



Vietnam War Protests at Pentagon - October 1967

Journalists Covering Protests

Journalists cover protests. That's part of the job.

Some protests might be big — like the picture above from 1967. It's from a Vietnam War protest just weeks before I graduated from school and began a full-time career in journalism.

Some protests might be small — like a group of citizens upset about a local rezoning request. No matter the size of the protest, the reasons are important to those who protest.

The Right To Protest

Protesting is something citizens do often in the United States. In fact, our country began as a protest. The right to protest is so important that the founders of our country made it part of the nation's Constitution —

“... the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

FIRST AMENDMENT, U.S. CONSTITUTION

People have a *right* to come together *peaceably* and to *petition* the government for a *redress of grievances*. That's foundational to your coverage of protests as a journalist. It helped guide me through decades of covering hundreds of protests. People have a right to assemble peaceably and petition the government.

Something else that helped guide me, and I believe will guide you as well, are the basic rules of journalism. I'll repeat them here [from a previous series](#) —

- Be Curious
- Be Skeptical
- Be Objective
- Be Accurate

The public wants news coverage that's —

- Honest
- Accurate
- Fair

That happens when the people who cover the news for the public — journalists — are curious, skeptical, objective and accurate in their reporting.

Covering Protests

Journalists can look at covering protests in three sections:

1. Before Protests Begin
2. During Protests
3. After Protests End

Before Protests Begin

Covering protests before they begin is the daily job of journalists. Some news stories have *protest potential* and reporters and editors need to recognize that. That means a particular story has both informational and emotional elements that may lead members of the public to protest.

Information is important and reporters need to get it right the first time, every time. Sensitivity is also important. Journalists who are insensitive to

the emotions of members of the public may find their ability to cover stories hampered in the future.

One or more people express concern, grievance, or discontent in a public forum. You may first hear them during a city council, county commission or board of education meeting. As journalists, take note of when that happens. Make good notes. Interview the person or persons expressing their concern or discontent. Ask them good questions and listen to their answers. Follow up their answers with more good questions. Demonstrate basic humanity and be polite, but be careful not to agree or disagree with them about what they're protesting. Reporters who express their personal views (opinions) to members of the public, government officials or other journalists have tainted their coverage. News managers/editors would be right to remove that reporter from covering the story, so journalists take note. Keep your personal opinions about news stories to yourself.

Let your news manager/editor know about what the people said if you think the story has *protest potential*. Your manager may want to watch the interview or ask you questions about your coverage to better understand what you saw and heard. Journalists are in a unique position to see a potential protest coming before the public knows about it. Get in front of public issues and you'll often be able to get in front of public protests.

Government leaders often ignore public concerns until emotions get high. Journalists can cover the issues while emotions are still under control and uncover the reason behind public concerns and government lack of attention to those concerns. Journalists who do their jobs well can raise

issues to a level that help government leaders recognize the importance of those issues to their constituents. Journalists who cover stories honestly, accurately and fairly also build trust with the public they serve.

As simple as that may sound, you may be asking how you can possibly do that when you have opinions, sometimes strong opinions, about a news story. Honestly, we all bring some bias to the table. We believe certain things and often believe those things strongly. However, our job as journalists is not to convince the public that our opinions are right. Our job is to cover the news honestly, accurately and fairly. We report stories truthfully and objectively and let the public decide what they believe about those stories.

During Protests

The first protest I covered was about the Vietnam War. Protests against U.S. involvement had been going on for several years, but the Tet Offensive in January 1968 fueled anti-war sentiment. Protesters claimed that President Lyndon Johnson and U.S. military leaders had misled the American public in believing the United States was close to winning the war in Vietnam. As we know from history, our nation's involvement did not end for seven more years (1975).

I started in radio in a small town, so the anti-war protests were not large in number. They were passionate but peaceful. I recorded what people said and took notes about what I saw to help me in writing and reporting the events I had covered. Journalists still do that today.

My initiation into *protest potential* quickly became *protest actual*. Civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated less than three months later.

Civil Rights protests often experienced violence. Three people protesting racial segregation in Orangeburg, South Carolina on February 8, 1968 were killed by highway patrol officers. 28 other protestors were injured. Less than a week later (February 12th) hundreds of sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee began a strike because of the deaths of two of their fellow workers along with demands for improved safety measures and higher pay. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. came to Memphis weeks later in response to the strike and delivered his famous *I've Been To The Mountaintop* speech. He was shot and killed the next day.

