

around NSA, and Bamford ignores them. His book may be considered a valuable account of the structural chronology and morphology of NSA, and it does contain some account of Soviet penetrations and other NSA losses (the attack on the *Liberty* and the *Pueblo*, for example). But Bamford's obsession with secrecy and the much-ballyhooed "right to know" is trite and unpersuasive, and it leads him to neglect the more serious aspects of NSA, which also happens to represent one of the more serious problems of modern governments—the replacement of human skills by technical expertise and the consequent inability of governments to deal with human problems. Four centuries ago Machiavelli warned both princes and republics not to rely on mercenaries, artillery, and fortified defenses. He is often criticized for ignoring the importance of these factors in

securing political and military power, but Machiavelli's real concern was that states would rely on such gadgetry at the expense of the moral and emotional forces that underlie the strength, security, and interests of the state. In the philosophy of James Bamford, as in that of the technocrats he dissects, such forces are not even dreamt of because their ideology renders the moral and emotional realities of human nature invisible. Instead, the establishment pursues the appearance of security through technological illusion, and critics like Bamford promote the illusion of freedom by denying the need for security.

The Puzzle Palace sports a quotation from George Orwell as its motto and ends with a quotation from Frank Church. One feels rather sorry for Mr. Bamford, because after so much effort he finds so little to justify either one. □

Media Magic: Victories into Defeats

Peter Braestrup: *Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington* (Abridged edition); Yale University Press; New Haven, CT.

by Robert Nisbet

This valuable book was first published in two volumes in 1977. Such was its immediately recognized authority that it created a very considerable amount of distress in schools of journalism and in the higher offices of the print and electronic media. And well it should have, for it is difficult to imagine a more humiliating document than this book in its impact upon publishers, editors, producers, and anchormen. Rarely if ever have the media been caught in flagrante delicto in as searching, meticulously investigated, and superbly written a

Dr. Nisbet's most recent book is Prejudices: A Philosophical Dictionary.

fashion as they have by Peter Braestrup. And seldom has the difference between objective reality and contrived, falsified reality been made more stark.

Peter Braestrup was the proper man to undertake the seven years of detailed investigation that went into the making of *Big Story*. A combat Marine veteran of Korea, he went to South Vietnam as reporter; in due time he was Bureau Chief of the *Washington Post*. Korea had blooded him, as it were, so he was used to the realities of battle in a degree denied to most or all of his fellow reporters in Vietnam. The reader will look in vain for anger and recrimination in the book. There is no air of righteousness, no finger pointing, no moralizing. The author describes himself as simply "an active if less than omniscient participant in the Viet Nam coverage I describe."

The result is damning nevertheless. Braestrup holds the glass up to myriad reporters, editors, commentators, and anchormen in respect to their coverage of the single most decisive battle of the

whole Vietnam War—or rather what could have been the most decisive battle had that battle been assimilated by official Washington and the media in a way bearing some correspondence to reality.

On January 30-31, 1968, the Vietcong, aided heavily by North Vietnamese regular soldiers, unleashed a powerful assault upon towns and cities in South Vietnam, including Saigon. Even in the first waves, more than 80,000 troops were involved. Moreover, they were overwhelmingly the cream of the enemy's forces, well trained, bold, and resourceful—and well armed. Almost immediately the communists were able to surround the American Marine outpost in Khe San; they held it under siege for days. For three weeks they occupied the former imperial capital city, Hue. Even the American Embassy in Saigon was invaded by sappers, and although they never achieved control, there were some anxious hours.

But despite the careful preparation for the surprise onslaught, and despite the very high quality of troops, the attack failed utterly. Within a few days the eventual outcome of the battle was no longer in doubt. The South Vietnamese troops, fighting bravely and effectively—joined, of course, by American soldiers—came very close to completely destroying the attacking communist forces. Tens of thousands of elite, long-experienced fighters of the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese regulars were killed or captured. As wave after wave of the communist soldiers came out of the jungle and the villages they were met by deadly firepower.

