had to be in Columbus, Mississippi when I saw that movie, I think that, more than anything else, changed my concept and the outlook on what we were

doing.” He continued that seeing the protesting helped him come “to the realization that things like this were so, so wrong. And what was it for? Certainly not defending democracy.”

### **Political attitudes**

In many of the interviews, participants expressed their political views, both of how they felt about what the government was doing during the war and how they feel about the government’s actions looking back on them today. The majority of the time, the attitudes were presented during the final stage of the interview when participants were asked if these iconic photos presented an accurate history of the war era. Some people were subtle in the expression of their views, or only indicated them with their tone, while others were much more explicit.

Many participant remembered being “fed the government line” about the war. One participant said, “...being young and impressionable, you bought the party line, you bought the line that we were fighting for democracy.” However, thinking about the memory of this, he said, “You bought the line that Johnson and Nixon gave, but looking back from this standpoint, you know it’s completely wrong.” The Vietnam veteran who participated in the study said, “They tell you what they want you to know.” He spoke about a specific instance when he was sent to Cambodia. His unit was working to set up a fire support base and built a landing strip for the cargo planes to come in with supplies. He said, “President Nixon came on the TV, I understand, over here and said, we have no troops in Cambodia. And I was already there in Cambodia.” He finished the story by saying, in a sarcastic tone, “... of course that’s the federal government for you.”

One participant spoke about the varying opinions he remembered in the United States, he said, “There was certainly arguments for why we were in Vietnam, and why we shouldn’t be there and those will be debated with never an answer.” Another participant elaborated on

these differences when he said, "I think that during most of the Vietnam War there were always harsh opinions, it was a really polarizing conflict and you had the administration trying to hold onto it and justify ... and a lot of the colleges, especially the students were quite vocal about their opposition to it." On the other hand, one participant said, if a person does not think like the college students who were protesting the war, then they thought, "... my country is right, God bless America, good for our boys going over there to stop the Commies."

### **War today**

People believed that the government was hiding information from them during the Vietnam, but this study yielded information that suggests that this statement could also hold true today. One participant related the same idea of the government concealing information to the wars we are currently fighting. He said, "I think a lot of times the federal government tells us stuff they want us to know, hiding stuff, and look what it's got us in Iraq and Afghanistan. Basically nothing except some dead soldiers. But that's a war and unfortunately that's the way it comes down." One participant said, "I feel highly manipulated. As a country, I think we are highly manipulated right now in Afghanistan and Iraq."

Another participant expressed his opinion of the national psyche in present-day war. He said that the nation was experiencing "the feeling of defeat in Vietnam, so lets go kick their ass in Iraq." He also said, "I think, in the future we'll look back on the Iraqi conflict and go, 'what the hell were we thinking?'"

Many participants also made comparisons between the Vietnam War and the war we are currently fighting in the Middle East. One said, "we can draw connections to what's happening in Iraq and Afghanistan." Similarities between military tactics was brought up by one participant, he said, "... we're seeing it now in Afghanistan and Iraq that it's almost impossible for a large military force operating the way they do against guerilla warfare."

One participant drew a comparison when he was talking about the people who at the time were in favor of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. He said, “The thing about the middle, late ‘60s ... there were people who were totally in favor of the war, more so than people who were in favor of the Iraq invasion, much more so, much more emotionally in favor of stopping the Communists and doing what we had to do.” Another participant spoke about people who were not in favor of the Vietnam War. He talked about his memory of the protests against the war; he said that the protests about Vietnam were “... not unlike some of the protests that we have seen since the conflicts in the Middle East.”

There was one comparison that came up often when participants spoke about the photograph of Self-Immolation—suicide bombers. People saw this act of suicide for a religious cause and thought of the current issue of men and women voluntarily taking their own lives in the name of religion. One participant who described the comparison said, “... we see here, again that it’s a religious form of expression to kill yourself, now the difference in the Middle East today is the people killing themselves are doing it as weapons of violence.” This comparison to suicide bombers only came up when specifically speaking about Malcolm Brown’s photograph; however, comparisons to the war in the Middle East were interspersed fairly evenly across all aspects of the interview.

