War in the Media Age:
The Government/Press Struggle from Vietnam to the Gulf

by

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ABSTRACT:

The rise of the Media Age and the media's importance in the world of American politics has forced changes in the way America wages war and, particularly, in the way that presidents deal with the press during war. This thesis seeks to document and explain the rise in the government's employment of press restrictions and public relations since Vietnam as essential elements of America's new way of war. In four case studies: the Vietnam war, the invasion of Grenada, the invasion of Panama, and the Persian Gulf war, it illustrates the government's efforts to avoid the deterioration of public support for war by controlling what it believes to be the key link between war and opinion—the media. By making this argument, this thesis refutes the conventional wisdom that the military is primarily responsible for press restrictions in recent American conflicts.

Thesis Supervisor: Harvey M. Sapolsky

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For Jeannie and Calvin
Acknowledgments

I am a firm believer in the theory that nothing worth doing can be done by one person. Accordingly, I have many people to thank.

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Chapter One

The Rise of the Media Age and America’s New Way of War

The rise of the Media Age and the media’s importance in the world of American politics has forced changes in the way America wages war and, particularly, in the way that presidents deal with the press during war. This thesis seeks to document and explain the rise in the government’s employment of press restrictions and public relations since Vietnam as essential elements of America’s new way of war. It illustrates the government’s efforts to avoid the deterioration of public support for war by controlling what it believes to be the key link between war and opinion—the media.

In August 1990 President Bush committed the US to pushing back Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, eventually sending over 500,000 troops to Saudi Arabia to draw a “line in the sand.” Mindful of public opinion, Bush promised repeatedly that the situation in the Persian Gulf would not become “another Vietnam.” He was correct on at least two levels. This time, of course, the US military destroyed its opponent in an unprecedented show of mastery on the modern battlefield. In addition, Bush and the military defeated the press, severely limiting journalists' access to the battlefield while providing their own images and reports for public consumption.

A brief comparison reveals that the government’s Gulf War press policies were far more aggressive and restrictive than those of the Vietnam era. First, military public affairs policies, those that most directly influence and limit journalists’ conduct on and

1 George Bush’s televised speech to the nation, January 16, 1991.
access to the battlefield, did far more to obstruct newsgathering in the Gulf than in Vietnam. During the Vietnam war journalists could move about the countryside at will either by themselves or by military transport. During Desert Storm, however, not only were the numbers of journalists allowed to visit military units sharply limited, the military also dictated when and where they could go. During Vietnam journalists operated without military supervision; in the Gulf the military assigned public affairs officers to accompany journalists wherever they went, a policy which the press felt obstructed its newsgathering efforts. And finally, during Vietnam journalists abided by voluntary guidelines concerning what information could be published. There was no censorship; the military did not see news reports before they appeared in the paper or on television. In the Gulf, however, news stories were subject to "security review;" military officers reviewed all news before it was published.

White House public relations in Vietnam and the Gulf war differed in the same way. White House public relations strategy during Vietnam tended to be reactive; it operated primarily to help the government recover from negative reports and unanticipated events. As a result, the White House often failed to influence the manner in which events were interpreted and reported by the press. Gulf war public relations strategy, however, was extremely proactive. The White House and the military seized the initiative in the battle to determine the images and information the media would relay to the public. The result was that the president and the military framed the debate, set the public agenda, supplied television with many of the defining images of the war, and enjoyed very favorable press coverage throughout the conflict.

The success of the government's Gulf war press strategy and policy represented the modern peak of government control of the press in wartime, and perpetuated a trend that had become evident in the US invasion of Grenada in 1983. What explains this dramatic change in the government's approach to dealing with the press during war? What explains the government's success in controlling the press and managing the news?
What consequences has government control had for politics, foreign policy, and democracy?

This thesis seeks to answer these questions by illustrating how the Media Age, characterized by the rising importance of the press in everyday political life, has compelled presidents to alter their approach to waging war, and thus to change their strategies for dealing with the media during war. It traces the evolution and implementation of government press strategy from Vietnam through the Gulf War. In so doing, this thesis challenges the popular existing explanation for the rise of modern press restrictions and amends the history of recent wartime government/press relations which the conventional wisdom has skewed, relocating the subject of wartime press policy and public relations within the broader arena of government/press relations and American politics where it belongs. Finally, this work is also intended to provide the reader with a thorough grounding in the history of recent government/press relations during conflict, and in the mechanics of how presidents, the military, and the press do their jobs during war.

The Conventional Wisdom

Despite the fact that government/press relations during war have always stirred debate, especially recently, little scholarly work has focused on understanding the dynamics of their evolution. Folk theory and anecdotal explanations thus dominate the debate. The conventional wisdom for why military press controls have become so restrictive arises primarily from the writings of those journalists and military officers who have been involved in recent conflicts. They have tended to develop their arguments, however, without correcting for their professional biases, often basing them on impressionistic reviews of history or narrow personal experience. In addition, they have focused more often on professional issues surrounding how they go about their tasks than on broader explanations for their actions. Thus, though valuable for understanding the
military/media relationship and documenting their interactions, these writings have not
provided explanations for the growth of press controls grounded in careful historical
research or thorough analysis of the issues.² The result of their dominance of the debate
is that press controls during war are seen as a consequence purely of military/media
tensions, mutual dislike, and mutual misunderstanding. Though these points all have
merit, they provide far too narrow a basis for understanding what has been happening.

Academics have not gone much further in analyzing the evolution of
government/press relations during war. Scholars have tended to focus either on
normative discussions of the proper role of the press during war or on historical
descriptions of military and press behavior in particular conflicts.³ Thus, there exist
several accounts of Vietnam military/media relations, such as William Hammond’s
excellent account of Army public affairs.⁴ The US invasions of Grenada and Panama

² I cite the work of journalists and military officers heavily in subsequent chapters. A small representative
sample of such efforts from Vietnam through the Gulf war is: Malcolm W. Browne, “War Correspondent
and The Media in Time of Limited War (London: Frank Cass, 1992); Steven Komarow, “Pooling Around
Information,” in Watson and Tsouras, eds., Operation Just Cause: The US Intervention in Panama
Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1992); Mark Hughes, “Words at War: Reflections of a Marine Public
Affairs Officer in the Persian Gulf,” Government Information Quarterly Volume 9, No. 4, 1992

³ On normative issues refer back to the national interest/free press debate outlined above. On public affairs
before Vietnam a good deal has also been done, though I do not deal with that period in this dissertation.
Good places to start are Loren Thompson, “The Military and the Media: A Historical View,” in Loren
Thompson, ed., Defense Beat (New York: Lexington Books, 1991); Peter Braestrup’s background paper in
Battle Lines: Report of the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on the Military and the Media (New York:
Priority Press, 1985); and Philip Knightley, The First Casualty: From the Crimea to Vietnam (New York:
Harvest, 1978); Joseph Matthews, Reporting the Wars (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,
1957)

⁴ William Hammond is the number one source for those interested in understanding Vietnam public
and likewise 1969-1973 Hammond’s works are also the best guide to historical resources; Philip Knightley,
The First Casualty: From the Crimea to Vietnam (New York: Harvest, 1975); James Aronson, The Press
and the Cold War (Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1970); Philip Geyelin, “Vietnam and the Press: Limited
War and an Open Society,” in Anthony Lake, ed., The Vietnam Legacy: The War, American Society and
the Future of American Foreign Policy (New York: New York University Press, 1976); Kevin Williams,
Vietnam: The First Living-Room War,” in Derrik Mercer, ed., The Fog of War: The Media on the
Battlefield (London: Heinemann, 1987); John Mecklin, Mission in Torment (New York: Harper & Row,
1965); Dale Minor, The Information War (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1970); Vietnam: 10 Years Later
spurred fewer such studies, but are well documented nonetheless.\(^5\) And the Gulf war prompted an avalanche of discussion and opinion about public relations and military press policies.\(^6\) Many insightful analyses of press coverage and its impact have also been done, such as Daniel Hallin’s superb study of the media in Vietnam and Peter Braestrup’s thorough analysis of press coverage of the Tet Offensive.\(^7\)

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\(^6\) On Panama the best works are Fred Hoffman’s study for the Pentagon, *Review of Panama Pool Deployment, December 1989*, and the after action report by Southern Command Chief of Public Affairs, Colonel Ron Sconyers. Sharkey’s *Under Fire* also examines Panama.

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No study, however, has attempted to link the government’s handling of the press in each conflict with a single theoretical thread. Nor has anyone considered the government’s wartime dealings with the press to be influenced by more fundamental themes and forces at work in American politics, particularly by critical changes in the government/press relationship over time. Thus, even though the history of individual cases has been thoroughly documented, the result has been a distortion of the broader historical record and an inability to explain satisfactorily the rise of press controls and wartime public relations since Vietnam.

Popular explanations for the evolution of wartime press policy revolve around the military’s experience in Vietnam. Gulf War policies restricting press freedoms, many argue, were the result of the lessons learned by the military in Vietnam. Military leaders, convinced that the press had turned the public against the war through distorted and sensationalized reporting and by beaming the horrors of war into living rooms each night, planned to ensure that the press would never again roam free on the battlefield. Beginning with the 1983 invasion of Grenada, the military practiced its techniques for restricting the press, finally perfecting them in the Gulf War. A typical statement of this view is Philip Taylor’s:

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8 The list of authors who have propagated this conventional wisdom is long. I have taken the liberty of condensing their arguments and observations into a more coherent whole than is available in any one source. Although no one has rigorously analyzed this conventional wisdom, many authors accept it as fact, and thus spend little time outlining it in detail. Those who make this argument in at least some form include: James Brown, "Media Access to the Battlefield," *Military Review*, July, 1992; Patricia Axelrod, "Operation Desert Sham," *Penthouse*, 1992; William Boot, "The Press Stands Alone," *Columbia Journalism Review*, March/April 1992; Marie Gottschalk, "Operation Desert Cloud: The Media and the Gulf War," *World Policy Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 3, Summer 1992; Debbie Nathan, "Just the Good News
Vietnam may be widely regarded as having been the ‘first television war’—although strictly speaking the Korean War more accurately deserves that description—but television was widely blamed for having alienated American public sympathy and support for that later conflict. Regardless of the rights and wrongs of this thesis (and there is much to question in it), it dominated military public relations planning; in other countries as well as the United States—in wars fought since the 1960s.  