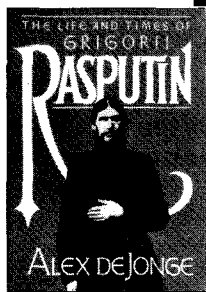
Braestrup quotes tellingly from another reporter present, Don Obendorfer:

It is clear that the attack force—and particularly the indigenous Vietcong who did most of the fighting and dying—suffered a grievous military setback. . . . The Vietcong lost the best of a generation of resistance fighters, and after Tet, increasing numbers of North Vietnamese had to be sent south to fill the ranks. The war became in-

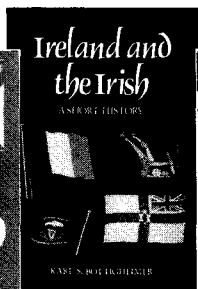
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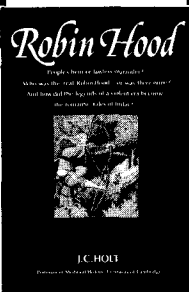
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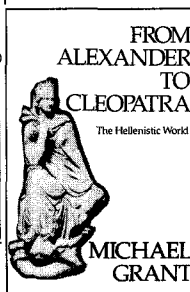
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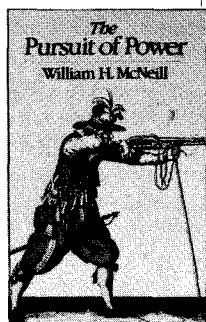
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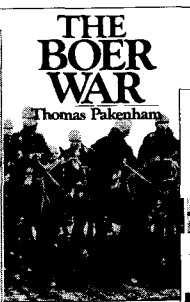
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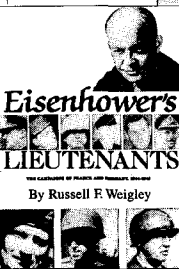
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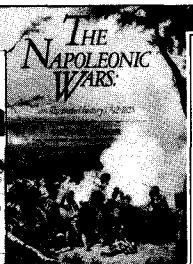
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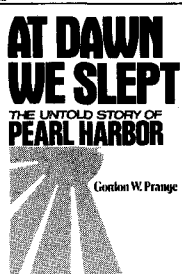
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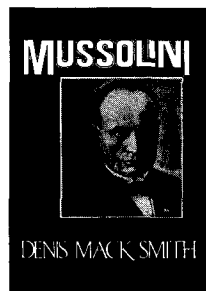
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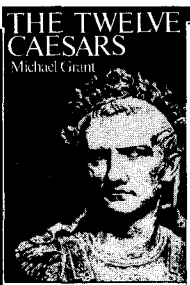
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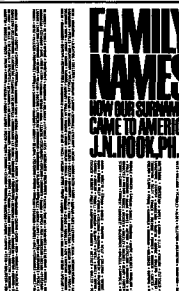
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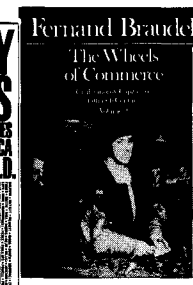
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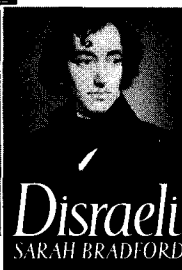
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creasingly a conventional battle and less an insurgency. Because the people of the cities did not rise up against the foreigners and puppets at Tet—indeed they gave little support to the attack force—communist claim to a moral and political authority in South Viet Nam suffered a serious blow.

Or consider this quotation, from the authoritative *Strategic Survey—1969*, published by the Institute for Strategic Studies, London:

The enormous losses incurred by North Vietnamese during their major offensives of February and May 1968 destroyed the elite of North Vietnam's army. That army showed little sign of recovery during 1969. They had been forced in 1968 to abandon much of their rural power base, in the form of territory under their control, in order to launch the assault upon the cities. That assault having failed, they found in retreat that their rural base . . . had begun to crumble.

