

View from Somewhere Episode 6: Truth & Vietnam

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TRUTH & VIETNAM (ep 5) CREDITS:

Host/producer: Lewis Raven Wallace

Producer: Ramona Martinez

Guests: Laura Palmer, Kerry Gruson

Theme music: [Dogbotic](#)

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Special thanks: WUNC for recording help

Archival footage:

TRUTH & VIETNAM (ep 6) LINKS:

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[“The Long Road Back,”](#) by Kerry Gruson (The New York Times Magazine, 1988)

[“We are all disabled in some way,”](#) article on Kerry Gruson and Thumbs Up International in the Palm Beach Post (2014)

[Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers](#) by Michael Schudson

[Shrapnel in the Heart: Letters and Remembrances from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial](#) by Laura Palmer

[War Torn: Stories of War from the Women Reporters who Covered Vietnam](#), featuring Laura Palmer

[Paper Soldiers: The American Press and the Vietnam War](#) by Clarence R. Wyatt

[The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam](#) by Daniel C. Hallin

[The View from Somewhere: Undoing the Myth of Journalistic Objectivity](#), by Lewis Raven Wallace (University of Chicago Press, 2019)

MUSIC (in order of appearance):

- **Colorado** by Podington Bear
- **Tango Mécanique** (The View from Somewhere Theme Song) by Kirk Pearson and Julian Korzeniowsky
- **Fingernail Grit** by Podington Bear
- **Bambi** by Podington Bear
- *Electro Synths by Dogbotic, Original Music for The View from Somewhere*
- **Skeptic** by Podington Bear

- **Forces** by Podington Bear
- **Running on Empty** by Podington Bear
- **Retrograde** by Podington Bear
- **Tango Mécanique** (The View from Somewhere Theme Song) by Kirk Pearson and Julian Korzeniowsky
- **Scaffoldings** by Podington Bear
- **Sanctuary** by Podington Bear
- **Senseless** by Podington Bear
- **Solemn Oath** by Podington Bear
- *View from Somewhere Theme (Chill Version), Original Music for The View from Somewhere*
- *Tango Mécanique, Electro Variation by Dogbotic, Original Music for The View from Somewhere*

TRANSCRIPT:

Ramona Martinez:

This is the View from Somewhere, a podcast about journalism with a purpose—I'm Ramona Martinez, the producer. This podcast is serialized, so if like what you hear, go back and listen from the start. You can find full transcripts of these episodes at viewfromsomewhere.com.

Also, we're currently fundraising to get to the end of our season, and we need YOU to chip in. If you value what we're doing here and want to be a part of making it possible, go to [view from somewhere dot com](http://viewfromsomewhere.com) and click on the donate button.

By way of warning, this episode contains sounds of gunshots and explosives. Thank you, and enjoy the show.

MUSIC: *Colorado* by Podington Bear

Lewis Raven Wallace: Basically my life had become a google-fest. Learn about a rad journalist, google them, get all the books, try to find them...I was googling away when I came across Kerry Gruson in this 1969 Wall Street Journal article...the headline: "Journalists: Objectivity and Activism." Alright, yea.

"Objectivity is a myth," declared Gruson, a 21-year-old reporter at the Raleigh News and Observer. During an October protest against the U.S. war in Vietnam, she put on a black armband and walked out of her job as a reporter, while millions of people were demonstrating across the country...

She ended up in this 1969 Wall Street Journal because her *parents* were basically journalism royalty...her mother Flora Lewis was a famous correspondent and columnist for the Washington Post, and then Newsday, and her father Sydney Gruson was a high up executive at the New York Times. He had forbidden his employees from participating in this same protest. And this article is a debate about objectivity and the war, between father and daughter. I love it.