References to the war today was the only topic that was coded for that was not necessarily a memory, but instead, the participants used memories of the past to help explain the present day. It is an interesting result that when quantitatively analyzed, this topic was present the most often throughout all of the participant interviews. The “war today” topic came up in nine different contexts and fairly evenly across all stages of the interviews. It was followed closely by “political attitudes” and “friends/family,” each of which were referenced eight times.



### Historical references

Some participants thought of memories of other historical instances to help describe or understand the Vietnam photographs. Participants referenced memories of the Holocaust, the Korean War, and Civil Rights. When a participant referenced the Korean War, he was comparing the deaths in Korea to the deaths in Vietnam, he said, "The Korean War deaths for many, many countries is unbelievable. When you look at the numbers, you go, this can't be right. Vietnam was just more publicized, more visible."

The other historical references that were made throughout the interviews were all directly related to a specific photograph. The participant who spoke about the Holocaust did so when she was looking at the My Lai Massacre photo. When she described the photo, she said, "Well it's obviously of people who have been killed and I don't know, they've just been mowed down it looks like. The picture makes me think of some of the concentration camp pictures of World War II."

Three different participants mentioned the Civil Rights Movement that was also going on in the United States during the same time period. Two of the participants spoke of desegregation riots after their memories were triggered by the Kent State photograph. One of the participants told a story of riots that were taking place on his university campus, he said, "African American students were protesting because the new college president had reduced the black studies...curriculum on campus and had fired some of the professors, so they were marching all over campus to protest that."

The final participant who spoke about Civil Rights did so based off of a false understanding of the Self-Immolation photograph, thinking that the photograph was actually of the Ku Klux Klan. She spoke about being from Indiana and visiting family in North Carolina and

noticing the difference in the treatment of African Americans. She said, “I could tell then that there was a big difference in the North and the South.”

### **Other categories**

There were other categories that emerged during the interviews, but were not as prominent. These categories included first-hand memories of the war, military tactics, the American soldier, and Vietnamese children. All of the memories of the war came from the two men who were in the military, the man stationed in Vietnam and the man stationed in Japan. They spoke about actions in the war zone, the landscape they were surrounded by, and the people they interacted with. One participant remembered that the American soldiers who returned from war would conceal that they had been in Vietnam, unlike the celebrated soldiers who return from war today. The man who served in Vietnam spoke about his hostile welcome when he returned home. He said, “We were coming through the airport and we had people spitting on us. And calling us baby killers. It’s pretty tough. It’s pretty tough to handle. When you’re fighting for your country. And I wasn’t sent there not on my own accord, but I was sent there because I was drafted and that’s where I had orders to so I did the best I could do to survive.”

### **Research Question 3 Discussion**

The manner in which participants responded to the iconic photos gives insight into how media that was produced from the war has since then been translated into history, and how that history is reflected in individuals’ personal memories. These categories were not predetermined before the interviews took place; they emerged organically through the topics and memories that the participants chose to discuss. So it is important to consider what these topic categories suggest about the collective memory of the Vietnam War. The memories that

emerged from the interviews often were personal memories and memories created by the media. The personal memories were memories of friends or family, memories of how individuals were affected by the draft, and political attitudes during the time period. Memories created by the media were memories of war tactics learned on the news and memories of pop icons or cultural references that related to the time period.

These memories emerged when participants were looking at the iconic photos, but oftentimes, those memories and ideas they were expressing extended past the frame of the photo. The participants would speak of memories that were sparked by the photo, but might not have necessarily contained a tangible connection to the photograph. Sometimes they would begin by speaking about the photo and then detach and branch off into different thoughts and feelings, while other times, they would not even verbally express the connection between the photograph and their memory. During the individual photo portion of the interviews, a majority (55.8 percent) of the memories that were expressed were not related to the photograph that was in front of the participant.

In some cases, when participants were unsure of the content of the photograph or did not remember the specifics of the event of the photograph that they were examining, they would revert to personal memories and talk about those instead. If they did not connect with the photo on a personal level, they would then turn to memories of aspects of the war that they had learned about through the media or from second-hand stories that they learned from others.

It is also worth considering that the memories that the participants spoke of could have been based off of a false understanding of the photograph. Results of research question one indicated that there was a lack of understanding of the details and context of the iconic photos among the participants. Research questions one also yielded some misconceptions about the

photo. It is possible that the 55.8 percent of memories that were not related to the photograph further indicate a lack of understanding or misconceptions that were not verbalized during the interview, but still existed among the participants.

