

## Arnold Isaacs Replies to Dr. William Stearman

Arnold R. Isaacs, *Journalist and Vietnam War Correspondent*—Dr. William Stearman has every right to his opinions on the Vietnam War. He has no right to mislead readers about my essay and what it said and did not say. Stearman’s distortions are startling, to put it mildly. To begin with, for reasons only he can explain, he all but ignores that my article was a discussion of selected books on Vietnam. Except for a single title, he does not refer to the books at all or say anything about their subject matter. Then he fails to make any distinction between opinions I stated as mine and opinions that are clearly described as those of the authors whose books I reviewed. The result is a complete misrepresentation of the essay’s fundamental nature and its content.

The conclusion that the Vietnam War was immoral, for example, was not mine but that of Nick Turse, the author of one of the books I discussed. Far from endorsing Turse’s view, as Stearman alleges, I wrote at some length opposing it. I disputed Turse’s assertion that war crimes were a typical practice of American soldiers and criticized him for giving absolutely no recognition to Americans who did not commit or cover up crimes against civilians. Elsewhere Stearman similarly and falsely attributes judgments to me that were not mine but those of one of the books I reviewed. Those were not subtle differences but obvious ones, and I am at a loss to know how Stearman arrived at such consistently inaccurate interpretations of what I wrote.

Stearman took particular exception to my calling the Defense Department’s history for its 50th anniversary commemoration “a feel-good fable.” (That *is* my opinion, and I think an inescapable one; it’s hard to know what else to call a history that glosses over all uncomfortable facts including that our side lost the war.) Stearman is not above promoting fables of his own, however. His anecdote about Peter Braestrup in Hue, for example, clearly belongs in that category.

First, the scene he describes never happened. The bodies of the 2,800 massacre victims were not found in a single mass grave as U.S. troops retook the city. Instead, as is exhaustively documented in a report written for the U.S. mission by a senior American official, the bodies were in 19 different locations that were discovered at intervals over the course of many months after the battle, so the true nature of the event emerged only over time.<sup>1</sup> Second, no such story appears in Braestrup’s own account of how American journalists covered the massacre—this in a highly critical 1,400-page study of U.S. media in the Tet Offensive. Nor is it mentioned in Braestrup’s 1982 oral history interview for the LBJ Library, the transcript of which runs more than 60 pages. There is no evidence that Braestrup ever told the story elsewhere, either, or that anyone else did until Stearman’s friend Siemon-Netto started circulating it years after Braestrup’s death. (If the anecdote had been known earlier, it is a safe bet that the many and vociferous critics of American reporters in Vietnam would not have left it unmentioned for four decades.)

It is also untrue that the *New York Times* gave only a few paragraphs to the massacre or that it was a “one-day story” for American media. In fact, the *Times* and other major papers carried a number of reports as the story began to unfold in the weeks following the battle. It is worth noting that one of the earliest and most detailed stories to appear in the *Times* was written by a journalist whom Braestrup documents as *opposing* U.S. policy and expressing unease about writing “propaganda.” The journalist was not American and not a TV reporter but a *London Times* correspondent named Stewart Harris. Rather than suppress the Hue killings for ideological reasons, though, Harris was one of the first to investigate them. He wrote about them in unsparing and graphic terms—which suggests exactly the opposite of Stearman’s conclusion about journalists and their values.<sup>2</sup> All this is evidence that Stearman could easily have found if he had made any effort to verify his story. I am sorry he did not see fit to do so.

The Braestrup anecdote is not the only factually questionable item in Stearman's commentary. His account of the 1972-73 peace negotiations is inaccurate in almost every detail. So is his assertion that American journalists eagerly searched for stories on war crimes by U.S. troops. The My Lai incident, for instance, was reported in considerable detail by communist news media not long after it happened, but American reporters in Vietnam quickly accepted the U.S. command's denials and made no effort to investigate the communist report. When Seymour Hersh broke the My Lai story for American readers many months later, his report was turned down by a long list of major media organizations before it was finally published by a little-known antiwar news service. Only then did the event get extensive attention. On other atrocity reports and on the issue of civilian casualties in general, the record is clear that American news media were reluctant rather

than eager to pursue such stories, and those subjects were, if anything, under-reported rather than overemphasized in U.S. media coverage of the war.

Whether Stearman's misrepresentations of my essay were deliberate or just inexplicably careless, I have no way to know. In either case, they do not advance his argument but discredit it. I am reminded of a quotation from John Adams, who wrote in 1770, "Facts are stubborn things, and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passion, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence."<sup>3</sup> Whether expressing his views on Vietnam or his disagreements with my essay, Stearman would have been more convincing if he had heeded Adams's advice.

1. Douglas Pike, *The Viet Cong Strategy of Terror. Saigon: U.S. Mission* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1970).

2. Peter Braestrup, *The Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington*, 2 vols. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1977), 1: 279-86; 2: 241-44.

3. John Adams, "Argument in Defense of the British Soldiers in the Boston Massacre Trials" (4 December 1770).

## Ph.D. Completion Timeline

Lt. Col. Shon McCormick, *Ph.D., U.S. Army, Army Strategist (FA 59)*—I am writing to voice my concerns with the Ph.D. completion timeline Maj. Gen. Gordon Davis, Brig. Gen. Thomas Graves, and Col. Christopher Prigge portray in their article "The Strategic Planning 'Problem'" (*Military Review*, November-December 2013). My own recent experience in completing a Ph.D. program encouraged me to write and ensure prospective Advanced Strategic Planning and Policy Program (ASP3) candidates are fully aware of the cost in time and energy associated with completing the program under the conditions the authors describe.

Based on my experience, I do not think most officers can complete their dissertation according to the ASP3 model. According to the article, officers in the ASP3 program need to complete a substantial portion of their dissertation work while simultaneously performing a developmental tour at a "combatant command or other strategic headquarters." Even though I had the luxury of conducting the majority of my dissertation work as a full-time student, it still took me 18 months of eight- to ten-hour workdays.

Moreover, the only way I was able to meet this timeline was to choose a social science approach because it was more amenable to rapid completion. Those choosing a historical approach requiring significant primary research require much more time—time that I do not see provided in the ASP3 model. While the final year focused on completion is beneficial, the student's research—the most time-consuming portion of the dissertation—has to occur during the developmental tour because research is the unavoidable first step in any dissertation. To stay on track, ASP3 officers should expect to devote their weekends and other free time during their developmental tour to researching and writing.

My point is not to argue that no one can finish the ASP3 program according to the model. The authors acknowledge that a number of officers have completed Ph.D. programs on their own time. I just want to ensure prospective ASP3 candidates are aware of the costs in personal time and effort they should expect to put forward under this program.