I later learned that Gruson stuck with journalism, moved to Boston, and she also stuck with her anti-war views. as the U.S. began to withdraw from the war, she felt strongly that the aftermath wasn't being covered well enough. So in 1974 she said goodbye to the man she was in love with, lined up freelance gigs with the Globe and the Chicago Tribune, and set off for Vietnam. She would never make it there—the scars left by the war transformed her, in ways she couldn't possibly have expected...

THEME MUSIC

Lewis: This is the View from Somewhere: A Podcast About Journalism with a Purpose. I'm Lewis Raven Wallace. On the last couple episodes, we learned about how "objectivity" was only really codified in the 1920s and 30s. But by the 1960s, those codes were facing widespread challenges. Young reporters were going to cover Civil Rights or anti-colonial uprisings, going to Vietnam. And a lot of them didn't want neutrality; they wanted justice.

Today we'll hear stories from a couple of those idealistic reporters, Kerry Gruson and Laura Palmer, who believed in the power of journalism—but also learned during Vietnam just how complicated truth-seeking can be. And how reality can shape *us* as much as we shape reality. I have a bunch of my own questions, about how we *serve* truth, even if we don't believe in *one* objective truth...

MUSIC: *Fingernail Grit* by Podington Bear**

Laura Palmer: I started Oberlin College in 68, I went to every anti war protest in Washington D.C. And I was deeply opposed to the Vietnam War.

Lewis: Laura Palmer came of age in a hot moment—during her senior year of high school Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. Then Robert Kennedy. The Tet offensive also happened—the U.S. was amping up its presence in Vietnam, sending her classmates off to fight this war.

<<Tet Offensive Audio clip >>

<<Vietnam Protest Audio: “all we are saying is give peace a chance”>>

Laura: I mean we were going to end the war we were going to find a cure for cancer, feminism, I mean, the environment, we were on fire and it was an extraordinary time.

Lewis: She was having a moment that SOME privileged kids come to—I had this, around this same age—when you realize what you’ve been told about democracy and fairness is a lie.

Laura: I lived in the glass house that Camelot built and when it was shattered, I ran into the streets.

Lewis: Laura was idealistic, angry. But also serious about her future.

Laura: My plan was that I was gonna go to law school and get Black Panthers out of jail.

Lewis: And then, plans changed. The summer before her senior year of college, she started dating a doctor that she met hitchhiking on the interstate—like you do. They fell in love, and decided to travel together after she graduated.

Laura: So, I thought that you know maybe we would go to Africa, or maybe we would go to India, I never thought of Vietnam. So when he called me, I was home working as a cocktail waitress to make some money, and he called at 2 in the morning and said, ‘I have a job offer for 6 months in Saigon, do you wanna go?’ And I said, ‘Absolutely.’ I said yes. I’m someone who while I’ve never had a plan for my life, I’ve always been curious, and if a door opens, I’ll go through it. If something sounds exciting, I’ll say yes.

<<Archival Vietnam Street Noise>>

Lewis: So that was how she ended up in the hot streets of Saigon in 1972. Speaking no Vietnamese, with virtually *no* job experience. And, shocker, she and the doctor broke up, and suddenly she was looking for work—she ended up interviewing for media jobs. She had done a brief internship at NBC on the copy desk, but that was it for journalism experience...

MUSIC: *Bambi by Podington Bear*

Laura: I could only answer no to every question. Do you have any experience in journalism? No, not really. Did you major in journalism? No. Do you speak Vietnamese? No. Do you know anything about the military? No. Do you speak French? Because there was a lot of-as a former colony, a lot of French being spoken, and I said 'No, I don't I studied Spanish.' I had absolutely no qualifications, although I did throw in that I'd been a copy boy at NBC.

Lewis: She was getting a lot of no's. But eventually she got an offer from ABC News to be a radio stringer. She thinks she got the gig because the New York Times was in the middle of a sex discrimination lawsuit, so ABC needed a token woman reporter.

Laura: The first thing the bureau chief said to me when I started working in the Saigon bureau for ABC news, he sat me in front of him and his desk and he looked at me and said, 'I just want you to know of all the applicants, you were the least qualified.'