The conventional wisdom glosses over the role of the White House and top civilian leaders and the connection between press controls and public relations. When civilian leaders have been implicated in recent policies, it has usually been in the context of having approved military plans to restrict the press. After the invasion of Grenada, for example, many argued that Reagan officials had forsaken their responsibilities by ceding to the military the authority to make decisions regarding the press.  

**War in the Media Age: An Alternative Explanation**

This thesis refutes the conventional wisdom. The White House, not the military, is in fact primarily responsible for the growth of press controls. By wrongly focusing on the military, the conventional wisdom completely ignores the factors which have in fact driven changes in press policy and obscures the broader issues such changes raise. Changing government strategies for dealing with the press during war are both a reflection of and a key element of the evolving political-military strategy presidents have

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adopted to wage war since Vietnam. This new strategy, in turn, reflects presidential adaptation to the evolution of the government/press relationship since Vietnam and the growing importance of the press in American political life.

The rise of the Media Age has forced changes in the way America wages war and, particularly, in the way that the government deals with the press during war. Presidents of the post-Vietnam period have broken with traditional American political-military strategy for waging war and replaced it with one which reflects widely accepted beliefs about the military inadequacy and political dangers of the previous approach.

To understand this shift, one need only contrast the Vietnam war with the Gulf war again. During Vietnam the US government followed a course of gradually escalating the conflict, attempted repeatedly to strike deals with the enemy by promising to halt US air strikes if North Vietnam agreed to peace negotiations, suffered over fifty thousand dead and many more wounded, and dragged the conflict out until public opinion, which had been supportive for years, finally ensured that a US withdrawal was the only policy a president could follow.\textsuperscript{11} During the Gulf war, on the other hand, the US combined a massive bombing campaign with an overwhelming ground strike to destroy the enemy's capability to wage war and force a quick end to the conflict with minimal US and allied casualties on terms dictated by the coalition.\textsuperscript{12} The old strategy of gradualism has been replaced by one which emphasizes overwhelming firepower, speed, minimizing US casualties, and minimizing the length of time the public is required to support a conflict. It also stresses that the president and military must have the support of

\textsuperscript{11} On Vietnam strategy and history, see Cites galore

the American people behind them before they consider taking military action, and that a quick victory is the best way to maintain that support. At the core of this new political-military strategy, of course, is the new, more aggressive news management strategy employed so successfully in the Gulf war.

These new military and media strategies have emerged as presidents have adapted to the rising importance of the press in the American political system since Vietnam. More specifically, presidents have responded to two consequences of the fact that the media now play a more central and decisive role in American politics than at any time in the past. On one hand, presidents are responding to what they perceive to be rising certainty that the media, if left to their own devices, will turn public opinion against even those conflicts that initially draw great support. This fear has led to the first prong of the new media strategy: more aggressive press restrictions to ensure that journalists have as little opportunity to cover combat as possible. On the other hand, presidents have also taken advantage of the fact that just as the press has more power to hurt them, that same power, when turned around, now provides an even greater tool for pursuing their political goals before, during, and after war. Presidents believe that if they dominate the messages reaching the public through the media they will be more likely to win support for both their war policies and themselves. This belief has led to the second prong of the strategy: more intense and more sophisticated public relations efforts to complement the press restrictions. Let us now examine more closely how presidential reactions to the growing importance of the press have spurred the growth of these two facets of media strategy.

*Increasing Presidential Fears of Media Power during War*

Driving both the development of America’s new political-military strategy and the growth of press restrictions is the ever-growing presidential wariness of what might be called Mueller’s Dictum. Mueller’s Dictum states simply that as casualties rise, public support for war (and thus for presidents) inevitably will fall. John Mueller, a political
scientist, showed almost twenty-five years ago that public support for the Korean and Vietnam wars dropped fifteen percentage points for every order of magnitude increase in casualties. Thus, for example, as casualties (dead and wounded) in Vietnam grew from 1,000 to 10,000, and again as they went from 10,000 to 100,000, support for the war dropped fifteen percentage points. Presidents have not, of course, read Mueller's work. Rather, they and others (including America's opponents) saw for themselves the disaster of Vietnam and appear to have concluded that the public has little stomach for long and bloody wars. Such an experience goes a long way to explaining the origins of America's new approach to waging war, but more is needed to explain why an aggressive policy of press restrictions and public relations has become a fundamental element of that new approach.\(^{13}\)

Mueller argued that public disillusionment with war grew simply as a result of mounting casualties, but modern presidents disagree. Presidents believe that the link between casualties and public opinion is heavily influenced by how the media presents the war and its costs to the public. Despite Mueller's insistence that in fact the media, and television in particular, have nothing to do with the level of public support for war,\(^{14}\) presidents fear that negative coverage of war, especially television coverage, could destroy public support, make successful resolution of a conflict impossible, and in the worst case even ruin their presidencies.

\(^{13}\) It is interesting to note that most observers, particularly in the journalistic and policy world, believe that these lessons are accurate perceptions of reality. The best development I have seen on America's new strategy to date is Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, "How Kuwait Was Won: Strategy in the Gulf War," *International Security*, Vol. 16, No. 2, Fall 1991, pp. 5-41. The earliest indication that the White House had internalized the new strategy was Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger's brief treatise on the criteria to be met before the US employed military force. See Caspar W. Weinberger, "The Uses of Military Power," *Defense 85*, January 1985, pp. 2-11; For a discussion of the Weinberger criteria with respect to the Gulf War, see Thomas R. Dubois, "The Weinberger Doctrine and the Liberation of Kuwait," *Parameters*, Vol. 21, No. 4, Winter 1991-92; on the military lessons of Vietnam see Roger Draper, "Our Gulf Warriors," *The New Leader*, November 2-16, 1992;

\(^{14}\) Mueller notes the very suggestive point that support for the Korean and Vietnam wars dropped at exactly the same rate despite the fact that television was next to invisible during Korea and had a huge presence in Vietnam.
To presidents the press thus represents a threat even to the “quick and painless” strategy which they have adopted to minimize their political vulnerabilities. Presidents fear that even a successful, low-casualty conflict could be ruinous for their political fortunes if television managed to transmit footage of even a few soldiers losing their lives in the wrong way or at the wrong time. Where Mueller sees a tidy, logarithmic relationship between reality and opinion, presidents see an irrational and emotional connection. Intense media coverage of even a few casualties, they believe, can shake public confidence in the president and the mission (witness Somalia). Presidents thus fear sustaining even low levels of casualties when the media will be there to witness them. Even a military victory may turn into political defeat if the media were to emphasize the human costs of combat. As a result, an essential element of America’s new political-military strategy is to prevent, whenever possible, the media (particularly television) from recording the sorts of wartime events that could turn public opinion against war or the president.

Further, although presidents have always feared losing public support when bad news appears, since Vietnam things have gotten worse. The media’s rising power and influence in politics, the increasingly adversarial relationship between the media and government, the media’s hugely improved technological capabilities, and the breakdown in the bipartisan consensus on foreign policy have sharpened White House fears beyond historical comparison and driven home to presidents as never before the dangers of free and independent press coverage of war.

The Growing Importance of the Press in Politics

The transformation of the press into a larger, more influential, more critical, and more independent actor in American politics has given presidents an increased interest and incentive in shaping the news coverage of their administrations. The stakes for influencing news coverage have risen as the media play a greater role in the policy
process. Presidents know that a victory on the battlefield means nothing if they do not win the battle for public opinion through the media. And because the press has become politically more sophisticated and because other actors have learned how to gain access to the media to stake their claims, setting the public agenda and managing news has become more difficult. Presidents used to set the agenda simply by being the president. Now they must work harder to do so. Presidents have found that setting the agenda and getting their message to the public during war is much easier when the press is restricted than when it is free.