That must do here for the authoritatively certified reality of the Tet offensive and its outcome. In every important respect—political and social as well as military—it represented a huge success for South Vietnamese and American soldiers. But let us now turn to the coverage of this victory in the United States—at the time, afterward, and even to this day in many instances. Instead of the victory that it actually was for us, it was perceived and broadcast by the media almost unfailingly as the “disaster in Vietnam.” As Braestrup writes: “The generalized effect of the news media’s contemporary output in February-March 1968 was a distortion of reality—through sins of omission and commission—on a scale that helped shape Tet’s political repercussions in Washington and the Administration’s response.”

Distortion it was, to say the least. There are hundreds of pages in this book dealing relentlessly with just about every aspect of the distortion and every medium in which it flourished. Walter Cron-

kite, just back from a week in South Vietnam after the victory was assured, produced a now-notorious half-hour documentary in which the “reality” of the event was not our victory but our defeat. Cronkite’s “reality” was one in which there were few losses by communist attackers; one in which most official reports by the American leaders in Saigon were derided; one in which Hue was treated as in total ruins, with refugees everywhere in panic; one in which pacification was seen as a total failure of the United States; and, finally, a picture of the Tet offensive so somber overall as to lead Cronkite to conclude pathetically that the best Americans and South Vietnamese could hope for was somehow to “salvage a measure of victory from defeat” (emphasis added).

There was a story in *Newsweek* (February 12, 1968) that asserted: “Westmoreland and his commanders were

clearly caught short by the scope and intensity of the raids . . . And they *insisted* on reading the communists’ objectives in strictly military—rather than political or psychological—terms. . . . In Hue and elsewhere last week the Vietcong showed that they could still be *devastatingly effective*” (emphasis added). Interestingly, *Time* early on provided a story in which reality prevailed, in which the devastating losses by the communists were emphasized. But, as Braestrup observes, *Time* did not thereafter publish that kind of story. It also joined in the general chorus of doom that the media formed—along with some highly placed Washington officials.

One more illustration must suffice, this one from the chief guru of American liberals, John Kenneth Galbraith. As his memoirs make clear, Galbraith considered himself an authority on Vietnam, indeed on all of Southeast Asia. Braestrup

LIBERAL CULTURE

New Atlantis

The years Shirley MacLaine has spent as an ardent leftist and fellow traveler appear to have prepared her well mentally for a new role: that of spiritualist, medium, and psychic. In a recent interview, Ms. MacLaine declared—with the same passion formerly reserved for the communist workers’ paradises—that she was visited by actor Peter Sellers moments after he died: “I could *feel* Peter smile,” she said, thus inducing a bit of confusion as to the character of the meeting. She also claimed that in one of her previous lives she lived and died in Atlantis. Averred this American beacon of thespian intellectuality:

I remembered very clearly the feeling of living in Atlantis . . . I was a man, a great teacher . . . I couldn’t stand the thought of drowning, so I killed myself.

Ms. MacLaine’s metaphysical gammon will shortly roll off the presses in a book



at a time when a troubled publishing industry is routinely rejecting works of scholarship, intelligence, and talent. Which can only mean that a certain island on the New York Bay has sunk even lower than the fabled isle of antiquity. □

cites an Associated Press story, February 16, 1968, based upon an interview with Galbraith. The story begins:

Professor John Kenneth Galbraith today predicted that important units of the South Vietnamese army will either disappear into the woods or join the Vietcong within the next months. 'It's been an open secret for a long while,' Galbraith said, 'that important units of the South Vietnamese forces up in the 1st Corps area or the 25th Division south of Saigon have a close working relationship with the Vietcong and will either disappear into the woods or join the Vietcong.' . . . Galbraith said his conclusion of imminent collapse of the South Vietnamese government and army is based on a 'careful reading' of the news accounts of the war.

Galbraith was President of the Americans for Democratic Action at that time; it can be assumed that a very large number of liberals in the U.S. felt confirmed in their "knowledge" that not only had Tet been a disaster for South Vietnam and the Americans but also that the true corruption and all-around wickedness of the South Vietnamese government was so bad that entire units of troops and numerous citizens alike were defecting to the Vietcong. Braestrup cites material from Edward J. Epstein that tells how, in late 1968, an NBC producer suggested to his chief that a three-part series be done on television showing that Tet had been a victory for the Americans and South Vietnamese. The suggestion was rejected because, said NBC to the producer, Tet was already established "in the public's mind as a defeat, and therefore it was a defeat." I have no doubt that similar experiences were suffered by many a newspaper reporter or subeditor.

