

# 1.23

## Street Execution of a Viet Cong Prisoner, Saigon, 1968

*Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites*

Two Vietnamese stand in an open city street. The man to the left aims his pistol at the man on the right and pulls the trigger; the man on the right is in the liminal state between life and death, his face distorted by the force of the bullet that has entered his right temple but not yet exited the other side. Not yet dead, his death is nevertheless imminent.<sup>1</sup> The photograph, commonly dubbed “Saigon Execution,” became iconic and remains one of the images explicitly tied to America’s questionable involvement in the Vietnam War.

Iconic photographs represent significant historical events, create strong emotional responses, and circulate widely across media, genres, and topics.<sup>2</sup> These signature images also exemplify basic conditions of all photography, not least how the meaning of the image exceeds the intentions of the photographer, how it is from the start a complicated assemblage of facts and values, and how it can change over time. The corresponding difficulties in interpretation are evident in the history of “Saigon Execution.” The image depicts actual conditions of warfare during the Tet Offensive, when Saigon was under martial law: civilians were being killed (e.g., by the prisoner before he was captured), enemies were not always in uniform, and the street battles required close, vicious fighting. Yet even when this contextualization was provided, the image of a bound prisoner being summarily executed on a city street also evoked strong emotional reactions that encompassed justification of the war itself. This moral shock and its strong resonance with the controversy over the war may have accounted for the prominence of the image among the many others taken during Tet, as well as its subsequent use on behalf of both progressive and conservative ideologies.

The photograph was taken on 1 February 1968, the second day of the Tet Offensive, a comprehensive surprise attack against US and South Vietnamese troops by the North Vietnamese army and the Viet Cong. The photographer Eddie Adams, a seasoned AP war photographer, had been in and out of Vietnam since 1965. As Adams reported, he came across several South Vietnamese soldiers in the Chinese neighborhood of Cholon who were marching a man in civilian clothes down the street with his hands secured behind his back. Adams followed them, snapping photographs, when another man approached from the left, raised a pearl handled revolver to the prisoner’s temple, and pulled the trigger. Thinking that the man with the gun was trying to intimidate the prisoner, Adams took the photograph



**Figure 1.23** South Vietnamese Gen. Nguyễn Ngọc Loan, chief of national police, fires his pistol into the head of suspected Viet Cong officer Nguyễn Văn Lem (also known as Bay Lop) on a Saigon street, 1 February 1968, early in Tet Offensive. AP Photo/Eddie Adams.

never imagining that he was actually witnessing an execution.<sup>3</sup> He took other photographs of the aftermath, including several of the man laying on the ground with a river of blood flowing from his head, but it was the photograph taken at the very moment of execution that appeared on the NBC nightly news that evening, was reprinted the next day on the front pages of newspapers across the United States, appeared in many major weekly news magazines, was almost immediately taken up by anti-war protestors and displayed on posters and T-shirts, and subsequently earned the World Press Photo Prize of 1968 and the Pulitzer Prize for news photography in 1969.

As reported in the caption to the photograph as it was printed in the *New York Times* on 2 February 1968, the executioner was General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan, the national chief of police for South Vietnam, and immediately upon shooting his prisoner, a Viet Cong guerilla (later identified as Nguyễn Văn Lém), he announced to Adams, “They killed many of my people, and yours, too.” The image featured the act rather than any single justification, however, and this tableau along with filmed footage from the scene shot by an NBC crew was widely broadcast on television on 2 February.<sup>4</sup> The execution quickly became a rallying point for opposition to the war in Vietnam, and then for revisionary accounts as well.<sup>5</sup>

Adams went to his grave bemoaning the fact that the photograph was used to condemn General Loan and US involvement in the war. This response, while understandable in respect to Adam's beliefs, nonetheless is based on a blinkered understanding of both the Vietnam War and photographic meaning. An image of what appeared to be cold-blooded vigilante justice crystallized an attitude of official indifference to human suffering that far exceeded the reach of this one event, including the use by American forces or allies of napalm, Agent Orange, assassination programs, relocation camps, tiger cages, and similar tactics that inflicted severe civilian casualties in a war that many believed to be both unnecessary and unjust. Nor is such extension of the photograph secondary to its original meaning, as many features of the scene are already part of that wider and inherently controversial context.

Iconic photographs challenge conventional wisdom about the meaning of any photograph. That meaning often cannot be reduced to the simple facts of the case at hand or relegated to the photographer's intention or understanding. The facts are neither simple nor self-sufficient, but depend rather on selection, framing, depiction, contextualization, and imaginative extension in terms of larger narratives. The significance of "Saigon Execution" was not that it represented or misrepresented an execution, but that it embodied the moral ambiguity of violence that characterized US involvement in the Vietnam War. Its continued circulation suggests that, in more ways than one, the war is not yet over.

## Notes

- 1 See Barbie Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- 2 Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007).
- 3 Eddie Adams, ed., *Eddie Adams Vietnam* (New York: Umbrage, 2008): 140–51; and *An Unlikely Weapon*, dir. Susan Cooper (2008, Morgan Cooper Productions).
- 4 George A. Bailey, and Lawrence W. Lichty, "Rough Justice on a Saigon Street: A Gatekeeper Study of NBC's Tet Execution Film," in P. Braestrup, ed., *Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington*, v.2 (Boulder: Westview, 1977): 266–81.
- 5 See Bruce H. Franklin, *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 2000).