The press since Vietnam has become a larger and more influential force than ever in the policy process. Dom Bonafede noted this change in 1982,

The press emerged from Vietnam and Watergate more confident–arrogant, in the view of its critics–and freer than ever from some of its self-imposed restraints. The news media today are bigger, more diverse, more influential and more controversial.\textsuperscript{15}

While not confusing size with importance, the growing role of the media in politics has been matched by its growing numbers. After World War II the Washington press corps numbered about 3,000. By the mid 1980s the number of newspeople in the capital was over 10,000.\textsuperscript{16} Between 1968 and 1984 the number of radio and television reporters in Washington grew fourfold. This increase followed from the growing audiences for television news, and the need to cover the ever-growing number of programs and activities of the federal government.\textsuperscript{17}

This pervasiveness, in turn, has helped spawn a more intrusive press, one which inspects and judges our government more thoroughly now than ever before. The


\textsuperscript{16} Bonafede, "The Washington Press..." p. 664

journalists of today are better educated than their counterparts twenty years ago, and the number of specialists in the press corps, able to follow arcane twists in policy, has risen substantially, making it much more difficult for the government to escape scrutiny by releasing incomplete or misleading information.\(^\text{18}\) There is thus more pressure on policy makers to reveal the inner workings of government and details of policy than in the past. It has become much more difficult for the government to keep things secret or to delay the press in reporting any newsworthy item.\(^\text{19}\) Even the private lives of public officials have largely become public domain.\(^\text{20}\)

The press has also grown increasingly resistant to attempts by outsiders to manage the news. Journalists have always bristled at government (or other outside) control over the news, but over the last thirty years the major news organizations have become more independent. Jay Blumler summarized the journalistic desire for autonomy:

> Media power is not supposed to be shared: that's an infringement of editorial autonomy. It is not supposed to be controlled: that's censorship. It's not even supposed to be influenced: that's news management!\(^\text{21}\)

Observers have offered several reasons for the media's increased independence. Grossman and Kumar credit the growing financial and political power of these organizations with providing this independence.\(^\text{22}\) Others see it as a result of the Vietnam/Watergate era, when journalists became disillusioned with their traditional role as "neutral transmitters" of government statements. When journalists stopped trusting


\(^{19}\) On how much more cozy the relationship between officials and reporters was in the sixties, see Linsky, *Impact,* p. 42; and especially James Reston, *Artillery of the Press* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967)

\(^{20}\) This fact has become clear from all recent presidential election campaigns, as well as in confirmation hearings and other daily government business. See Larry J. Sabato, *Feeding Frenzy: How Attack Journalism Has Transformed American Politics,* (New York: Free Press, 1991)

\(^{21}\) Jay Blumler, "Purposes of Mass Communication Research: A Transatlantic Perspective," *Journalism Quarterly,* Vol. 55, Summer 1978. It should also be noted that Blumler is not entirely in favor of such freedom for the press. He wonders who will ensure that the press does not abuse its powers.

\(^{22}\) Grossman and Kumar, *Portraying the President,* pp. 305-306
that government press releases were honest, they perceived the need for greater distance from government and for a greater level of analysis of government actions and words.  

Daniel Hallin notes that this independence may also have roots in the more general erosion of public confidence in institutions which began in the 1960s.  

Further, the president and White House in particular must cope with a much greater level of coverage than in the past. Michael Grossman and Martha J. Kumar found that the *New York Times* increased its White House coverage 50% in the 1968-1978 period compared to the 1953-1968 period, while *Time* nearly doubled its coverage over the same period. Television, in particular, has been responsible for raising the visibility of the president and the White House. The president makes perfect television; he offers high drama in a form all Americans can identify, and the logistics of covering the president are far less challenging for the networks than covering large numbers of scattered beats. Grossman and Kumar found that over the period from 1968 to 1978, CBS ran an average of four stories about the president each night. Even more importantly, the president's stories tend to come early in the newscast, thereby making a bigger impression on the audience about their importance.

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25 Grossman and Kumar, *Portraying the President*, pp. 256-259


28 Grossman and Kumar found that 23% of all White House stories came before the first commercial break, television news' version of the front page. *Portraying the President*, p. 259
With the demise of political parties as unifying and educational instruments, television and the print press have taken over the role of informing the public about the government’s activities and providing judgments of the president’s performance. The press’ power to set the agenda—to determine what politicians and the public will think and talk about—has grown as the press has inserted itself further into the policy process. In the past, presidents had an easier time setting the agenda, with the press corps more often taking its cue from him. Now, however, as larger numbers of journalists prowl the sprawling federal government for news, presidents and other government agencies find it dramatically more difficult to focus the public’s or Congress’ attention on their preferred agenda. This trend is exacerbated by the fact that some journalists have become celebrities in their own right; reports and commentary from network stars can shine uncomfortable spotlights on public figures and organizations.

As a consequence of its rising influence the press has become a more critical element of the political system. Television, especially, has become the linchpin of presidential strategies of governing. Presidents know that their policy initiatives will be

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won or lost in the press. Negative press coverage could halt a program, thwart a cabinet nomination, or force a retreat in negotiations with congress. Martin Linsky interviewed senior government officials and found that they were in consensus on the growing importance of the press to public policy. Linsky found that not only do officials spend more time dealing and thinking about the press now than before Vietnam, he also found that those who had served in government primarily after Vietnam were more likely than others to report that the press had a "dominant impact" on the policy process.33

It is thus more important than ever that a president and his administration look good in the press and on television. As the media’s importance in politics has risen, presidential efforts to manage news have intensified. The results are clear at the White House. Gary Orren notes that 25% of Reagan’s senior staff was engaged in public relations or dealt with the media in some way.34 As we will see in subsequent chapters, this preoccupation with solving the press problem has carried over to wartime. As General Colin Powell warns, “Once you’ve got all your forces moving and everything’s being taken care of by the commanders. . .turn your attention to television because you can win the battle or lose the war if you don’t handle the story right.”35

Increasingly Adversarial Government/Press Relations

The collegiality which had existed between the government and the press eroded during the Vietnam War; officials and journalists are now far more likely to view their relationship as adversarial rather than cooperative, especially during war. This has pushed the government toward greater wartime restrictions on the press for a simple

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33 Linsky, Impact, p. 46. Linsky also found that current policy makers were twice as likely as pre-1973 officials to spend more than ten hours a week dealing with media issues.

34 Orren, in Linsky, Impact, p. 4

reason: Officials, wary of the power of an adversarial press, have become more likely to see the press as a hostile force which must be subdued or evaded in order to achieve policy successes. They do not believe that the media will portray their policies in a favorable light in the absence of concerted government public relations efforts. This fear has a sound basis. In fact, journalists no longer place the same level of trust in government statements and actions that they once did. The press once equated presidential intentions with the national interest; journalists now force presidents to prove that their actions will benefit the nation. They are more likely to criticize policy with negative stories and to offer their own analysis of political and military actions.

The central forces behind this evolution away from the era of cooperation were the events of the turbulent Vietnam and Watergate period. As I will outline more thoroughly in Chapter Three, over the course of the Vietnam war journalists began to question seriously United States policies—its ability to win the war and even whether the US should be fighting at all. Many journalists felt that they faced presidents and a military with a questionable commitment to honesty and an unhealthy interest in news management. Mounting evidence encouraged many to assume that the government was not always telling the truth, and some came to believe that it was journalism’s duty to ensure that the government was forced to tell the whole story about the war. David Halberstam, a journalist who frustrated the government with his reporting from Saigon, summed it up this way in a 1978 interview: "The White House constantly, constantly lied about what its intentions were....Scotty Reston’s phrase ‘escalating by stealth’ is exactly

36 Linsky, Impact, p. 46

37 This point is taken for granted in most discussions of government/press relations. Among those who take up the theme specifically (and who argue its strongest implications) are Daniel P. Moynihan, "The Presidency and the Press," Commentary, Vol. 51, No. 3, March 1971, pp. 41-52; Larry J. Sabato, Feeding Frenzy, Thomas E. Patterson, Out of Order; and Martin Linsky recounts discussions with former senior government officials on this note, Impact, p. 45 ff.

38 Schudson, Discovering the News, pp. 160-194
right....They were lying to their own Bureau of the Budget Director, they were lying to the Council of Economic Advisers, they were lying to everybody....They are liars, that is why they have no credibility."\textsuperscript{39}

Predictably, those in government and the military at the time saw things differently. To them, the press was unfairly biased against the war, and its negative coverage of the war was eroding the public support vital to victory. Television, in particular, was blamed for focusing too heavily on combat, casualties, and atrocities, and for thereby distorting the true picture of the conflict and US efforts in Vietnam. In the end, many in the military and government officials put a large share of blame on the media for the United States' loss in that war.\textsuperscript{40}

The mistrust and adversarial relations engendered under Lyndon Johnson, highlighted by the administration's "credibility gap," continued and worsened under Nixon, who feared and hated the press more than any president before or since. Nixon's dealings with the press on Vietnam were hardly any more successful than Johnson's, although he initially enjoyed the benefit of a media honeymoon as a result of his campaign pledge to seek peace rather than victory in Vietnam. Nixon then began to create his own problems; while he preached "Vietnamization" and "peace with honor", he sought in secrecy to expand the war to Laos and Cambodia to force the North Vietnamese to give concessions at the peace negotiations. When journalists discovered that both they and the public had been duped, trust deteriorated further.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{39} Grossman and Kumar, \textit{Portraying the President}, p. 10

\textsuperscript{40} Bruce Kinnard, an Army general, surveyed those flag officers who had served in Vietnam about their attitudes toward the press, see, \textit{The War Managers}; (New York: Random House, 1977). For personal accounts from military officers casting a range of blame on the media see Maxwell Taylor, \textit{Swords into Plowshares}, William C. Westmoreland, \textit{A Soldier Reports} (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976) and Philip B. Davidson, \textit{Vietnam at War}. One of the bluntest assessments of the media's role in the war actually remains that of a journalist, Robert Elegant, "How to Lose a War," \textit{Encounter}, August 1981, pp. 73-90.

But on top of Nixon’s Vietnam troubles were his difficulties in dealing with the Washington press corps on a daily basis, which peaked with Watergate. Nixon, who had never had an easy time with the press, dating back to his days as Eisenhower’s vice president, came into office and was soon frustrated with how the press covered his administration. As former Nixon speechwriter William Safire recounted, “I must have heard Richard Nixon say ‘the press is the enemy’ a dozen times.”

All Presidents, of course, have had troubles with the press. Nixon, however, went to greater lengths to deal with the problem than any before or since. As Marilyn A. Lasher wrote in a study of Nixon’s relations with the press:

Lawsuits, tax audits, FBI investigations, threats, subpoenas, license challenges, retaliation, and power plays became the hallmarks of [Nixon’s] dealings with the press. By orchestrating a barrage of anti-media efforts, the Nixon White House was able to chill dissent in political commentary delivered on network television evening news programs.

