

12/30/71

Mr. Neil Sheehan
The New York Times
229 W 43 St.,
New York, N.Y. 10036

Dear Mr. Sheehan,

Your report on the NBC white papers on Vietnam credits neither you nor Fred Freed, the Times or NBC. It is particularly painful to me because I have been the victim, as I see it, of both the inadequacies and dishonesties of the Times and of NBC, yet I tell you the country is indebted to both for the belated attention each has given the subject of Vietnam.

As yet neither of you has done enough, but you have both, if so very late, done very well.

I suspect, and I ask you to ask yourself, if you did not fix upon deficiencies in your own fine work, as brought to light by NBC, as a basis for criticism. You didn't see it in The Pentagon Papers, didn't say it there, therefore it is wrong?

The Pentagon Papers are far from complete. You accept them as the last word. On John Kennedy and Vietnam withdrawal, you are quite wrong in your criticism of NBC, and the position to which he moved is firmer than NBC indicated. You didn't do your own homework but relied upon the incomplete Pentagon Papers. "y own work on this goes back to the period of the assassination(s). It does not rely on Wilson or Forrestal.

Because for all their deficiencies The Pentagon Papers is so very important, and because while the NBC White Papers fell far short of what they could have been they remain a significant contribution to public knowledge and understanding, with the influence of the Times, I really do regret that you seem to have fallen into a sour-grapes attitude. It would be tragic if this kind of unfair reporting would reduce the slim enough prospects for other such TV ventures. NBC deserves unstinted praise for these shows as it deserves your apology.

Your own fine work can be more seriously flawed if you were but aware of it. For example, the handling of the Gulf of Tonkin matter. Ask yourself what proof you had that the second alleged attack ever happened. Yet you present it as fact. The Pentagon Papers didn't have the other side, so you didn't. They don't really have JFK on withdrawal (the Pentagon didn't, either) so to you it isn't so.

Should there be another such show and should you again be called upon to review it, I hope you will then bear in mind what Jesus said about the stoning of the prostitute. Meanwhile, should the government ever follow through on what Zigler indicated might be possible and raise any questions about non-use of the so-called "Freedom of Information" Act, perhaps I can help you. (You'd never know this from reading the Times, but I've filed a number of suits under it and actually got an unreported summary judgement against the Department of Justice. NBC also knew and also didn't report.) Let you both earned thanks and mine at least you both have.

co: Fred Freed

Sincerely, Harold Waisberg

TV: 'Vietnam Hindsight' on the Kennedy Years

By NEIL SHEEHAN

A two-hour documentary by the National Broadcasting Company on the Vietnam decisions of the Kennedy Administration illustrates the limits television faces in seeking to meld into good history narration, film clips and retrospective interviews with surviving participants.

The program, entitled, "An N.B.C. News White Paper: Vietnam Hindsight," is being shown in two parts, the first hour at 8:30 P.M. yesterday and the second at 10 P.M. today.

The first section, called "How It Began," encompassed events from President Kennedy's initial commitment of American military advisers, planes and helicopter units to South Vietnam in the fall of 1961 to the political turmoil that erupted in 1963 with the Buddhist agitation against the Diem regime.

The concluding hour, entitled, "The Death of Diem," covers the coup d'état that resulted in the assassination of President Ngo Dinh Diem and his powerful brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, and the role of the Kennedy Administration in the coup plot.

The documentary was produced by Fred Freed, who

has won three Emmy awards, and, according to Mr. Freed, it took N.B.C. six months to put together and cost about a quarter of a million dollars.

The program does not, as asserted in a statement by Reuven Frank, the president of N.B.C. News, provide much "new material and new insights about information eight, nine and ten years old which was ignored or at least underestimated at the time."

The information and insights about the Kennedy years and Vietnam that the program presents have been available in published work on this crucial period in the history of the war.

For example, the material presented in the second hour, showing that the Kennedy Administration was deeply implicated in the coup plot, that the decision to kill Diem and his brother was a collective one taken by a military group headed by Gen. Duong Van Minh and that the assassin was General Minh's aide-de-camp, a Maj. Nguyen Van Nhung, has all been known.

Nevertheless, the experience of seeing those events visually recreated, and listening to participants describe them, have an impact on the viewer that printed history

such as the Pentagon papers, even if more detailed, cannot match.

Listening to Lieut. Col. Lucien Conein, a retired Central Intelligence Agency officer who was the liaison agent with the plotters, tell how the plotting unfolded, leaves the viewer with little doubt about the extent of United States implication.

As such, the documentary provides a valuable re-examination of history for the average American who may not find himself capable of reading thousands of words.

The narration-film clip-interview technique shows its limits at a number of points, however.

In two instances where N.B.C. apparently did not have authentic film to illustrate the narration, substitute film is used without any warning to the viewer.

The first involves a battle, and film clips from a training film are used to simulate combat.

The second is an incident in the old imperial capital of Hue on May 8, 1963, that started the Buddhist campaign against President Diem. Diem's troops killed nine persons in a crowd peacefully demonstrating against a decree outlawing the display of

Buddhist banners on Buddha's birthday.

While the narrator relates the event, the viewer sees a film clip of a Buddhist demonstration in Saigon weeks later.

The television technique shows its limits most often in what it leaves out.

Roger Hilsman, the former Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, tells the viewer that Robert F. Kennedy had asked whether the United States ought to withdraw entirely from Vietnam at the time of the Buddhist crisis in mid-1963.

The Pentagon papers show that Robert Kennedy added a second clause to this comment at a Washington policy meeting on whether to encourage a coup. He said that if Diem was found to be the obstacle to winning the war, then the United States ought to get rid of him.

Mr. Hilsman does not mention this second remark.

Michael V. Forrestal, a former special White House assistant to President Kennedy, seeks throughout to create an impression that President Kennedy would have withdrawn from Vietnam in 1965 rather than bomb the North and commit American combat troops to the South as President Johnson subsequently did. He says that Mr. Kennedy discussed the possibility of withdrawal with him just before his death.

Mr. Forrestal does not mention that two days before Mr. Kennedy died, the leading members of his Administration met in Honolulu to begin planning, among other items, clandestine warfare against North Vietnam, an action Mr. Johnson took up.

Floyd Kalber, the N.B.C. correspondent who narrates the program, concludes with a strong statement placing responsibility on Mr. Kennedy and his advisers for gravely deepening the American commitment in the war.

The fact that his assertion is not supported by a closer examination of the views put forth by Mr. Forrestal and others on the program, however, makes this conclusion something of an afterthought.