Lewis: Whatever. Anyhow, she was smart and quick and dove right into the job covering the official war story, according to the war's leaders...

Laura: I started doing the daily things, like going to the military briefings, reporting, it would be...We'd call them the five o'clock follies, because the South Vietnamese government would talk about all the things the other side was doing, and they of course were culpable for nothing.

MUSIC: *Electro Synths by Dogbotic, Original Music for The View from Somewhere*

Lewis: Laura believed in the possibility of reporting truth objectively. But reporting in Vietnam was *complicated*. Depending on whom you ask, the Vietnam War was either a victory for objectivity or the end of objectivity. People on the left tend to see the former: a courageous press cut through government propaganda to bring home the story of an unjust war. People on the right tend to see Vietnam reporting as the end of objectivity: antiwar reporters like Laura Palmer were a biased influence that turned people against the war, making it unwinnable. And, there were all the limitations of reporting on guerilla warfare with no clear war front, taking in propaganda from both sides.

<<Small bit of nat sound of explosions, planes here>>

By the time Laura Palmer was in Saigon—public opinion in the U.S. largely HAD turned against the war, and the U.S. was trying to reduce its presence. But, there was still reporting to be done.

Lewis: In January of 1973, President Richard Nixon announced a ceasefire.

<<Nixon announcing ceasefire>>: ...with the purpose of announcing that we today have concluded an agreement to end the war and bring peace with honor in Vietnam and in southeast Asia. The following statement...

Lewis: Not long after this speech, Palmer got her first assignment that took her beyond the press briefings, the basic he said he said stuff. She flew to Tan My Island in a chopper to interview some of the last combat G.I.'s in Vietnam—she recalls it looking like a summer camp, with little bungalows and big sandy beaches. Her army chaperone disappeared and suddenly she was alone with about a dozen men...

MUSIC: *Skeptic by Podington Bear*

Laura: I was interviewing soldiers who were...who didn't want to go home, and they were not happy about the news of the ceasefire. And the interviews were really dark and disturbing. It was, 'I don't want to go home, I've been having a blast killing dinks, chasing gooners. Never had a shot to see somebody in half as he was running down the road, but I sure shot at a bunch of them.' Um...

Lewis: It was not quite what she expected...she was anti-war, after all, and figured people would be celebrating getting to go home. But these guys on the frontlines *didn't want* the war to be over. How to do justice to that in a radio spot?

Laura: So...taking a 20 second clip of that would have been so misrepresentative of what these men were really saying. I think they found someone who said, you know, they used a little bit of it, but nothing in depth, maybe someone said, "I just wish I could stay here and finish out my tour, and I lost a lot of buddies." Something that was very neutral. But they were really teachers for me, and it was when I started to learn that you can...there are two ways to die in a war, you can die fast, or you can die slow. And these men had been at war too long and it had

fundamentally changed them. And they no longer fit in at home, and they didn't fit in there. They were not bad people but they were...they had been in a lot of bad situations and it had changed them.

Lewis: Talking to these men—and starting to *really* see the complexity of their experience—plus talking to communist fighters from North Vietnam, *and* people in South Vietnam as the U.S. soldiers left, all this changed *her*... she felt less sure of things that she used to feel sure of.

Laura: It was, you know, as we used to chant at the demonstration, 'Ho Ho Chi Minh, LMF is gonna win. 1,2,3,4, we don't want your fucking war. 5 6 7 8 organize and smash the state.'

LW: Suddenly everything seemed more nuanced than that...

Laura: I know in my bones that I went to Vietnam with all the answers, and I left proud of ability to understand the questions, to realize that there were, the war was...although my basic opposition to the war never changed, I could see how many shades of grey they were.

MUSIC: *Forces by Podington Bear*

Lewis: It wasn't just, U.S. bad, North Vietnam good. Or even war bad, peace good.