It is unnecessary to cite further examples. The question now is: What is the explanation for the immense chasm that separated reality in South Vietnam from the false representation of it which seized nearly all of the U.S. media, leading them to declare defeat and disaster

where, in fact, victory lay? Braestrup does not think that ideological forces had much to do with phenomenon—apart from the working press's general hostility toward President Johnson and some of his close advisers. He calls it "an extreme case," writing: "The special circumstances of Tet impacted to a rare degree on modern American journalism's special susceptibilities and limitations. This peculiar conjuncture overwhelmed reporters, commentators, and their superiors alike." He correctly points out that credibility of the Johnson Administration was extremely low in the media's opinion—and in that of the general public, for that matter—from about 1966 on. Johnson (who as Vice-President had been lukewarm toward any participation at all in Vietnam and was perhaps the only voice in opposition to U.S. participation in the coup that overturned Diem) became simply overwhelmed by the war. He doubtless sensed early that it was going to be a lethal blow to his aspiration to greatness as President. In any event, as Braestrup notes, Johnson's leadership as commander in chief was pretty much in shreds. Some of his press conferences and interviews on the war in Vietnam are almost nightmarish in retrospect. Such a President and the attendant condition of chaos in the White House made accurate reporting difficult for even the few really exceptional members of the media, both at home and in South Vietnam.

But, Braestrup declares, beyond Johnson's lack of candor and the confusion he disseminated lay signal inadequacies and failures on the part of the "media managers." These are the people in press and television who are the ultimate determiners of what is wanted, what is relevant, and what is actually printed or broadcast. In the end it was failure or willful refusal of the news managers at home that "brought down the curtain while the play was still going on." Disaster for the U.S. had been quickly assumed when Tet began, and no amount of contrary evidence proved capable of altering this assumption, this state of mind.

Braestrup ends his book with a warning that the inadequacies of the media are with us still, the sorry tale of Tet notwithstanding, and "in view of all these factors, unsatisfactory performance in another surprise crisis or near-crisis appears likely." Braestrup has already, several times, been proved correct as a prophet—El Salvador, especially on television, being a special example.

I do not agree entirely with Braestrup's dismissal of the ideological factor in the press's coverage of Tet. Granted that in the field ideological considerations mattered little if at all once the Tet offensive began. But surely the "media managers" back home were, by 1968, exceedingly sensitive to ideological considerations. The revolutionary 1960's were already in full display. There is no question at all in my mind that the relentless and steadily mounting opposition to the war in Vietnam from the left—which included a substantial number of intellectuals and other opinion-makers as well as the thousands of students whose demonstrations and riots were the regular stuff of the evening news—had a great deal to do in shaping what the French call a *mentalité* among news managers as well as "managers" in the churches, the schools, and the universities. It is impossible to believe that the rather abject departure from government of the McNamaras, Bundys, Hillsmans, and Schlesingers had nothing to do with the rain of hatred and scorn that so many of America's best-known intellectuals, from New York to San Francisco, had been directing against these Presidential advisers since 1965. It is equally impossible to believe that the same rain of hate and scorn did not also affect media managers. Let's hope that in future U.S. military and political engagements (e.g., in Latin America) the media managers clean house a little beforehand. But no matter how clean they get their house, they (and we) should be warned that the same rain of hell fire that fell on their heads in the late 1960's from the political left is going to fall again, this time, perhaps, much more heavily. □

A Dwarf as Giant

Pablo Neruda: *Passions and Impressions*; Farrar, Straus & Giroux; New York.

by Mary Ellen Fox

How does one cope with the phenomenon of Pablo Neruda, Chilean poet and 1971 Nobel Prize winner? He is obviously considered a great poet by many—at least by those who have been overwhelmed by his neo-Whitmanesque effusions or by the so-called charm of his odes to socks, watermelons, salt, and other sundry items. Still others are enthralled by that facet of his poetry which can only be described as socialist-realist bombast and which includes a diatribe against the United Fruit Company and a paean to a shoveler in the nitrate mines.

