

VI WHY SOME SMALLER WARS ARE BIGGER NEWS THAN BIGGER ONES: CONFLICT AND THE JOURNALIST AS PLAYER

Although the seminar was dominated by issues raised by coverage of the recent war in the Gulf, its mandate was broader: The role of the media in international conflict. Discussion touched on what Bernard Wood called "the First Gulf War," between Iran and Iraq; on the Palestinian rebellion against Israel, the *Intifadah*; and on hostage-takings, a subject dealt with by two journalists who had become, in different ways, players in those grim dramas.

Vietnam was often mentioned by American participants because of the pivotal role played by the news media in that first "living-room war," and the bitterness between the military and the media that followed. It was not just the novelty and high drama of a televised war that was important. It was also the ways in which newspaper and TV reportage both influenced and reflected public opinion in the United States. In the early stages of the long conflict, mainstream opinion favoured the war, which was seen as part of the worldwide crusade to contain communism. Americans became more and more critical as promises of quick victory proved illusory, and the "body count" -- a Vietnam military phrase -- rose in numbers and emotional power.

The rising tide of anger against the war forced President Lyndon Johnson to abandon hope of re-election in 1968. His successor, the anti-communist hawk Richard Nixon, ended the war in unacknowledged defeat. Such is the potential power of uncensored news coverage in conditions where the society accepts openness and where technology permits immediate transmission of words and film.

At the other extreme of contemporary war coverage were conflicts in Ethiopia and the Ogaden, in the Sudan, in Liberia, and between Iran and Iraq. Compared with the massive coverage of what turned out to be a one-month war last winter, these protracted conflicts were under-covered. One important reason was that neither the United States nor any other Western nation was directly involved. Another was that access to these theatres of war was difficult. The Sudan excluded journalists almost completely.