Laura: I had friends who were South Vietnamese who hated the communists. And I could see what the war meant through their eyes. And I learned a lot from that.

Lewis: But Laura Palmer still believed, or believed even more than ever, in the possibilities of objective reporting. She says the amount of lying and deception from government authorities actually *helped* her see the situation more neutrally.

Laura: When reporters hear lies from opposing sides, it makes it very easy to be objective, because you know neither the south vietnamese, nor the north vietnamese who were holding press conferences in Viet Cong every Saturday after the ceasefire, were telling the truth. Both sides were

lying, both sides were corrupt. And each side would deny that they had committed any ceasefire violations during the week.

Lewis: In 1975, Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese. Most Americans frantically evacuated.

Archival sound from evacuation, courtesy of CBC <<1 2>>

MUSIC: *Running on Empty* by Podington Bear

Lewis: But this whole time, in addition to the North and South Vietnamese, and the U.S., there was another set of “sides” to the story...not the governments but the people—that’s the part I can’t stop thinking about. More than 3 million Vietnamese people—many of them civilians—died during this war. 58,000 U.S. fighters lost their lives.

Palmer didn’t have a problem reporting the facts. But she was aghast at the way the U.S. government in particular kept pushing this war, producing reasons to send more troops...the government sent so many people to their deaths, in spite of knowing it might be pointless.

Laura: I think I always will wonder and absolutely never be able to reconcile myself to the reality that people knew this war was unwinnable and they still sent fine young men to their death.

<<[Henry Kissinger, We believe peace is at hand](#)>> (1972) **We believe that peace is at hand. It is inevitable. That in a war of such complexity that there should be occasional difficulties in reaching a final solution. But we believe that by far the longest part of the road has been traversed...**

Lewis: Laura Palmer went on to spend decades documenting stories of returning veterans, and stories of families who lost loved ones to war. And she does see Vietnam as a victory for objective truth-telling...

Laura: Ultimately the truth always wins out, I deeply believe that. And while journalism is certainly imperfect, in many ways, and at many times, ultimately the truth about Vietnam did come out, and the war was not winnable.

MUSIC: *Retrograde by Podington Bear*

Lewis: I see what she means...because journalism did have a lot of victories in Vietnam, exposed a lot of atrocities. But to me, it feels like it took so long, and so many lives, before some version of the truth won out. That doesn't mean I think I know the answers, just that the situation was truly complex. The public in the U.S. supported the war for a long time before it opposed the war, and all the while lots of reporters were putting out daily reports that repeated propaganda from government press conferences.

It's hard to say whether Vietnam coverage really was a victory for truth. That depends on where you're standing. *The truths that were eventually exposed came too late for all the people who died.*

In any case for Laura Palmer, serving the truth *meant* serving objectivity...exposing herself to all sides, to new perspectives...peeling back the layers until change finally came. And we needed people like her, doing that hard work. Straight ahead—we return to Kerry Gruson, who tried to get to Vietnam and never made it.

MUSIC: *The View from Somewhere Theme - Reprise*

FUNDRAISING BREAK

Lewis: *Right now, for a quick moment, we want to ask for YOUR support. This podcast is produced completely independently, with the help of our Kickstarter supporters and other individual donors. It's like...public radio, but without the government or private sponsorship. Which means it is all you! Right, Ramona?*

Ramona: *Yes. You are the ones who pay for our studios, software, equipment, travel, living wages for the production team—and those fancy cuts of news tape you hear on the show, those are like \$500 dollhairs apiece.*

Lewis: *So really, every dollar that you give goes towards something that is totally necessary for the production of the View from Somewhere. And, real talk right now, we are mostly definitely running out of money to get to the end of our season in 2020 and bring you all of the episodes we want to. You can help offset that, with any amount, it all*

helps, and we have supercool swag and lots of gratitude to give away. You can get a signed copy of the book, the View from Somewhere. Beautiful posters of Ida B. Wells and Marvel Cooke. Go to our website, www.viewfromsomewhere.com, and click on the donate button now. Alrighty! You like that public radio moment?