However, it is not Neruda the poet but Neruda the political essayist and activist that is in question here, since *Passions and Impressions* is primarily a compendium of Neruda's positions both intellectual and emotional. Neruda was a fervent communist; the tenets of his faith are party-line orthodox in the extreme. He sounds "*plus Catholique que le Pape*" when he lashes out at "the agents of North American imperialism" such as Anaconda Copper and Bethlehem Steel, while describing Marx and Lenin as "a generation of extraordinary fathers of hope . . . [and] new leaders of love." Neruda believed that "political struggle is an integral part of poetry"; accordingly, his political commitments and contributions must be given equal weight with his poetry. The most charitable thing that can be said about his beliefs is that they are outrageously naive. This book is well named, since there appears to be a minimum of cerebration in it and a maximum of romantic feelings. With the idealized image of communism and the cold facts of history continuously on a collision course, Neruda jettisoned

logic and objectivity without blinking an eye. After the trials and the purges, after the gulag, after Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and after an avalanche of revisionism to the point where the gospels and heresies of the moment couldn't be determined without a scorecard, Neruda blindly persisted in his faith. In the world view of most Latin American intellectuals, Marx and the State have replaced Christ and the Church. In a recent interview*, Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes explained such religious adherence to a new creed this way: "We are the sons of rigid ecclesiastic societies. This is the burden of Latin America—to go from one church to another, from Catholicism to Marxism, with all its dogma and ritual. This way we feel protected." But Neruda went even further than his fellow coreligionists in that he was one of the few who maintained absolute, unquestioning loyalty to Moscow throughout his life.

Even the Latin American clergy trade in the old faith for the new, improved model. Nicaragua's present Minister of Culture, a poet who is also a priest, describes his own road to Damascus*:

It was like a second conversion. Before then, I saw myself as a revolutionary, but I had confused ideas. I was trying to find a third way, which was the Revolution of the Gospel, but then I saw that Cuba was the Gospel put into practice. And only when I converted to Marxism could I write religious poetry.

When confronted with such a remark, a believing Christian must hesitate between laughter and tears. This same schizophrenic reaction occurs after reading a speech of Neruda's from 1968 reprinted here as "My Burning Faith in Peace." Addressing an emissary from the U.S.S.R., Neruda honors him for "repre-

senting the greatest inspiration known to man. This inspiration is the existence and the persistence, the unparalleled triumphs, of the Soviet people and the great Revolution . . . that vast nation, governed by a classless society, invariably joins in every movement for peace and liberation manifested anywhere on our planet." There is still more: "We know that the Soviet Union is a formidable seedbed of modest but illustrious heroes. The world still thrills at the memory of its glorious defense of peace and liberty in crushing the threat of Hitler. Those were somber and bloody days, and humanity recognizes its immeasurable debt to the Soviets." Of course, we all know how that modest but illustrious hero Stalin single-handedly defeated Hitler. Neruda continues by decrying the United States as Hitler's heir:

But, terrified, we ask ourselves whether such an unconceivable horror [as World War II] might again befall history. More recently, we have seen how peace, a peace so tragically obtained, has been betrayed. One state more powerful than the rest has carried death and destruction to lands far distant from its territory. With ferocious violence it has destroyed the cities, the cultivated fields, the buildings, and the lives of a small nation whose people, proud of their ancient culture, had only recently burst free from their colonial chains.

And Neruda goes on to describe the criminality of the U.S. actions in Vietnam, while comparing our "genocide" there with the murder of Martin Luther King. "He [King] was killed by abominable, seemingly powerful forces. From the unjust war in Korea to the disgraceful assault against the independence of Vietnam, these forces have been unleashed in North America as a poisonous by-product of war. It is in official violence that we must seek the origin of these crimes. Two wars have taught thousands of young men the practice of killing and

Dr. Fox's degree is in Spanish literature.

*"Revolution and the Intellectual in Latin America," *New York Times Magazine*, March 13, 1983.