In 1969, upset over press coverage of antiwar demonstrations, Nixon had Vice President Spiro Agnew launch a public attack against television, chiding the networks for their "instant analysis" of presidential speeches and for their overly negative coverage of government. These attacks, often covered by the networks live and heavily covered by newspapers, in fact engendered a great deal of support from the public, but served to set journalists and the Nixon administration further at odds. As Paul Weaver wrote, "These tactics not only didn’t work, they seemed only to confirm the press in its new determination to be independent, which in context meant critical.”


45 Paul H. Weaver, "The New Journalism and the Old—Thoughts after Watergate,” *Public Interest*, vol. 35, Spring 1974, p. 79
Thus, when the Watergate scandal broke in 1973, journalists had little sympathy for Nixon. Throughout the year in which Watergate dominated the headlines and nightly newscasts, the administration's relations with the press deteriorated into a state of near war. White House briefings grew tense and hostile, while the administration in vain explored every avenue to generate positive publicity for the president before he finally resigned to avoid impeachment on April 1974.

While Nixon's resignation marked the end of the darkest days of the government/press relations, it by no means signaled a clean slate. As Thomas Patterson writes, "Although Watergate and Vietnam are viewed as the high point in critical coverage of our leaders, they merely marked the beginning of a steady rise in negative news." Grossman and Kumar note that no president since Lyndon Johnson has enjoyed over 50% positive coverage in the *New York Times*, *Time*, or on CBS even in their first year, when coverage is at its most favorable. This increase in critical coverage has done little to improve relations. As Paul Weaver pointed out, "Increasingly newsmen began to say that their job was to be an autonomous, investigative adversary of government and to constitute a countervailing force against the great authority of all established institutions."

**Advancing Media Technology**

Accelerating presidential concerns and fears of the media has been the breakneck pace of technological change which has given journalists increasingly powerful tools to

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46 Maltese, *Spin Control*, pp. 120-125

47 Spear, chapter 7


49 Grossman and Kumar, *Portraying the President*, p. 261

50 Weaver, "The New Journalism..." p. 80
gather and disseminate news from around the globe, including the battlefield. Though the
media’s technological advances have raised concerns for officials throughout history, the
pace of change and the growth of new media capabilities since Vietnam is unparalleled.
Writing just before World War One in response to press coverage of the Spanish
American war, war correspondent Richard Harding Davis summarized the impact of
technological change on the future of war reporting:

The fall of the war correspondent came about through the ease and
quickness with which today’s news leaps from one end of the earth to the
other. In the days of the Crimea, of the Civil War, of the Franco-German
and Russo-Turkish wars, the telegraph and cable were inadequate and
expensive, and the war correspondent depended largely upon the mails. In
consequence, before what he wrote appeared in print the events he
described had passed into history, and what information he gave could in
no way benefit the enemy. But the day his cable from Cuba to New York
was relayed to Madrid the war correspondent received his death
sentence...51

Davis’ argument carries even greater weight today. The lightning fast march of
technology has transformed the media’s newsgathering capabilities in the last twenty
years and has magnified the government’s incentives to keep the press away from the
battlefield.52 Advances in computers, satellites, fiber optics, minicams, and other areas
have combined to allow the media to bring us news live and in color from anywhere on
the globe, including the front line, sharpening fears of negative and horrible war coverage
and altering the relative usefulness of censorship and restricting access.53

In earlier wars, the press agreed to give the government the ability to censor its
materials (or agreed to self-censor, as in Vietnam) in return for access to the war zone and
aid in transmitting their dispatches back home. In this way, the military, and thus the
White House, could be assured nothing was published that would threaten operational

51 Quoted in Charles Brown, The Correspondents' War (data) pp. vii-viii


53 A good review of the technology available as of the Gulf War and how it can be used is Linda Jo
Calloway, “High Tech Comes to War Coverage: Uses of Information and Communications Technology for
security. Today, however, technology makes it possible for a journalist to transmit his story, his photos, and even his television footage back to the United States from almost anywhere in the world. A journalist no longer needs military assistance to send his material to his organization (which previously gave the military confidence that all material had been reviewed), nor does he need to even leave the battlefield. The bargain struck between access and censorship is thus no longer valid. Now, even if the government imposes censorship, unless the military keeps close track of all journalists, the military cannot be sure that it has reviewed everything. As a result, officials have found it easier simply to keep the press away from the battlefield entirely, rather than risk the press using its technical capabilities to report from the front.

Officials worry that such uncensored reporting will be more likely to damage operational security and aid the enemy. A reporter going live from a battle area could, in his rush to get on the air, disclose information that could damage operational security, simply because he did not stop to think about the consequences.

Military and civilian leaders have long harbored particular concerns about television coverage of war. And with recent advances in media technology, their concerns have been amplified. During Vietnam television crews consisted of a reporter and two cameramen. The camera, to which the reporter was connected by a short wire when taping, weighted almost ninety pounds. Today television cameras weigh as little as fourteen pounds and are carried on a shoulder, and are easy to take almost anywhere.


57 The amateur videotape recording of police officers beating Rodney King in Los Angeles, seen repeatedly on national network news, exemplifies this growing power of new media technologies to be everywhere and see everything.
With their greater mobility, television reporters are more able to cover the very action presidents fear most—combat. One Marine colonel noted at a conference on military/media issues, “My nightmare is that if the press can report instantaneously, parents will see Johnny’s brains getting blown out on CNN.”

Some also complain that live television news from the battle zone is likely to lack even the rudimentary explanation and context necessary to understand a conflict. Without such context, it is argued, the public may be unduly swayed by images and forget or dismiss the logic behind the rational for US action. Research shows that this concern has some merit. Live coverage of the Gulf War by CNN focused heavily on breaking events, while offering very little background about why they were happening.

Further, the immediacy of the news today makes foreign policy more difficult to manage, especially during crisis situations. Lloyd Cutler, former White House counsel for Carter, argues that television coverage often robs the government of time to deliberate thoroughly when making decisions. Although newspapers have had similar impact in the past, television has an unsurpassed ability to alert the public and to spur presidents to quick action. It seems fitting therefore that today almost all senior officials have a television nearby tuned to CNN, especially in a crisis, and often find that they too learn some things more quickly through that than other official intelligence channels. Chris Kent notes this reality in his article on CNN:

As one US assistant secretary put it, ‘That’s the first thing we here [in the administration] when something important happens—turn on CNN.’ Not long ago the Washington Post reported that Chief of Staff John Sununu

58 The Military and the Media: The Continuing Dialogue, p. 49


60 Lloyd Cutler, “Foreign Policy on Deadline,” Foreign Policy, #56, Fall 1984, pp. 113-128; Austin Ranney, Channels of Power, pp. 113-128; Martin Linsky finds the same process at work, especially in his study of the Love Canal case. Impact, pp. 71-81, 87-118.
had quipped at a recent staff meeting that ‘he had learned more about the attempted coup in Panama from watching Cable News Network than from Webster’s Central Intelligence Agency.’

In Vietnam, television news lacked the immediacy that makes it such a powerful political force today. Vietnam footage shown during the nightly news was at least twenty-four hours old, often older. Without easy and inexpensive access to satellites in Vietnam, film had to be flown to Tokyo, where it could then be sent to New York. The first same day coverage seen from Vietnam was not until 1969. And the cost of using the satellite link for speedy news transmission was prohibitive except in exceptional circumstances. The delays between events in Vietnam and their appearance on television news gave officials more time to make decisions than they are often allowed today.

Americans and their news organizations, furthermore, have become accustomed to the benefit of speed allowed by this technology. Everyone will long remember the vivid images from the Berlin Wall as it came down in 1989, from Moscow during the attempted coup in 1991, and from Tienanman Square in China, as human rights protesters battled tanks in the streets. In each case television cameras were there, bringing the entire world up to date on what was going on each day. Thus, although seeing television footage days later may have been the norm during Vietnam, today very little film of breaking events over a day old now makes it to the evening news. The press, therefore, has a great incentive to resist government efforts to slow the pace of news.

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64 John Fialka notes that television studios had to discard (archive) thousands of feet of Gulf film because it didn’t make it back to the US in time to be news.
Press Coverage of the Deteriorating Foreign Policy Consensus

Finally, the incentives for presidents to manage news during war have also grown stronger as a result of press coverage of the deteriorating consensus on American foreign policy. When political and military leaders agree on the need for military action, presidents will have a relatively easy time leading the nation into war. When elites disagree, however, the president faces a much more difficult task. Not only must he convince important political leaders that military action is necessary, he must do so under fire from critical press coverage. As Daniel Hallin has noted, press coverage reflects the debates and beliefs of political leaders. When they agree, the press is unlikely to challenge the justifications for US policy. When they disagree, however, the press will report the misgivings of the critics.\(^\text{65}\) Negative press coverage can then compound the difficulty a president has keeping his political allies on board and his enemies at bay.

During the darkest days of the Cold War, the broad outlines of US strategy were clear, and few questioned a president’s foreign policy decisions made within that framework.\(^\text{66}\) American involvement in World War II, Korea, and even the war in Vietnam (at first) enjoyed bipartisan support in the United States. Presidents enjoyed generally favorable press coverage in these periods.

During Vietnam, however, the elite consensus over the war broke down. Press coverage became more negative, and the government/press relationship suffered.\(^\text{67}\) After

\(^{65}\) Hallin, *The "Uncensored" War* . . . , Hallin develops a very useful framework for understanding press coverage and why it changes over time.

\(^{66}\) On the president's ability to get his way without difficulty on foreign policy during the Cold War, see Aaron Wildavsky, "The Two Presidencies," in Wildavsky, ed., *Perspectives on the Presidency* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1975) pp. 448-461.