Ramona: *yep, yep yep*

Lewis: *Better than corporate underwriting! Now, back to our regularly scheduled program....*

Ramona: *People power!*

Lewis: *That's gonna work, everyone's gonna give so much money after we say that.*

MUSIC: *Scaffoldings by Podington Bear*

Lewis: Kerry Gruson—the badass woman from the 1969 Wall Street Journal article who said Objectivity is a Myth—she came up in this same generation as Laura Palmer. But for her, “objectivity” never felt like the right frame.

I read up on her...and flew to Miami to meet her, in her apartment on the waterfront. There was a glittering blue ocean in the background, terra cotta tile inside, and Kerry's bright blue eyes shining at me as we talked. She talks slowly and softly, because of a disability—so I leaned in...looking closely into her eyes....

Lewis: You described yourself as stubborn, and I can identify with that. I wonder if there are any instances that stand out to you where being stubborn posed a problem for you?

Kerry: There are so many instances, if I were to go into them, we'd spend the rest of the interview talking about them.

Lewis: [laughing]

Lewis: There's a transcript of this on viewfromsomewhere.com if you'd like to follow along that way. As I mentioned, Kerry's parents were both journalists, and because of their work, she grew up all over the world. Growing up, objectivity and truth came up at the dinner table.

Kerry: I remember long debates with my parents on precisely those issues because my father of course was a product of the Times, held that

objectivity was sacrosanct. And I...in part because of my background, because I had grown up in so many different cultures, I saw the world as a very complex place where cultures and histories interact to change your vision of reality. So I was much less sure of what was right and what was wrong, what was objective. I felt that subjectivity really determined your vision of the world. That you see the world through your own eyes.

MUSIC: *Sanctuary by Podington Bear*

Lewis: Like Laura Palmer, Kerry was coming of age at the height of U.S. presence in Vietnam, and Civil Rights. She reported for a summer on the Civil Rights movement in the South. Then got that job out of college at the Raleigh News-Observer, publicly opposing her own father on the question of objectivity. Then later in Boston she had a series of journalism jobs, some mainstream, some alternative. But she always felt being just an observer wasn't enough. She decided to become what she calls a committed observer.

Kerry: If you're a committed observer, you have to take action, I think. Because standing on the sidelines cannot be an option, at a certain point. You are compelled to take action.

Lewis: So she reported, but she also protested. And it was this role of committed observer who did *not* stay on the sidelines, that drew her to head to Vietnam, in 1974. After the ceasefire—before the evacuation.

MUSIC: *Senseless by Podington Bear*

Lewis: On her way Kerry stopped in Hawaii. She planned to interview veterans returning from the war front. She met a green beret, alone, in his hotel room.

Kerry: Because I am by nature a very trusting person. I have a very hard time imagining myself to be in danger.

Lewis: During this interview, the soldier had a PTSD flashback, and he attacked Kerry—thinking she was a Viet Cong fighter.

Kerry: He strangled me, he thought I was going to kill him. So he had to kill me first, so he strangled me and left me for dead.

Lewis: Her only memories of being strangled are what her mother pieced together later. The soldier had apparently dragged her into the street, where someone found her unconscious...by the time she was conscious again, she was back in New York. She had suffered an injury to her spinal cord that took away most of her mobility—she would never walk again. She had to relearn to talk, eat, and use her hands—the soft speech you hear is a result of what she calls her accident.

Lewis: And how did your accident influence your view of the war in Vietnam?

Kerry: I'm glad you said accident, because that's also how I look at it. It wasn't an attack or a vicious attempt to do me harm. It really was an accident. I felt that we were both victims of the war, so it kind of vindicated how I felt about the war.