The assassination of Dr. King angered people across the United States and around the world leading to many protests and more violence. April 1968 was a challenging time for journalists in many cities, large and small.

The protests of 1968 were not over yet – not by a long shot —

- Presidential candidate Robert Kennedy was assassinated two months after Dr. King's assassination
- Protests and responses to protestors at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago two months later became violent
- Protests at the Miss America Pageant a couple of weeks later played a major role in the advancement of the Women's Movement and racial equality in beauty pageants

- Protests on both sides of the abortion issue were also growing during 1968

I covered several major protests in the first year of my work as a professional journalist and it didn't stop there. The next 40+ years included multiple local and national protests every year. Your experience as a journalist will probably be similar to mine. You will cover both *protest potential* and *protest actual*.

What do you do in that situation? Do your job. Cover the protests honestly, accurately and fairly. Don't fall into the trap of including your personal opinions in your coverage. Opinions can persuade people, but that doesn't make opinions right – especially when people's lives and wellbeing may hang in the balance. Knowledge is based on what's true, so journalists need to find the truth to meet the needs of a free society.

Basic Rules for Covering Protests

- Remember that there is more than one side to a protest story .. be sure to get all sides as you report .. try to be as balanced as you can in reporting the various sides
- Know your legal rights .. Reporters Committee For Freedom Of The Press has a good resource on that topic — [Police, Protestors, and the Press](#)
- Do your research .. learn as much as you can about the issues and any history that might guide you in your coverage

- Know the people involved in the protest .. start with the leaders and those who may appear to hold significant positions within the group .. talk with them about who they represent, why they are involved in the protest, what they want to accomplish through protesting .. if government officials or employees are involved, learn everything you can about them and what they have said and done in reference to the issues of concern to protestors
- Know the people involved in counter-protesting .. same rules apply .. start with the leaders and those who may appear to hold significant positions within the group .. talk with them about who they represent, why they are involved in the counter-protest, what they want to accomplish through counter-protesting, etc.
- Talk with members of the public not involved in protesting or counter-protesting to understand their viewpoint .. be sure to represent their positions accurately and fairly .. talk with enough members of the non-protesting public to get a fair sense of what people believe
- If you don't know the people involved in protesting or counter-protesting, do your best to find out who they are, where they're from, who they represent, whether they've done similar protests in other cities .. check to see if broadcast or print media in other cities have covered the people involved in protesting in your city .. get copies of those stories for background and to better understand the protestors' and counter-protestors' concerns
- Be careful what you call people during your coverage of a protest .. report what you see and hear, but don't label people in your reporting .. that's opinion, not journalism

- Be careful with the words you choose to describe events .. report what you see and hear in factual, honest language .. don't use verbs that overstate or understate the truth .. be honest, accurate and fair in your reporting
- Identify people you interview whenever possible .. it's helpful for an audience to know something about the person talking with you
- Report accurately and fairly about police and other law enforcement officers who respond to the protests .. be sure you know both the legal codes and law enforcement policies and principles for responding to protestors .. don't overlook police action that violates legal code and law enforcement policies and procedures, but be careful to quote from code or policies/procedures when reporting on police response .. having to walk back inaccuracies in reporting is no substitute for being right the first time
- Record protestors' words and actions .. you can use the recordings for soundbites and actualities .. you can also use the recordings to help remember details accurately for your reporting
- If you're reporting live, be careful to stick to what you know to be true .. don't embellish to try to make the story seem different than it really is .. this also goes for TV producers who write lower-thirds and tease segments and for editors who write headlines for newspapers, magazines and online news .. Be careful what you show live to your audience .. let your producer know when things may be getting dangerous for you or others near you .. crowds will sometimes respond to live cameras with words, gestures and other things your news managers may not want the audience to see live .. producers at the station or network will usually handle a decision to go back to the

anchor set from a live shot based on what may be happening around you

- Use subjective adjectives with caution .. searching for adjectives to describe what you're seeing may end up being wrong and even approaching editorial .. stick to the facts of what you see and hear .. remember the basic rules of journalism when reporting from the scene of a protest .. objectivity and accuracy

Your job as a journalist is to get every story you do about protests right the first time. Don't make mistakes that can lead members of the public to make bad decisions responding to your story. Clarify, correct and retract where necessary, but understand that media mistakes in protest coverage can lead to bad outcomes for innocent people.