One participant expressed his memory of seeing photos in *Time* magazine and not wanting to look at them. This is important to consider because some participants indicated the same reaction during the interview process. When confronted with the graphic content of the photos, especially that of the My Lai Massacre, some participants seemed to have a hard time looking at the photo for an extended period of time. With the photograph in front of them while they were asked questions about it, some participants got quiet and did not have much to say about the photograph, and some others chose to talk about topics that were seemingly unrelated. This could be indicative of not wanting to look at the photograph or refusing to be confronted with the issues that the graphic content of the photograph presented. It is important to note that not all participants reacted negatively to the graphic content, as some were unfazed by the graphic content of the photo.

During the final segment of the interview, the participants were shown the five iconic photos together, laid out on the table in front of them. It was during this portion of the interview, that 28 of the 71 total memories emerged, or 39.4 percent. This amount of memories was more than double the amount of memories for any one photo (Accidental Napalm yielded the most memories for a single photo at 12 total memories).

There are many possibilities of why that occurred. When all five photos were presented together, the participants were confronted with the collectiveness of the photos. Were they trying to make sense of the photos by reaching some conclusion of what the photos meant to them? The participants were also asked, "Is this an accurate history of the war era? If not, what is missing?" They could have been trying to fill in the pieces of what was missing by drawing on

their personal experiences and memories. It is also possible that in order to understand the images that they are being confronted with, they drew on what they knew, for example, family and friends, or what they believe in, for example their personal political attitudes. It is also important to consider that this being the last portion of the interview, and the most open-ended portion of the interview, the participants might have been more compelled to speak in general, and more comfortable speaking about their past.

The participants also tended to speak more freely during this portion of the interview, often speaking for extended periods of time without being prompted by more questions by the interviewer. This could be due to the vague question that was asked about the Vietnam War, but it could also be because of the five photos that were laid out before them. They were confronted with five visually engaging photos instead of one specific photo during the previous portion of the interview. Many participants spoke sporadically about the photos, jumping between different photos throughout their thought process, and oftentimes, linking multiple photos together to explain their personal experiences. For example, one participant spoke about Self-Immolation, Accidental Napalm, and Kent State (in that order) to explain how the photographs created an understanding about what was going on in the war. He said, "This one cues my unwillingness to want to admit that these things happened. And this one cued a sympathy for the victims, for the innocent victims, and of course children are the most innocent. And this one cued I think the frustration of a lot of college students that this whole us versus them mentality that was taking place didn't have to be that way."

For this study, the participants were required to be of a certain age so that they were aware of the political atmosphere during the Vietnam War era. People's behaviors and opinions are more likely to be influenced by major events that occurred during their adolescence or early

adulthood.<sup>115</sup> Many of the participants spoke about memories that they were personally engaged in as well as memories that they have because of the information that their loved ones shared with them. This raises the question of the viability of oral history and how oral history of the Vietnam War will change once people who were around during the era are no longer living. According to Connerton, any historical reconstruction can be strengthened by oral history.<sup>116</sup> How will the collective memory of the Vietnam War change once these people are no longer around to share their personal memories? Will memories of the war only survive in history books or in the media such as iconic photos that are still regarded with high esteem? Many participants in this study expressed that they did not believe that these iconic photos portrayed an accurate history of the war, but will this side of the war be all that survives as personal memories are gradually extinguished?

Two participants touched on the idea that the soldiers returning from war did not want to talk about their experiences in Vietnam. The Vietnam veteran who participated in the study said that he refused to talk to his wife about the war for a long time after he returned, and that he did not tell people that he went to school with after the war that he was a veteran. If this is the case, how many memories have been suppressed? How many memories were never shared and have never entered into the collective memory? There could be memories that exist within the soldiers who fought, but have never been shared with the rest of the population.

The relationship between the specific historical details of the photos and what participants shared when confronted with the photos varied widely. Sometimes there were very identifiable connections between the memories and the photos, sometime there was no connection at all, and sometimes the connection was based on a misconception of the

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<sup>115</sup> Schuman and Scott, "Generations and Collective Memories," 380.

<sup>116</sup> Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 35.

photograph altogether. Within the controlled environment of the interview session, the participants used the photographs as stimulants of their memories, regardless of their specific interpretation of the photograph.