\(^{67}\) Hallin, *The "Uncensored" War*, pp. 174-210. Hallin found that early press coverage of Vietnam, when consensus on the need to act in Vietnam was high, was very accepting of US policy. Criticism of particular efforts in South Vietnam was more common. This finding is reinforced by the testimony of several journalists who covered the war. See, for example, David Halberstam, *The Powers That Be* (New York: Knopf, 1979) After the 1968 Tet Offensive, when elites began speaking out more against the war, press coverage followed. This is discussed at greater in Chapter 2. Also see the companion piece to Wildavsky's noting the breakdown of consensus on foreign policy, Donald A. Peppers, "The Two Presidencies: Eight Years Later," in Wildavsky, ed. *Perspectives on the Presidency* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1975) pp. 462-471.
the war, Congress began to take a more active role in foreign policy, its members fearing that the president had gained too much power over its conduct.\textsuperscript{68} The press has responded by holding post-Vietnam presidents to very high standards when considering involving the US in another engagement. Every conflict since has fueled debate over whether the US should pursue a military option.\textsuperscript{69} Not only has this meant greater political opposition to presidents, but this opposition has been duly recorded by the media, often infuriating policy makers. Most recently, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, the Cold War compass directing US foreign policy has disappeared entirely. The room for debate over strategy, as well as tactics, has increased dramatically. The task facing presidents who would lead the nation to war has become much more daunting.\textsuperscript{70}

*Increasing White House Efforts to Manage the News in Peace and War*

At the same time White House fears about the destructive power of the press have risen, however, it has also recognized the correspondingly greater benefits for those who manage to dominate or influence press coverage on an issue. In the Media Age public relations strategy sits on par with political strategy in the Oval Office. Presidents have come to view the media, especially television, as integral elements of their strategies for governing, for building public support, and for claiming credit for their successes. And just as they turn to the media in peacetime, so do they turn to their public relations apparatus in time of war. Public relations in fact represent a necessary complement to


\textsuperscript{69} The debate over each conflict will be reviewed in later chapters.

\textsuperscript{70} Current US debate over what should be done in Somalia and Bosnia reflect the standards to which politicians, especially the president, are being held. See Chapter Six
press restrictions. Keeping journalists away from bad news is but a first step, one which can only reduce the amount of negative press coverage of war. The second step presidents must take is to generate positive news coverage of conflict in order to justify their actions, convince the public that the cause is just and the costs bearable, and to ensure that a military victory redounds to their political benefit.71

Since Vietnam presidential appreciation of the growing importance of the media has led successive White House staffs to develop sophisticated strategies for public relations to combat the media's power. By many accounts, they have done so with great success. As Grossman and Kumar noted in 1981, "the recent history of the office of the president is in large part a history of the expansion of the resources that presidents have to get their message to the public."72 Joseph Spear went so far as to say that "During this period [the 1970s] the chief executives virtually mastered the media."73 This success has led in turn to a reliance on using public relations to build public support, to sway recalcitrant Congresses, and to maintain high levels of presidential approval. Their peacetime efforts to deal with the press have then been imported directly to wartime public relations campaigns.

Presidents believe that the aggressive use of the press has become increasingly essential simply to stay even, to avoid being drowned in criticism, to buoy presidential approval, and to keep the administration focused on its political agenda.74 To play the public relations game successfully, a president must be media savvy. As Richard Cheney, former Ford chief of staff and Bush Secretary of Defense, told an interviewer,
"The most powerful tool you have is the ability to use the symbolic aspects of the presidency to promote your goals and objectives.... You don’t let the press set the agenda. The press is going to object to that. They like to set the agenda. They like to decide what’s important and what isn’t important. But if you let them do that, they’re going to trash your presidency." Further than that, however, presidents have found that skilled dealings with the press are also a powerful tool for building public support for their policies and for dealing with recalcitrant Congresses. The result has been a steady rise in the sophistication of presidential efforts to manage the news coverage of their actions, and an increasing reliance on public relations to solve problems facing their administrations. It would be unthinkable today for a president to consider policy actions without simultaneously considering media strategy.

The evolution of a structured and sophisticated White House media operation began in earnest under Nixon. In an attempt to use the press to their advantage, Nixon and his staff initiated many of the routines carried on by every president since. For instance, Nixon’s staff started compiling a daily news summary from television and newspaper stories to keep a close eye on press coverage. The administration made a routine of calling journalists to complain about mistakes and perceived bias or distortions in their reporting to influence future coverage by making them think twice about taking such a tack in the next story. In the administration’s efforts to avoid the mediation of Washington journalists, many of whom Nixon considered unfriendly to his cause, senior officials often took their messages directly to local media outlets, who tended to be far less critical and more likely to report the administration’s preferred themes. The most powerful version of this tactic was Nixon’s repeated appearance on television during prime time for presidential addresses. By avoiding day time press conferences in which

75 Maltese, Spin Control, p. 2

76 Kernell, Going Public, pp. 51-81 on the president/press relationship are particularly useful here.
journalists could ask hostile questions or selectively report Nixon’s words to the public later that night, Nixon felt he could send his message directly to the public. With some minor exceptions and fine tuning, all presidents since Nixon have embraced his White House communications apparatus and public relations tactics.

Most observers agree that during the Reagan administration news management hit its stride. As we will discuss more thoroughly in Chapter Three, Reagan’s presidency was consciously and skillfully packaged for television. David Gergen, communications director for Reagan put it this way, “We wanted to control what people saw, to the extent that we could. We wanted to shape it and not let television shape it. . . . I mean, large aspects of government have become staged, television-staged, and there is a real question who is going to control the stage. Is it going to be the networks or the people who work for the candidate or for the president?”

George Bush, while in no sense a great communicator like Reagan, nonetheless showed that he and his team had learned and borrowed from Reagan during his 1988 election campaign. Bush’s advisers included experienced hands in the government/press struggle, and they first displayed their skills by using television far more effectively than Bush’s opponent, Michael Dukakis. Later, Bush showed his considerable sophistication on media issues during both the Panama and Persian Gulf crises. His use of the press in both cases helped him build overwhelming public support for actions which initially did not appear popular.

Implications of the Media Age Argument

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77 Smith *Power Game*, p. 403-404

78 Maltese, p. 216

79 Chapters 4 and 5 on Panama and the Gulf War will detail this thoroughly.
Why should we care about press coverage during war, or whether the White House tries to restrict press access to the battlefield while providing the public with its own version of events? Clearly, we might worry for the same reason presidents worry—because of the possible impacts of media coverage and government control of that coverage on public opinion, politics, and the direction war takes.

Many observers agree with presidents that the media pose a serious risk to presidential foreign policies and the success of American military campaigns. Only if presidents are able to keep journalists and hypernegative press coverage in check, they believe, will the public be able to support a military conflict, thereby allowing presidents to pursue the national interest. Others, however, believe quite the opposite, that excess presidential control over the media during war poses risks of its own. Without a truly free press during war, they argue, the president may gain too much control over what the public learns about the causes, character, and consequences of the battles fought in its name. The result, some argue, is that the government will report only its successes, giving presidents the power to build and maintain public support for their actions even when they are based on dubious premises.

These concerns highlight the importance of finding that presidents, rather than the military, are primarily responsible for the growth of recent press restrictions during war. While the military may itself find many reasons to seek restrictions, from worries over operational security to a desire to gain public approval, the military does not occupy the central position in American political life that the president does. A military that does not like journalists is normal, and the consequences of military-driven restrictions are limited to times of war. But a president seeking to restrict the press coverage of war may not only threaten the unique bond between the public and its highest elected official, but certainly threatens the everyday working relationship between the White House and the press. This relationship, once poisoned during war, will not be easily repaired; president/press tensions may have long lasting negative consequences for politics and the
policy process. In fact, many argue that the United States still suffers from the breakdown of mutual trust and understanding which resulted from presidential battles with the press during the Vietnam/Watergate era a generation ago.

This thesis should prove a resource for those interested in understanding the relationship between political communication and public opinion. This is not a theoretical work on public opinion, but it is a study of government officials acting on their beliefs about public opinion and its relation to war and press coverage of war. It is thus an analysis of institutional responses to the practical dilemmas of building public support and preventing the media from destroying that support. This work in a sense picks up where Mueller's analysis leaves off. Having identified a connection between casualties and opinion, one begs the question: how does knowledge of that fact change the way people think and act during war? Can anything be done to alter the correlation between war and opinion? Can a president escape disapproval for an unpopular war? By looking at presidential attempts to do something about the situation Mueller's work revealed, this thesis offers an indirect test of Mueller's work. If presidents can change the connection between casualties and opinion through public relations and press restrictions in spite of Mueller's claims, we have discovered something of both practical and theoretical significance. If they cannot, Mueller's insistence that the media have little to do with the deterioration of public support for war will be bolstered.

In addition to concerns about how the public will react to press coverage of war, we must also consider what such an emphasis on public opinion and news management may have on the nature and quality of presidential actions and decisions. Have presidents become concerned with the potential negative impact of press coverage to the point where their fears have degraded the decision making process during time of crisis? Do presidents now choose policy options in times of armed conflict based more on the basis of how they will play in the media than on their moral, legal, and practical consequences?
Finally, the new White House press strategy reflects the nature of the broader government/press relationship today. The state of that relationship has fundamental implications for every branch of politics and policy both in the short and long term. In particular we need to know how well the press fulfills its obligations in a democratic system. Does the press function as a watchdog on government, informing the public about the work of its officials and keeping the government honest, thereby fulfilling its Democratic function as foreseen by the Framers? Is the press too critical of government, and with negative and sensational coverage disrupt policy, destroy careers, and endanger US interests? Or does the press serve to promote official views by relying heavily on government officials for information and news, thereby choking off public debate on important issues and marginalizing political opposition to entrenched power? Unsurprisingly, these competing images of the press are accompanied by competing beliefs about what role the press should play, and what a journalist’s relationship with officials should be. Should the press criticize government as much as it does, or should it defer more to the wisdom of officials who have the ultimate responsibility for making policy and running government? Does the press enhance or stifle democracy through its reporting practices?

