

Summary of investigative analysis

World Press Photo is suspending authorship attribution of the iconic 1972 photograph known as ‘The Terror of War.’

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The prize-winning photo, taken in June, 1972, during the Vietnam war, was long attributed to Huỳnh Công “Nick” Út, a Vietnamese staff photographer for The Associated Press (AP). However, recent claims presented in the documentary *The Stringer*, supported by a visual analysis conducted by the Paris-based research group INDEX, challenge that attribution and put forward Vietnamese freelance photographer Nguyễn Thành Nghệ as the likely author.

‘The Terror of War’ won both a World Press Photo of the Year Award and a Pulitzer Prize and is widely seen as instrumental in sparking significant anti-war protests that led to the end of the war.

In the wake of the new allegations, both World Press Photo and The Associated Press undertook further research.

It is important to note that the authenticity of the photograph is not in question, nor that its impact and importance warranted the awards it received, only that its authorship cannot be definitively established.

Background

The iconic photo was captured on 8 June 1972, as over a dozen journalists gathered near Trảng Bàng, northwest of Saigon, to cover an intense battle between the North Vietnamese army (NVA) and South Vietnamese forces (ARVN). Heavy combat erupted nearby as

reporters, photographers and TV crews positioned themselves at a military checkpoint along Highway 1, where civilians and ARVN soldiers from the 25th Division had assembled. They observed an A-1 Skyraider from the 518th Vietnamese Air Force Squadron mistakenly drop napalm on its own forces and civilians attempting to flee the fighting. Among children fleeing was nine-year-old Phan Thị Kim Phúc. The photograph of a young child naked, crying and badly burned, captured the horror of war. It was published worldwide and profoundly impacted global perception of the war. It remains a powerful representation of war's human cost.

Methodology

World Press Photo commissioned an investigative analysis. In extensive assessment of the visual imagery available, it prioritized photographic and film material over retrospective eyewitness accounts, although it also took them into account. Many of the possible witnesses and sources of information are no longer alive.

A critical step in assessing the photo's authorship was identifying who was present at the scene. The napalm strike and its aftermath were witnessed and documented by a large group of journalists: 16 individuals were visually identified at the scene, including photographers, at least three television crews, and print reporters who had been covering the fighting in and around Trảng Bàng that day.

Establishing who was on the scene and where they were positioned provided the foundation for analyzing visual evidence and assessing the competing authorship claims. News archives, photographs, film footage, and personal memoirs were cross-referenced. A geo-based timeline was created using visual material and satellite imagery. Technical aspects, including camera models and contact sheet notches, were assessed, and feedback was gathered over five months from the AP, INDEX, the filmmakers, and external experts in photography and archival research.

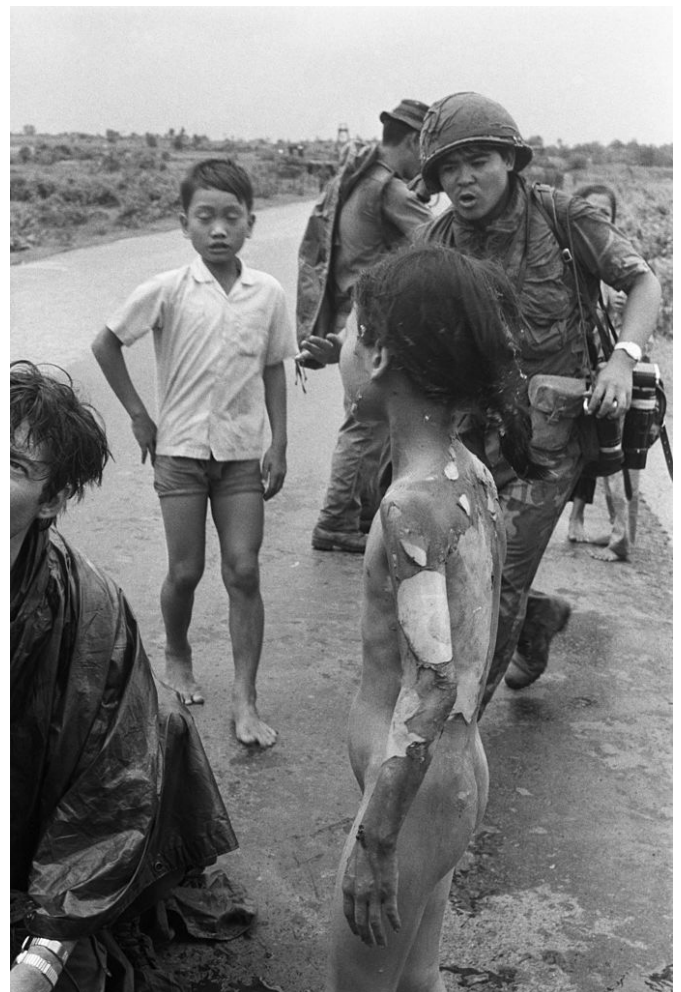
Unresolved issues

Út's position: The findings suggest that Nghê was likely positioned closer temporally and spatially to the moment and location of capture, whereas the closest verified visual of Út before and after the famous photo was taken, places him farther back. INDEX and AP agree that Út was farther back from the scene when he first appears on film after the photo was taken. INDEX's reconstruction suggests it was highly unlikely he could have taken the photo, run 60 meters, and returned calmly, all within a brief window of time. AP disputes the accuracy of the 60m figure and contends that the distance was actually shorter. They argue the movement is feasible, especially given timeline gaps and Út's account of repositioning. A gap in footage makes the exact timing unknowable. It remains possible that Út moved between positions in ways not captured by the available footage. World Press Photo's analysis finds the movement unlikely, whether the distance is 30 meters or 60 meters, but not impossible. With no continuous recording, the question remains open.

Video still from ITN footage showing a distant figure approaching from a distance, believed to be Nick Út. Credit: Getty Images. Annotation added by World Press Photo.



Technical clues: The AP's finding of the probable use of a Pentax camera aligns with Nghệ's equipment and not with Út's. Út publicly and widely described his use of two Leicas and additionally two Nikons. This raises questions about Út's authorship and supports Nghệ's claim. That said, AP says it is possible Út used a Pentax that day and the identification of a Pentax is 'probable' but so far no definitive proof has emerged.



Nguyễn Thành Nghệ (left) is seen with a camera resembling a Pentax, the model he says he used that day. Nick Út (right) is shown carrying multiple cameras that same day. Út has long stated he used two Nikons and two Leicas, but recently told the AP he may also have carried a Pentax. No photo from that day confirms all the cameras he had with him. Credit: Getty Images.

Another possible author: An important factor for World Press Photo is that the investigation by The Associated Press has revealed that the authorship debate may not be limited to the two photographers.

The role of Vietnamese military photographer Huỳnh Công Phúc, who is known to have supplied images to news agencies, had not previously been publicly scrutinized. Phúc has been misidentified as Út in the past and appears in video footage in a position closest in time and space to the approximate vantage point of the famous photograph. Information that introduces a plausible third possibility underscores the inherent limitations of what can be known about a chaotic and stressful event that took place nearly 53 years ago.

Conclusion

If limited to Út and Nghệ, the current visual and technical evidence leans toward Nghệ. In addition, the confirmed presence of at least one other potential photographer further underscores the uncertainties surrounding the image's authorship. Together, these factors raise substantial and credible reasons to question the traditional attribution of this iconic photograph. As no single conclusion is definitive, and unless or until conclusive proof of authorship emerges, World Press Photo is suspending credit for 'The Terror of War.'

World Press Photo

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