

Elections are difficult for the electorate as well as for the candidates. This is even truer when the former is camped in the jungles and rice paddies half a world away. The task of AFVN Election Central in November 1968 was to carry the U.S. general election results to American soldiers in Vietnam. The way AFVN saw it, merely reporting the statistics was not enough.

✓ **AFVN**

✓ **Election**

✓ **Central**

✓ **Beating The Numbers**

✓ *by Randall J. Moody*

A spent bullet landing on a typewriter, a taxi full of TNT interrupting a newscast and sentries in the television tower. These are some of the things that make broadcasting in Vietnam a step above the ordinary.

Reporting U.S. elections in Vietnam is no ordinary matter, either. With the handicaps of distance, lack of material and personnel, unreliable communications circuits and the necessity to avoid interpretation and analysis, planning and executing an election report system for American Forces Radio and Television (AFRT) is not an easy task.

In the fall of 1968, American Forces Vietnam Network (AFVN) was composed of the key station in Saigon with AM-FM radio and a 240,000-watt television transmitter. The rest of the network consisted of radio and TV stations at Danang, Qui Nhon, Pleiku, Nha Trang and television studios in Tuy Hoa. An electronic

link of TV stations did not exist; consequently, programs were air-transported between network affiliates.

At that time during the Vietnam War, there were more than one-half million American servicemen in the country depending primarily on AFVN for their news from "the world." The immediacy of radio and television is highly important for events such as elections when instantaneous reporting is a must. If servicemen in Vietnam had had to depend only on newspapers, they would have received word of Richard Nixon's victory almost three days after it happened.

The news department of AFVN began planning for election coverage right after the Democratic National Convention in August. The department simply did not have the personnel or resources to do both radio and TV "live" coverage from the Saigon studios. Thus, concen-

tration was laid on television. The range of AFVN's signal broadcasting from Saigon (a survey showed that it reached about half the viewers of AFVN's entire TV operation) was considered worthy of a first-class production effort.

Another aspect—the audience was a cross-section of America. Somewhere in the hinterlands, someone would probably have an interest in some election contest. AFVN had to perform the job of a commercial network election central to be truly effective.

Broadcasts from AFRT (Washington) were used for most of the radio coverage on election night. Newscasters broke in about five minutes every hour for some local news and, occasionally, for interesting wire service reports.

The 1968 AFRT transmissions were somewhat confusing. Apparently, it was felt that all four commercial networks—ABC, NBC, CBS and Mutual—should participate in the coverage sometime during each hour. The result was four different coverages, none of which occurred at the same point in time. For example, the audience heard CBS say that Nixon had won a particular state and then, when AFRT switched to NBC, that network would report the results in that state weren't complete.

Election coverage for television was divided into four areas—the Presidential, Senate, House and gubernatorial races. Each newsmen was

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responsible for researching, writing background material, assembling visuals and thoroughly knowing his particular subject.

True and consistent objectivity in reporting is, at the least, difficult, especially in election coverage. Reporting only reams of dry statistics is unfair to viewer and newsmen alike, for there's a story behind each statistic. The reporter should tell not only what is happening but also provide some of the reasons why. (All media, whether broadcast or print, whether military or civilian, cannot be content with merely burying the audience with facts.) Therefore, the AFVN staffers were expected to transmit the results of their research as well as the registering returns.

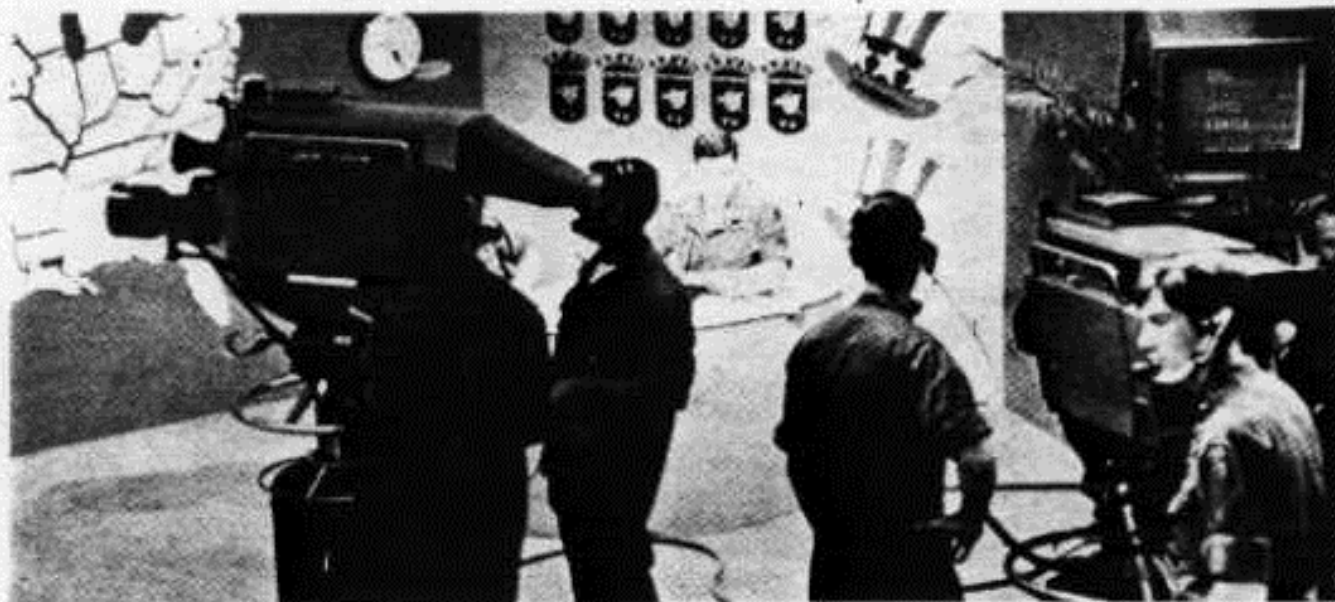
Marine Gunnery Sergeant Carl Carter handled the Presidential results. Carl, the regular evening newscaster, was AFVN's Walter Cronkite. He had the relaxed manner and ability to remain unruffled amidst the whirlwind activity in the studio. He put together, with the help of the film editor, Navy Journalist Dale Pitman, three reels of newfilm, one on each of the Presidential candidates, for use throughout the broadcast. The film, from the ABC film service, was compiled over the course of the long campaign.