This thesis provides ammunition to those involved in this debate through detailed analysis of the government/press struggle. By asking the appropriate questions, we can determine which of the competing views of the press seems to best describe the wartime situation. Did the press work hard to provide the public with impartial and independent analysis of crisis and war? Did government pronouncements and views dominate debate and press coverage? Did press coverage marginalize political opposition? Did press coverage disrupt policymaking or threaten the ability of the US to prosecute war successfully? And in all cases, why and how?

Methods
This thesis documents the Media Age’s impact on government strategy for dealing with the press during war by tracing the interaction among White House, military, and press from Vietnam through the US invasions of Grenada and Panama, and finally to the Gulf war. Each case study relies on three complementary strands of analysis to build the case for the Media Age as the driver behind changing government press policies. First, each examines how the White House looked to use public relations to pursue presidential political interests and to avoid falling prey to Mueller’s Dictum and the loss of public support. Among the questions addressed in this vein are: To what extent does the White House determine the shape and implementation of battlefield press restrictions? What factors shaped the White House public relations strategy? How did press restrictions aid the White House in its efforts to use public relations effectively? How successful were presidents in using the media to their advantage and why?

Second, each case illustrates the development and execution of military public affairs policy to show that the military has not been responsible for the government’s new media strategy and to assess what exactly the military’s role has been as it implements its press policies during war and carries out the commands of its political leaders. How has military public affairs policy evolved since Vietnam? Did the military in fact plan ahead of time to ensure that the press would never again roam free on the battlefield? Does the conventional wisdom accurately explain the military’s public affairs performance during recent conflicts?

Third, the case studies analyze how the media covered the conflicts in question to reveal how journalists coped with government restrictions and public relations offensives, how those restrictions influenced the tone and content of press coverage, and how the press has responded in the wake of its wartime performances. Was the press a major player in the political process during crisis and conflict? Did the press cover the conflicts in the adversarial, sensational, and damaging manner that the White House and military feared it would? What effect does competition among journalists have on the press’
ability to circumvent government controls? How has the evolution of media technology changed the way journalists report war news?

To illustrate my argument I rely on four primary sources of information. Of greatest value are the firsthand accounts of those journalists and military officers involved and secondary historical works which rely heavily on interviews with them. These works help to bring into focus how the government/press relationship looked at ground level to those who had to make the White House media strategy work and to those who had to work around it.

Second, a scattering of government documents offers valuable insight into government press policy planning, especially for the Persian Gulf period. Unfortunately many potentially useful documents, such as National Security Council minutes or Joint Staff planning materials, are classified and will remain so for quite some time.

The third resource was the journalistic product itself. For each conflict since Vietnam I have read the entire relevant New York Times coverage in order to closely examine press coverage before, during, and after war. This was an obvious necessity given that the thesis is motivated by the struggle to control that product. Focusing most of my attention on one newspaper, of course, entails limitations. I cannot claim, of course, to say that I have definitively analyzed press coverage of recent wars. Nor can I say what the full range of effects government restrictions might have had on various other media outlets. However, there is good reason to believe that studying the New York Times offers the researcher a great deal of insight into the general patterns and problems of the press. The Times, of course, is one of the most important news sources for government leaders, both informing them and helping to set their agendas. In addition, the Times is also plays a key role for the rest of the news media, often providing cues and indicating what stories they should cover. Thus, an analysis of Times coverage can tell us much about what the press found newsworthy, when it picked up certain stories, and so forth. Perhaps more importantly for this study, the Times is also the government's most
capable opponent in terms of its ability and determination to overcome obstacles to reporting a war. The Times thus represents an excellent test case for the impact of government restrictions. If government restrictions have a significant impact on the way the Times covers a war, we can conclude that other news organizations have likely endured similar and even more serious dilemmas.

In addition to analyzing print coverage, I made an effort to examine television coverage. I have examined written abstracts of the nightly news for these periods, and wherever possible reviewed articles which describe television coverage of conflicts, both in newspapers and in professional journals. Due to fiscal constraints, however, I was not able to do a systematic analysis of television coverage. This is unfortunate because I believe that such an analysis would in fact strengthen some of my findings.

Finally, I have plundered the scholarly literature on the government/press relationship and the role of the press in American politics. One of the most important conclusions to emerge from this study is the extent to which the press has permeated all government decision making and shapes every political action taken. Just as the press has changed the face of political life on an everyday basis, so has it begun to change the way America wages war. Tying this study into broader academic debates about the role of the press in politics adds to those debates and strengthens the study itself.

Taken together, the case studies provide powerful evidence that the Media Age has prompted widescale, politically potent, and probably irreversible changes in the way presidents approach war and in the way they deal with the press during war. The cases also raise a host of other issues tangential to the central focus of this thesis that involve heated debates in other corners of academia.

Outline of the Thesis

Chapter Two provides a baseline for interpreting the rise of the Media Age and the evolution of government press strategy by outlining the government's approach to the
press during the Vietnam war. Though both the White House and military came to fear the press during Vietnam, the new strategy I describe here did not emerge in this period. The war revealed problems, not solutions. Chapter Two also details the impact that Vietnam had on military and media attitudes toward each other which in turn led to the conventional wisdom. Chapter Three focuses on the US invasion of Grenada in 1983. In addition to providing the first post-Vietnam combat test for the military, Grenada marked the beginning of the trend toward growing press restrictions and public relations during war. This chapter challenges the conventional wisdom with a discussion of what really happened in military public affairs planning after 1973 and explains the often overlooked significance of post-Grenada changes in military public affairs. Chapter Four investigates the 1990 US invasion of Panama and the first test of the new public affairs policy featuring the Department of Defense National News Media Pool. This chapter focuses on the failure of the pool to fulfill its intended mission due to civilian pressures and the ineffective attempt by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to ensure its proper functioning in the future. Chapter Five analyzes the Gulf war, the modern peak of government control over the press and the ultimate example to date of the use of public relations to bolster a political-military strategy. Chapter Six, finally, offers concluding observations and predictions of where government press strategy is headed in the future.
Chapter Two

Press Policy in Vietnam

"It was the first time in history a war had been declared over by an anchorman."

–David Halberstam

“In view of the impact of public opinion on the prosecution of the war, the accuracy and balance of the news coverage has attained an importance almost equal to the actual combat operations."

–General William C. Westmoreland

This chapter provides a historical review of government press policies and public relations efforts during Vietnam. Vietnam spawned an avalanche of studies concerning government/press relations; the impact of television, the performance of the press, the credibility of presidents, and the attitude of the military toward the press have all been analyzed at great length. It would be impossible in any one study to do justice to this very large body of work. Thus while citing much of this literature, this chapter focuses on those issues that help put more recent public affairs policies in perspective. The primary purpose of an examination of Vietnam public affairs is to establish a baseline for comparison against which one can measure the current trend towards increasing press


82 I have not included in this chapter more than rudimentary detail on the history of the war itself. There are much better places to learn the history of the conflict in Vietnam. I have found several works to be of particular value: George Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1956-1975* (New York: Wiley, 1979); Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking, 1983); Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982)
restrictions. Both the media and the military harken repeatedly back to Vietnam as a measuring stick for current policies. But much of what passes for current debate is based on distortions of the past. It is thus essential to understand what public affairs policy looked like in Vietnam, both to understand the changes in policy over time, and also to provide us with the ability to critically assess claims made by both sides about the history and prospects of wartime military/media relations. The second task of this chapter, intertwined with the first, is to reveal that political motivations of presidents were a primary determinant not only of the structure but more importantly of the implementation of public affairs policies. As we will see in each conflict, what the military’s public affairs policy looks like on paper may at times have little to do with how the government actually deals with the press. And finally, we will review in detail how both the military and media felt about the role of the press in Vietnam by the end of the war. By detailing the specific complaints of the military about the press, we can more accurately judge whether the military’s Vietnam experience has indeed had the impact conventional wisdom maintains. Doing so will also help us to assess whether or not, from the military’s view, recent press policies represent an improvement over the past. Similarly, by understanding how the press felt about its role in Vietnam, we can appreciate how journalists have responded to current restrictions. Furthermore, by keeping the historical record firmly in view, we will be able to see more readily through the rhetoric heard from both sides in the military/media dispute in recent years.

In sum, this chapter argues that structurally speaking, military public affairs policies in Vietnam were quite open, meaning that the government did not attempt to censor press reports or to exert much control over where journalists traveled. This openness resulted in large part from the political decision that censorship and overt press controls were likely to be counterproductive to the government’s cause. As a result, the press enjoyed tremendous access to the battlefield and to information.
At the same time, however, this openness was often counterbalanced by the desires of consecutive presidents to influence news coverage of the war. Political and institutional considerations spurred frequent civilian and military attempts to manage the news from Vietnam, causing considerable tension between the government and the press and leading to the famous credibility gap. Officials were never satisfied with press coverage, however, despite their attempts to improve the war’s image.

By the end of the war many military officers felt that they had been betrayed by the media—that television in particular had done its best to defeat the military in its mission. Many in the media, on the other hand, left Vietnam with the belief that senior military and civilian officials had a predilection for dishonesty and cover-up. The mutual mistrust and antipathy from Vietnam would prove long-lasting, and had not abated by the time of the Grenada invasion in 1983.