MUSIC: *The Path Will Tell* by Podington Bear

Lewis: Kerry eventually went back to work as a news assistant in the Times' Miami bureau. And later, she founded an organization, Thumbs Up International that connects people of all abilities through athletics. As a result of her accident, her head is tilted to the side.

She already believed in multiple truths. And now she literally had a different perspective, permanently—her vision and physical position were changed by her experience—

Kerry: I see my physical disability as a positive because it opens my eyes to a different perspective, literally. I've started taking photographs of how I see the world, usually they're tilted. And they have a lot to do with shadows, because I love shadows...love the interplay of light and dark. I can show you some later, if you'd like

Lewis: Yeah...

Lewis: Kerry Gruson never felt sure that there was one objective truth, and her travels, and her accident, and her disability, all affirmed that.

This feels identifiable to me—like her, I grew up in a lot of privilege. And then, I was exposed or exposed myself to more and more life experiences not my own. And I figured out that I was trans—the gender and body I walk through in the world now are different than where I started. And I *think* those changes have made me a better, more complicated storyteller, a committed observer comfortable with change and ambiguity.

Kerry: So there are no final answers. It's like life itself. It's a process. And when you stop being open to the process and open to the change, open to changing definitions, that's when things get bad and rough and people get hurt. So I think we have to remain open to change and progress. Because without progress and without change there is death, and finality, and end, and intolerance, and conflict.

MUSIC: *Solemn Oath by Podington Bear*

Lewis: The idea of “objective” journalism could be just methodology—the fairness and balance Laura Palmer pursued in Vietnam. But it also often suggests standing aside, being outside the story, finding *the* truth, getting to the bottom of things.

As I was talking to Kerry Gruson, looking out at the bright blue ocean, I kept thinking about diving...how the deeper you go, the closer to the bottom, the less light there is. The more distortion. The ocean surrounds you. And you *can* get to the bottom, but you can't see everything there. There is just not *one* picture to be painted. Only glimpses.

And maybe this is what journalism is: diving in, and seeking a story out of our limited view of the light.

Lewis: It's been really wonderful to talk to you

Kerry: Wonderful talking to you. I think we shall we speaking more, I hope we will be, this is just beginning of the conversation and the collaboration.

Lewis: Agreed.

Kerry: Good.

Theme variation: *Chill*

Lewis: In some ways, I'm more confused than ever about truth and objectivity. But I know that when I look around, I'm swimming in a sea of subjectivity; I just have a million questions. I think about this Rainer Maria Rilke quote that I read when I was probably 15.... “Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now.”

Theme music

Next time on the View from Somewhere.

Ruben Salazar: *Objectivity is impossible, and I don't think there's a newsman alive who really thinks that objectivity is the name of the game in the news media.*

Lewis: Ruben Salazar—another groundbreaking journalist who served the truth and gave his life for it. We'll be turning over the mic to producer Ramona Martinez for this special episode about a Chicano journalism hero. Stay tuned in, subscribe, tell your friends about us. Keep asking those good questions.

I'm Lewis Raven Wallace, and I am on Twitter @lewispants. Also, don't forget to go to our website, viewfromsomewhere.com, to make a donation. You'll be a part of this independent effort to change journalism, plus you can get amazing posters of Ida B. Wells or Marvel Cooke or Ruben Salazar by Billy Dee, who also designed our logo. And get a signed copy of my book, *The View from Somewhere*, where you can read more about Kerry Gruson and Vietnam war reporting...

Thanks as always to producer Ramona Martinez—Ramona, whatchu got?

Ramona: Hey hey! Our theme music is by Dogbotic, additional music by Podington Bear. Our distributor is Critical Frequency. Thanks to our genius editorial consultant on this one, Carla Murphy, and thanks to WUNC for use of a studio. Check out viewfromsomewhere.com to donate, and you can also support us by reviewing us and giving us some stars in your podcast app! Talk to you in a few weeks!

Lewis: Live the questions! [laughter] Rahhh!