## CONCLUSIONS

According to Hariman and Lucaites, iconic images are those that are recognized by everyone and are understood to be representations of historically significant events, which for the most part was supported by findings in this study.<sup>118</sup> Among the participants, there was a 82 percent recognition rate of the iconic photos and a 70 percent rate of general understanding. However when measured for a sophisticated understanding of the photographs, the rate drops drastically to 42 percent. Participants indicated a general recognition of the photos, but were only able to verbalize vague details of the photograph's importance, which was consistent with the findings in Perlmutter's study that very few participants could provide a thorough description of the context or circumstances of the photo.<sup>119</sup> However, Perlmutter also concluded that participants who were in the stages of adolescence or early adulthood when they saw the photo for the first time would retain more of the details, which was not true for this study.<sup>120</sup> These findings indicate the possibility that the purpose of iconic photos have changed over time for the audience. As the details of the photos faded from memory, the iconic photos became more important as overarching representations of the Vietnam War.

Perlmutter also outlined the 11 categories that constituted an iconic photo: celebrity, prominence, frequency, profit, instantaneousness, transposability, fame of subjects, importance of event, metonymy, primordially and/or cultural resonance, and striking composition.<sup>121</sup> These 11 categories were coded for throughout the participant interviews to compare a scholar's understanding of an iconic image versus the casual viewer's understanding. Findings showed that the general public was in tune to some of Perlmutter's categories, but not all of them. Participants were primarily tuned in to celebrity, frequency, and instantaneousness. They rarely

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<sup>118</sup> Hariman and Lucaites, "Dissent," 4-31.

<sup>119</sup> Perlmutter, *Photojournalism*, 9-11.

<sup>120</sup> Perlmutter, *Photojournalism*, 10.

<sup>121</sup> Perlmutter, *Photojournalism*, 11-20.



mentioned transposability, fame, or importance of event, and they never talked about profit. Their failure to reference the “importance of event” quality also reiterates that they did not recognize these photos as representations of “historically significant events.”<sup>122</sup>

When the participants viewed the photos, they most often made connections to personal memories and memories created by the media. Some of the most prominent categories that were addressed in the memories were political attitudes, friends/family, and the draft. Sometimes direct connections were made between the photo and participants’ memories, sometimes there was no connection, and sometimes the memory they expressed was based off of a misconception of the photograph. It is possible that a lack of understanding of the details of the photos could have prohibited the participants from making more precise connections between the photographs and their memories. The category that was the most prominent among the memories was “war today.” In this case, participants did not use the photos to reference a story from their past, but instead, they used the photo to draw a connection to the present day. This finding showed that history is an important aspect in our understanding of our present-day condition.

This study showed that the iconic photos do play a role in shaping understanding of the Vietnam War era, but they are not necessarily used to document the events. The photos rarely took the participants back to the precise event, but they did take them to another place or memory. The photos took them back to a memory during that time period, or to a way they once viewed the world, or even to the present day, using the photo as a means of interpreting the current world around them. Shen found a link between the dynamics of news framing and audience responses through the examination of schema.<sup>123</sup> Schema is a term described by

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<sup>122</sup> Hariman and Lucaites, “Dissent,” 4-31.

<sup>123</sup> Fuyuan Shen, “Effects of News Frames and Schemas on Individual’s Issue Interpretations and Attitudes,” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 81, no. 2 (2004): 400-416.

psychologists as a cognitive structure that represents knowledge about a subject. Schema are kept in an individual's mental "storage bin" and once schema are activated by the media—in this case, by the iconic photographs—they can affect the interpretation and evaluations of other related information.<sup>124</sup> The participants in this study were drawing on schema to understand the photographs in a historical context and then use the photographs to frame their memories of the time period of the Vietnam War.<sup>125</sup>

### **Limitations**

The results of this study must be considered within its limitations. First of all, there were only 10 participants who were interviewed. The long-form interviews did not allow the time for more interviews, and a larger sample of people could have created different results for research question one, whether or not the participants recognized and understood the details of the iconic photos. A larger sample of people would have also yielded a larger amount of memories to code and examine.

Due to Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines, the participants were notified that they would be viewing graphic photographs of the Vietnam War prior to their interviews. This could have allowed them time to think about the photographs that they would be looking at prior to their participation; therefore there could have been a "priming" effect with some participants.