Three Political Problems: Publicity, Negativity, and Credibility

The military’s public affairs policy in Vietnam was an attempt by military and civilian officials to deal with problems that had plagued the US mission in Saigon and policy makers back in Washington from the early 1960s. The handful of correspondents then in Vietnam covering the small but growing US presence in South Vietnam had caused problems out of proportion to their number. Homer Bigart, Francois Sully, David Halberstam, Neil Sheehan, Malcolm Browne, Peter Arnett, and a handful of others had challenged official versions of events in Vietnam in their reports, casting doubt on the efficacy of the administration’s efforts and prospects in Vietnam, and adding to the tensions between the South Vietnamese and American governments.83

Officials felt that as the war escalated, bringing scores more journalists to Vietnam, the administration’s political difficulties would worsen if a more coherent plan to deal with the press was not crafted. By the time officials from Saigon and Washington met in Honolulu in March 1965 to consider such a plan, they were well aware of the three central problems that the Johnson administration and the military faced. Excess publicity, ‘negative’ reporting, and eroding government credibility had been problems since 1961, when John F. Kennedy began to increase the number of US military advisors in South Vietnam.

The first problem confronting Kennedy and later Johnson was simply to keep the public from learning about the extent of US involvement in Southeast Asia. As William Hammond writes, “The claim that South Vietnam was fighting with only US advice and support shaped US relations with newsmen in Saigon from the beginning.” Daniel Hallin concurs, noting of the government that “its public information policies were generally designed to keep American involvement in Vietnam out of the news.” Too much attention from the press, especially on the fact that US “advisors” were accompanying South Vietnamese troops into combat and suffering casualties, would have

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84 Hammond, The Military and the Media, pp. 135-143; Hammond’s work is the Army’s official historical study of the subject. Because it is the only work which relies primarily on primary historical sources to examine Vietnam public affairs, I make extensive use of it in this chapter. Those interested in greater detail than is offered in this chapter should consult Hammond’s volume.

85 Hammond, The Military and the Media, p. 11

brought publicity that in officials' eyes would have made pursuing limited US aims difficult and put the president in a risky political situation.87

The Kennedy administration needed to keep South Vietnam as the central figure in the news, in part because to intervene directly in South Vietnam violated the 1954 Geneva Agreements prohibiting such intervention.88 A second reason for doing so, equally or more powerful, was that if Vietnam became a visible political issue, domestic political forces on the right might demand escalation, forcing the president into a land war in Asia and thereby raising the stakes dangerously high. While Kennedy wanted to portray himself as a tough Cold Warrior, he and other Democrats viewed with trepidation any analogy with the deeply unpopular Korean war, which they believed had cost Truman the presidential election in 1952. It was thus widely doubted that the public would have the stomach for another war in Asia.89

Among the more blatant efforts to keep Vietnam out of the news were presidential denials of the true role of US forces in Vietnam. Tom Wicker of the New York Times recalled this one:

After long and solemn deliberations around Reston's desk on January 15, 1962, I was entrusted with a question for President Kennedy that perhaps ten Times reporters had honed to what we thought was a fine point. Kennedy could not entirely evade it, we were sure. So as soon as he recognized me later that day, I arose—feeling the cameras aim flatteringly at me—and demanded in my sternest voice: "Mr. President, are American troops now in combat in Vietnam?"

Kennedy looked at me—six feet away and slightly beneath his elevated lectern—as if he thought I might be crazy.

"No," he said crisply—not another word—and pointed at someone else for the next question.90

87 Aronson, The Press and the Cold War, pp. 180-205. Aronson offers a more aggressively critical analysis of both government and press in the early 1960s.

88 Aronson, The Press and the Cold War, p. 181; for background history on the agreements and how administrations viewed them see Herring, America's Longest War, pp. 29-57, 82-84.

89 Herring, America's Longest War, pp. 82-84; This analysis is noted in "Fears on Vietnam Rising," New York Times, February 12, 1962

US troops were in fact seeing combat and taking casualties, both as advisors accompanying South Vietnamese troops and later as pilots flying missions supposedly being flown by South Vietnamese pilots. But the administration rationalized that because they were not technically ‘combat troops,’ such an evasion was not quite an outright lie.\textsuperscript{91}

State Department Cable 1006 to the US mission in Saigon epitomized the early approach to public affairs and the attempt to keep Vietnam out of the news. The 1962 cable impressed upon officials in Saigon the need to keep the press focused on the role of the South Vietnamese and of keeping the US role out of the news. The cable noted that "it is not...in our interest...to have stories indicating that Americans are leading and directing combat missions against the Viet Cong."\textsuperscript{92} The cable also urged officials to impress upon journalists that "frivolous, thoughtless criticism" of the South Vietnamese government would not aid the American cause. The cable recommended that journalists never be taken on military missions which might create negative press coverage.\textsuperscript{93} Although officials at the time denied that the cable was a form of news management, journalists believed that the government was in fact trying to get the press to write more favorable stories.\textsuperscript{94}

\textsuperscript{91} Troops in Vietnam were in fact upset at the time that the public did not appreciate the risks they were taking in Vietnam. The government’s information policy kept news of their efforts out of the papers and discouraged officers from saying anything about their role. See Homer Bigart, "Denial of Purple Heart to G.I. Angers ‘Copter Men in Vietnam,” \textit{New York Times}, April 24, 1962; and David Halberstam, “Curbs in Vietnam Irk U.S. Officers,” \textit{New York Times}, June 3, 1962; Also see “Salinger Tells How Kennedy Tried to Hide Vietnam Build-Up,” \textit{U.S. News and World Report}, September 12, 1966, p 103

\textsuperscript{92} Cited in Hammond, \textit{Military and the Media}, p. 15


\textsuperscript{94} Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs Roger Hilsman testified the cable was not an attempt to get newsmen to write any particular stories and thus did not represent news management, see “Vietnam New Coverage,” in Hearings before the Foreign Operations and Government Information Subcommittee of the House Committee on Government Operations, 88th Congress, 1st session, May 24, 2963, pp. 387-420; and “US Information Problems in Vietnam,” House Report 797, 88th Congress, 1st session, October 1, 1963.
Although government/press relations were quite poor in the early days of the conflict, both Kennedy and Johnson were initially quite successful in their effort to keep Vietnam under wraps. A 1964 Washington Post poll found that 63% of the public paid little or no attention to the situation in Vietnam. This ignorance persisted despite the fact that over 16,000 US forces were by that time in South Vietnam, leading and advising South Vietnamese forces and taking casualties of their own. This low profile was due in part to the fact that the presidents had said little in public about direct US involvement in South Vietnam and even less about US casualties and how they had occurred. Up until that point, casualties had been light, but were rising throughout the early 1960s. Another factor helping Kennedy and Johnson allay any public concern was the bipartisan consensus on foreign policy. Both liberals and conservatives felt the need to help South Vietnam as a way to contain China and communist dominance of Asia. And as Daniel Hallin notes, press coverage of the time reflected this consensus, further legitimizing the conventional arguments for intervention in Indochina.

Later, Johnson would try to keep Vietnam off the public agenda not only to avoid public concern over casualties but also to protect his domestic political goals. He feared that once the war had fully gripped the public, keeping the war limited would be impossible. He would have to throw all of America’s weight behind the war effort, and thereby risk his Great Society legislation. Johnson thus sought to minimize the perceived scope of the US engagement and to avoid dramatic gestures of escalation. Johnson’s efforts to keep things quiet, however, worsened his other two problems, negative coverage and lack of credibility.

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95 Hallin, *The “Uncensored War,”* p. 9

96 Hammond, *The Military and the Media,* p. 69


98 Hallin, *The “Uncensored War,”* p. 24-25

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Officials in Washington felt that correspondents in Saigon were opposed to the US effort. Certain journalists, like David Halberstam, Neil Sheehan, and Malcolm Browne, infuriated officials on a regular basis with their coverage of the crisis in Vietnam. National security adviser W. W. Rostow summed it up succinctly: "It is easy in Washington to underestimate the cumulative effect of Halberston's [sic] New York Times reporting, as well as other recent... stories... it may be wise to consider whether a low key campaign of public information may, even now, be in order."99

In fact, however, reporters initially supported US goals in Vietnam. The problem lay in the fact that the Saigon journalists were reporting that the US policies in place to reach these goals were ineffective. Journalists were becoming impatient with hearing official optimism about South Vietnamese government and military effectiveness when their firsthand experience told them a different story. The difference was not over policy in a broad sense, but over tactics.100 As David Halberstam has argued, "The pessimism of the press corps was of the most reluctant kind: many of us came to love Vietnam, we saw our friends dying all around us, and we would have liked nothing better than to believe that the war was going well and that it would eventually be won. But it was impossible to believe these things without denying the evidences of our senses."101

This distinction had trouble making the Pacific crossing; every president had moments when he was sure the press was out to shoot down his Vietnam policies. US efforts in Vietnam depended heavily on the stability and competence of the government of South Vietnam. Unfortunately for US policy makers, those qualities were both

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99 From a memo from Rostow to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, cited in Hammond, The Military and the Media, p. 70


101 Cited in Aronson, The Press and the Cold War, p. 216
abundant in their absence. The instability and ineffectualness of first Ngo Dinh Diem and later the various generals who tried to run South Vietnam put the US in a difficult position. The US could not simply take over and fight the communists themselves—the president did not want the publicity, and South Vietnam was after all a sovereign nation, no matter how troubled. The United States could not just step in and run the war. But with the press in Vietnam seeing for itself how badly South Vietnam’s army (the Army of the Republic of Vietnam—ARVN) was doing, and commenting critically on the ability of the government in Saigon to win the population to its side in the fight against the Viet Cong, the job of US diplomats became very difficult, and in Washington officials worried about the impact on opinion such negative reporting would eventually have.  