Protecting Yourself During Protests

Emotions can run high during protests. Even as you want to get the story right, you also want to protect your rights as a citizen. What are those rights? The founders of our country expressed them this way –

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, IN CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776

News managers should train journalists how to cover protests before sending them out to cover protests. That's just good news management. Managers can also bring in media attorneys to help in the training along with sending some of their reporters, photographers, producers and editors to regional and national training. Those journalists can then share their notes and observations with other members of the news team when they return.

Here are some basic ways you as a journalist can protect yourself, and other journalists, during a protest.

- Safety first .. don't put yourself or others on your team (e.g. photographer, producer) in unnecessarily dangerous positions .. danger may come to you, but be cautious in going to it .. safety first
- Know where you are .. it is possible to lose your positioning if you are moving with a crowd of protestors .. in martial arts/self defense we teach *situational awareness* .. that's where you are always aware of where you are and what others are doing near you and around you
- Know how to get out of where you are .. be prepared to move quickly to a position of safety if necessary .. having an escape route ([exit strategy](#)) in mind is foundational in self-defense training .. tear gas can make moving to a safe place more difficult because it's hard to see and breathe, so develop a habit of thinking about escape routes as you move with the protest
- Try not to get caught in the middle of a protest .. as much as possible, stay on the edges of the protest .. you'll be close enough to know

what's happening and get interviews and far enough from getting trapped and unable to escape to safety if necessary

- Keep your producer or editor aware of where you are during protest coverage .. they may be able to send help in case you find yourself in trouble at some point during coverage
- Be aware of who is around you .. including other journalists, protestors and law enforcement officers
- Be aware of the mood of the protestors and police (if they are present) .. peaceful protests have been known to change quickly
- If you are alone and reporting live (e.g. audio for radio or online), move your body around slowly to one side then the other as you report .. that will help you protect yourself even as you continue to have clear sight of what's happening around you .. as best as you can, move so that you get a 360 degree view of your surroundings as you report .. reporting alone can be challenging during a protest
- If you are working with team members and reporting live (e.g. for television or streaming), watch out for each other, use the buddy system to keep each other safe .. news photographers concentrate their view on their camera lens or screen, so reporters and field producers should watch out for people coming toward the photographer from behind or beside them .. those are blind spots to photographers
- Know what information you have on your personal and company electronic devices and what notes you have made on paper .. if you have devices with sensitive information (e.g. contact names, email addresses, phone numbers, personal or work addresses) or login credentials to sensitive data for your personal accounts or your

employer's accounts, you may not want to bring those devices to the protest site .. any electronic devices you have with you can be lost, stolen, destroyed or confiscated .. you may want to ask producers or editors at the office to make calls or check information for you .. you may also want to invest in a phone that you use solely for covering protests (e.g. contract-free phones) .. also remember that technology exists which can clone phones, swipe information from your phone, etc .. if you have a second phone, be sure your producer or editor knows the number and can reach you .. always test new technology before using .. some news outlets still use radios, so that may be another option for you during protest coverage

- If you want to keep your primary personal or company mobile device with you during protest coverage, be sure to encrypt the device disk .. learn how to encrypt your data before arriving at the protest site .. use password protection for your mobile device and turn off fingerprint or face recognition during the protest
- If possible, fully charge the battery for your mobile device before you cover a protest and also have a fully-charged backup battery .. protests can last for many hours .. if getting to your vehicle is not a problem and you believe anything you leave in it will be secure, you can return to your vehicle for back-up batteries and other materials .. if getting to your vehicle is not possible, let your producer or editor know when your last battery shows 50% .. that will give them time to find a way to keep you supplied during the protest .. that is also true for photographers and batteries for their camera equipment
- Know what information you have on written notes .. that information can also be lost, stolen, destroyed or confiscated .. notes you've

written that include contact names and phone numbers/email addresses, quotes from interviews, private information shared with you, etc. can be used by protestors or police if they get their hands on your notes