All participants were shown the photographs in the same order, but the order of the photographs could have influenced their reactions to the content and their memories. When examining their memories, there was no way to know if they were responding to the

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<sup>124</sup> Shen, "Effects of News Frames," 402.

<sup>125</sup> Go to Appendix D for a visual of the development of the grounded theory.

photograph in front of them, or if they were still thinking about the photographs they had previously seen.

This study was not a psychological study. Although it was examining memories, the goal was not to reach an understanding on an individual psychological level, but rather to use the memories to examine how participants made sense of the photos in terms of history. This study was not focused on the psychological process of remembering, but rather on the outcome that the memories provided.

### **Future Research**

Perlmutter concluded that participants would be more likely to understand details of photographs that were published around their time of adolescence or early adulthood. Due to the constraints of this study, the participants were only shown photographs of the Vietnam War era, which would have fallen into that time category. It would have been interesting to expand this study, also showing the participants photographs of an event that preceded their lifetime (the Spanish Civil War or WWII), as well as photos of events which occurred more recently (the Gulf War or September 11), in order to further test Perlmutter's conclusions.

In the era of the Internet where thousands and thousands of digital images reside of today's wars, the gatekeepers that contributed to the creation of an iconic image no longer exist. *Life* magazine no longer exists and the 24-hour news cycle broadcasts such a profuse amount of footage from the conflicts around the world, that it is questionable if current photographers are even capable of creating an iconic image. When a photograph is published as a lead photo on a leading news Web site, it is replaced within hours. It would be interesting to look back at today's wars in 10 to 15 years and conduct a similar study to this one in order to determine if any images grew to iconic status in the eyes of the general public, and if these photographs contributed to collective memory.

The iconic photos from Vietnam still exist today as conversation starters, or as a historical lesson, but because the details have faded away from the collective memory over time, the photos rarely exist today as their initial intended purpose, as documentation of the event that the photographer saw through his viewfinder.

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## APPENDICIES

### Appendix A: Photos



Kent State

May 4, 1970

John Paul Filo



Self-Immolation

June 11, 1963

Malcolm Browne



Tet Execution

February 1, 1968

Eddie Adams



My Lai Massacre

March 16, 1968

Ronald Haeberle



Accidental Napalm

June 8, 1972

Nick Ut

## **Appendix B: Interview Script**

### **Background Info:**

Name:

Date of Birth:

Where were you born?

Where did you live in the 60s?

Were you ever in the armed forces? (Which branch? When?)

Have any immediate family members ever been in the armed forces?

### **Media Usage:**

During the 60s, did you read the newspaper?

Did you subscribe to any magazines?

How often did you watch television?

How often did you watch the news?

How has your media usage changed since then?

Can you briefly describe what media outlets you relied on for your news information in the 60s?

Now?

### **Iconic Photos:**

(One at a time in the following order: Kent State, Self Immolation, Tet Execution, Mai Lai Massacre, Accidental Napalm)

Do you know what this photo is of? When was it taken? Where was it taken?

Have you seen this photo before? Can you tell me about the first time you saw it?

If you look at the photo, what do you notice first?

What qualities of the photo are the most striking to you?

What does this photo make you think about?

### **To sum up:**

Now thinking about these photographs as a whole, do they create an accurate story/history of the war? If not, what's missing?

**Appendix C: Research Question 3 Table**

	Kent	Self-Immolation	Tet Execution	My Lai	Napalm	All Photos	Total
War Today	1	2	1	1	2	2	9
Political Attitudes	1	0	1	0	1	5	8
Friends/Family	0	0	1	0	2	5	8
Draft	1	0	0	0	2	4	7
Protests	3	0	1	0	0	2	6
Cultural References	1	0	1	0	2	2	6
Media	0	1	1	0	0	2	4
Memory of the war	0	0	3	1	0	0	4
Civil Rights	1	1	0	0	0	1	3
College	0	1	0	1	0	1	3
The American Soldier	0	0	0	1	0	2	3
Vietnamese Children	0	0	0	1	2	0	3
Historical Reference	0	0	0	1	0	1	2
Patriotic Mentality	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Propaganda	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Playing as a child	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
During the event	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Vietnam Landscape	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>71</b>

**Appendix D: Development of the grounded theory**