Army Staff Sergeant Nick Palladino, 22, the old pro of the staff, had been in Vietnam since 1965 and with AFVN when it was called Armed Forces Radio and located in the Brinks Hotel in downtown Saigon. His responsibility was to report the Senate races and to assemble and deliver the short newscasts which interspersed the election special.

Army Specialist Mike Maxwell covered the 365 Congressional contests without once becoming unglued. With the help of AFRT (Washington), he obtained the names of all House candidates—a formidable list. Mike didn't have the time to give results of all the

Covering the 1968 general election AFVN style, Marine Gunnery Sergeant Carl Carter (foreground), who reports on the Presidential race, looks over the network's Saigon election central studio.





rices, but through research and study he knew the key contests.

Marine Sergeant Kim Peterson, thorough and competent, often enlivened the sometimes tedious programming venture. He was responsible for the gubernatorial races and other key elections such as the mayoral contests in certain cities and other—jokingly referred to as “dogcatcher”—elections of interest.

To coordinate all this activity, I worked with Army Specialist Toney Brooks at an off-camera control panel in the studio. We acted as a clearing house for the whole operation. All the wire service copy passed through our desk for any necessary rewriting and editing before delivery to the on-camera reporters. Through the work of our studio engineer, Army Specialist Harvey Geminder, the control panel was electronically connected to each anchorman so I could relay instructions. The newscasters had transistor radio ear plug connections to receive directions. We were also in communication with the technical director in the control room to facilitate maneuvering his two cameras into the proper positions. The director, in turn, had a separate channel to his floor manager and studio cameramen.

Since the news team was dependent entirely upon the wire services and AFRT (Washington) for the returns, the teletype machines were installed right in the studio. The wire ticker noise added a newsroom dimension to the telecast.

Navy Radioman Art Borland spent at least two sleepless days making sure his sensitive teletype machines held up throughout the day (“day” because the time difference meant our coverage ran all day instead of all night as in the United States, an element which helped in-

crease our audience, as well).

Because of the electronically unstable reception of teletype and audio signals, and because it was vital they not be interrupted during the coverage period, I requested that the MACV signal office temporarily upgrade the priority of our lines during the election. This was done so that circuits, if broken, could be immediately restored.

The AFVN graphics department, headed by Army Sergeant First Class Richard Nankivell, worked long hours constructing and painting the red, white and blue election set in the one

A larger view of election central studio shows the special sets of AFVN's 1968 election broadcast. In the background, Army Staff Sergeant Nick Palladino gives results of the Senate races.



Marine Sergeant Kim Peterson reports on the gubernatorial contests. Each anchorman was responsible for researching and compiling data on his particular area of coverage.

large studio. It was unfortunate the telecast was not in color.

The special was promoted during every regular newscast for at least a week before the election. The night prior to the election, the evening report was delivered from the election set and the viewers were given an idea of what to expect the next day.

AFVN Television Election Central signed on at 9 a.m. local time and broadcast continuously until about 2:30 the next morning. We did not, however, go straight through with only election reporting. After about five hours, the program cut away to a football game, and later in the evening, shifted to a movie. We cut back in when new results were received on the wire. Only the close Presidential contest kept the special on the air so long.

The coverage process became a pseudo-event in its own right. Not long after the special commenced, the studio was full of cameramen and reporters from the commercial TV news bureaus—all recording the Election Central reporting techniques.

The audience included the top military and

civilian brass, both American and Vietnamese, including President Thieu. NEWSWEEK magazine erroneously reported that Thieu was watching the returns via satellite. We considered that a compliment and didn't complain too much.

Dick Rosenbaum, then the ABC bureau chief, sent a telegram of congratulations. It arrived several days after the election which illustrated the efficiency of normal communications channels in Vietnam.

Of course, the most important audience was the thousands of American servicemen who, although half a world away from home, were able to get all the news of the elections at the same time as did their friends and relatives.

Just placing numbers on a board is not enough for responsible election coverage. The heritage of our mass media is one of clarifying as well as informing. Interpreting, summarizing and putting it all in perspective is just as much a part of reporting elections as telling who won.

And that's exactly how AFVN told the American election story in November 1968. □