- Know your legal rights if police attempt to confiscate your electronic devices, written notes, video, etc .. Journalists have many protections against unlawful search and seizure, but those rights may not always be recognized during emotional protests .. if police officers attempt to confiscate your equipment or written notes, politely but firmly let them know about your legal rights .. ask them if they have a warrant to take your equipment, read your notes or look at your video or photos .. inform your producer or editor as soon as an officer attempts to confiscate your equipment or written materials or take you into custody .. news managers can guide you through the process as well as contacting attorneys to become involved
- If police officers tell you to leave a particular protest area, what should you do? First, be sure to wear your press credentials conspicuously on your body so officers can clearly see that you are with a media organization .. be sure to point out your credentials to officers in case they don't see them .. journalists should continue recording while they talk with police, but not in such a way to incite a confrontation with officers (don't stick the camera in their face, be polite) .. be sure not to touch a police officer during your conversation .. officers may see that as physical confrontation or attack and respond to you physically .. journalists should politely but firmly express to officers the legal right they have to cover the protest, especially if it is in a public place .. keep in mind that the right you

have as a journalist is the same as a member of the public .. police should not tell journalists to leave a protest area unless officers are telling the public to leave that area as well .. ask officers questions, politely, to hear why they want you to leave .. try to develop a conversation instead of a confrontation .. the better journalists know city, state and federal laws concerning public assembly, the better things should go for them if police demand they leave a public area .. journalists and members of the public generally have the legal right to assemble in public places

- The police also have rights and responsibilities to keep the peace and protect lives and property, so be sure you understand those rights and how they affect you and members of your team .. if officers issue an order to disperse to the protestors and you, contact your producer or editor right away to ask for direction .. determine with them ahead of time what to do in case you are not able to reach them during a protest .. be careful not to resist a lawful police order .. if you are arrested, do not resist but ask to have a lawyer present during questioning .. use your phone call to call your attorney or inform your producer or editor so they can send a lawyer to represent you .. be respectful during the arrest process and continue recording or have another journalist record your arrest if possible .. evidence of your compliance with police arrest can be helpful in any legal matters that may arise from your arrest
- Stay neutral during the protest .. if you are participating in any way that gives the appearance to police that you have joined with protestors (e.g. chanting, yelling slogans, waving signs/slogans, etc), officers may treat you as a protestor and not as a member of the

news media .. your behavior prior to police telling you to leave and even being arrested by officers could work against your arguments before a judge .. you may be charged with obstructing a lawful police order or interfering with a police investigation

- Your legal rights also extend to protestors who may want to confiscate your equipment or demand that you leave .. record interactions with protestors and politely make your case for covering the protest .. if your life is in danger, move to a safe place and contact your producer or editor for guidance

Even when you follow the rules and do your best to be neutral, honest, accurate and fair, there is still the possibility of things going wrong with police or protestors in the heat of protests fraught with deep emotions. The Committee To Protect Journalists has published a document that would be good for journalists and managers to read prior to covering protests, elections, etc. It's called the [Journalist Safety Kit](#).

After Protests End

Protests do come to an end. It may take days, weeks, months, even years, but protests do end. However, that does not mean the end of your reporting. First, ask and answer a series of questions that will help you develop many important post-protest stories. You can use these questions for any type or size of protest.

- When did the protest start?
- When did the protest end?

- Why did it end?
- How did it end?
- Where did it end?
- What happened to people involved in the protest?
- What happened to people arrested during the protest?
- What happened to protestors and law enforcement officers injured during the protest?
- If property was damaged during the protest, what did property owners do? Did they rebuild? Choose not to rebuild? Sue?
- What came from the protest? Changes? New laws? Statistics?
- Were all protest issues resolved?
- If not, what is the possibility that protesting may begin again in the near future?

After you answer these and other questions, you can begin developing interesting follow-up stories. Here are some examples —

- The cost of the protests .. lives, property, rebuilding, community changes .. [follow the money](#) and you will find important stories to share with your audience
- Court coverage for people arrested during the protest and lawsuits that often follow
- The beginning and ending dates of protests become the dates for anniversary stories .. that's an opportunity to remind viewers, listeners and readers of what happened in the past, lessons learned from those events and any lessons that remain to be learned

- Profiles of people involved in the protests can help viewers, listeners and readers understand the lasting impact of the protests .. profiles can include protestors, counter-protestors, law enforcement, government leaders, elected officials, etc.
- *Where are they now* stories .. different than profile stories, where are they now are quick glimpses of how people's lives changes because of the protests
- How are any laws, policies or procedures changed because of protests working today? Any further changes expected?

Journalism has a long history. Our job as journalists is to cover the news honestly, accurately and fairly. We can accomplish the high ideals of the founders of our great country as we follow the basic rules of journalism. They understood that a free press was essential for a free society.

"Our liberty cannot be guarded but by the freedom of the press, nor that be limited without danger of losing it."

THOMAS JEFFERSON TO JOHN JAY, 1786