102 Ambassador Lodge wrote back to Washington in the middle of a period of heightened tensions between correspondents and officials in Saigon to say that, “The US press should be induced to leave the new government alone. . . . They have exerted great influence on events in Vietnam in the past, and can be expected to do so again. Extensive press criticism, at this juncture, could be critical.”  

103 McNamara had already voiced similar feelings at a Honolulu conference in 1962, arguing that anti-Diem reports hurt “our case with the public, with congress, and with our own officials.”  

104 Homer Bigart, a Saigon correspondent for the New York Times, also noted the tension, “The Kennedy Administration is still rigidly following its sink or swim with Diem line. . . . the Administration believes the American correspondents here are giving a distorted picture. . . . of American involvement in the shooting war. The Administration feels the reporters are magnifying incidents where American servicemen find themselves in combat.

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102 For a brief summary of press pessimism about South Vietnamese forces and government, including excerpts from news stories, see Hallin, The "Uncensored War," pp. 39-43

103 Hammond, The Military and the Media, p. 70; also see Hammond’s discussion of negative press coverage and officials reactions to it, pp. 70-80

104 Cited in Hammond, The Military and the Media, p. 12
situations, and are writing too much about American casualties." Unfortunately for future administrations, the situation never improved much after Diem.

Kennedy and Johnson thus went to great efforts to encourage positive coverage to counter what they believed were overly critical reports from Saigon. Their campaigns included angry calls to newspapers to complain about biased coverage, private policy discussions by Johnson to influence editors of important newspapers, and government sponsorship of trips to Vietnam by local newspaper reporters who were presumed to be more accepting of official views and more likely to do favorable stories on "hometown boys." The president and other administration officials made speeches around the country to put forth the government view. But official statements too frequently did not match what journalists were seeing and reporting on the ground in Vietnam. This resulted in a continuing crisis of credibility.

Since the earliest days of US involvement, the government had established a pattern of publicly avowed optimism coupled with a reluctance to reveal operational details which might be perceived in a poor light or used as propaganda by the communists. These attempts to avoid publicity and negative press coverage, however, led to an even greater problem as the press and public stopped trusting government pronouncements. Reporters had little trouble in South Vietnam getting access both to information and to the battle zone. They readily discovered for themselves that things were not going as well as the US mission or Washington argued. After enough revelations that government and military reports were either inaccurate or misleading, reporters lost faith in them. The daily military briefings in Saigon, for example, were dubbed the "Five O'clock Follies," and few correspondents relied on them for a true

105 Cited in Braestrup, Big Story, pp. 2-3

106 Herring, America's Longest War, pp. 134-135, for example

107 Hammond, The Military and the Media, p. 16
picture of the war.\textsuperscript{108} This erosion of government credibility with journalists eventually made its way to the public. In 1965 a CBS poll reported that 67\% of the public felt that the government’s statements about the war were not always truthful.\textsuperscript{109}

**The Basic Public Affairs Package Emerges, 1965**

In 1965 Lyndon Johnson introduced the first US ground troops into Vietnam, thereby deepening the US commitment and making US actions in Vietnam far more newsworthy. By the end of the year Johnson had sent over 180,000 US forces to South Vietnam. Along with ground forces came journalists. The Saigon press corps, only seven in 1962, grew by August of 1965 to over 400. Half of these were Americans, the rest were from all over the world. This growth foreshadowed the problems the government would have as the public awoke to the war and the toll it would take on the nation.

Officials in Saigon recognized that they would need to draw up a new system to handle the influx of correspondents. In fact, pressures had been mounting for a reexamination of information policies since the spring and summer of 1964. By that point the tensions between the US mission and the press were high, the war was not going well, and both military and civilian officials began to realize that current press policies were in many instances doing them more harm than good. Investigation of the military’s public affairs operations revealed several organizational problems as well as a poor understanding of how to deal with the press. Officials felt that the information program needed to be centralized under one person. Barry Zorthian, a USIA official, was made

\textsuperscript{108} See, for example, Peter Braestrup’s Background Paper in *Battle Lines: Report of the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force Report on the Military and the Media*, (New York: Priority Press Publications, 1985) pp. 63-64; The unreliability of the follies is discussed in almost every account of military/media relations.

\textsuperscript{109} Cited in Williams “Vietnam: The First Living-Room War,” p. 255
chief public affairs officer for the US mission and was given the order to make the needed improvements in Saigon’s relations with the press.¹¹⁰

Zorthian then set to work with the recently appointed commander of US forces in Vietnam, General William C. Westmoreland, to restructure the public affairs effort in Saigon. Their changes were made in the hope of regaining journalists’ trust as well as balancing critical press reports with more positive assessments of the situation in Vietnam. Considerations of operational security certainly existed and were sharpened by the thought of greater numbers of reporters coming to Vietnam. Operational security, however, had not been a problem thus far and was not the focus of Zorthian and Westmoreland’s planning. Among other things, the changes they made included greater efforts to get journalists to the scene of military engagements and to disseminate official speeches and stories about positive aspects of the conflict. Zorthian and Westmoreland’s plans were approved by the State Department and their polices came to be identified by the phrase “maximum candor.”¹¹¹

Unfortunately for officials, installing the policies of maximum candor did not convince journalists that openness and honesty were established fact. As the conflict grew more complicated and the US more involved throughout 1964 and into 1965, journalists began to protest that the government was not actually interested in loosening its information policy.¹¹² The Wall Street Journal offered a typical assessment of the situation in early 1965, “Time after time high-ranking representatives of government—in Washington and in Saigon—have obscured, confused, or distorted news from Vietnam, or have made factually erroneous evaluations about the course of the war, for public consumption... Yet the contradictions, the double-talk, the half-truths released in the

¹¹⁰ Hammond, The Military and the Media, pp. 74-80

¹¹¹ Hammond, The Military and the Media, pp. 80-85

¹¹² Hammond, The Military and the Media, pp. 102-103
name of the United States government about the Vietnamese War are not the fault of the USIA alone. The problem goes back to the Pentagon, to the State Department, and to the White House.”

Continued tensions between the government and the press, especially over US actions in Laos in 1964, threatened the Johnson administration’s diplomatic efforts as well as its ability to keep the conflict in Vietnam out of the public view. Officials said little about US air strikes in Laos to keep details out of the news, but the press complained loudly. The Washington Post editorialized: “Does the government really have the naiveté to believe that its hand in these operations can be concealed?” Another obstacle created to staunch the flow of operational details was to put the air base at Da Nang off limits to journalists except when accompanied by a military information officer. US officials tried to explain that this was a South Vietnamese initiative and that military security, not news management, had been the motivation. Correspondents again reacted negatively, and remained quite able to get very accurate information from other sources.

Despite Zorthian’s and Westmoreland’s best efforts, there was no appreciable improvement in press coverage, especially from Washington’s perspective. Knowing that problems could worsen once US forces were fully committed to combat, Westmoreland and Zorthian called for a conference of military and civilian officials to be held in Honolulu, Hawaii in March 1965 to discuss the future of public affairs policy.

113 Wall Street Journal, April 23, 1965, cited in US Congress, Senate, Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, “News Policies in Vietnam,” 89th Congress, 2nd session, p. 64; Senator Fulbright offered this and several other articles in the same vein for consideration during the hearings.


116 Hammond, The Military and the Media, pp. 133-142;
At the top of the list for discussion was whether or not censorship could solve the problems plaguing the government. Several issues seemed to favor the imposition of censorship. First, although there had been (and would be) very few instances in which journalists revealed tactical military information of use to the enemy, concern persisted over the press and operational security. In military eyes in Saigon and Washington, the difficulty of maintaining operational security was becoming more pronounced as the war expanded in size and scope and greater numbers of journalists came to Vietnam.117 Second, and of greater importance at the time, political pressures created by press coverage of the war were encouraging officials to consider that censorship might be a preferable alternative to allowing journalists free rein in Vietnam. Johnson and other Washington officials were outraged by press coverage of the air campaign and troubled by its revelations of the Marines’ activities. Press discussion of Vietnam, and particularly critical comments about how well things were going, made life difficult for Johnson as he tried to conduct a limited war without stirring the public consciousness. Too much news about Vietnam would give critics of Johnson and his policies more ammunition to use against him, and would make judgment of the success or failure of the intervention easier, thereby raising the political stakes for the president. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Wheeler wrote to Westmoreland in response to press discussion of Johnson’s decision to send the Marines to Vietnam, “It is a fact, that the situation in the US is exacerbated and pressures upon highest authority [Johnson] increased by press coverage of items such as these cited above.” He added in his next message, “It may well be that nothing short of press censorship will serve this end [easing pressure on Johnson].”118

However tantalizing the idea of censorship appeared at times, there was an overwhelming case for not instituting it. First, congress would have needed to declare

117 Hammond, The Military and the Media, pp. 139-140
118 Hammond, The Military and the Media, p. 160
war to provide the legal foundation for imposing censorship. As noted, however, declaring war was definitely not something Johnson wanted to encourage. In addition to concern that the public would not approve of a sudden escalation of the war, Johnson feared the risk to his Great Society legislation should the country move to an all-out war footing. Johnson told a biographer, "...History provided too many cases where the sound of the bugle put an immediate end to the hopes and dreams of the best reformers: the Spanish-American war drowned the populist spirit; World War I ended Woodrow Wilson's New Freedom; World War II brought the New Deal to a close. Once the war began, then all those conservatives in the congress would use it as a weapon against the Great Society..."¹¹⁹ The large expenditures of both dollars and political capital would, he worried, leave him incapable of fulfilling his domestic agenda.¹²⁰

A second problem with imposing censorship was the expected uproar from the press should censorship be instituted after so many years without it. Officials at the Honolulu conference were very aware of the government's credibility problems with the press, and did not think that imposing greater restrictions would improve government/press relations. In addition, any censorship program would have had to allow South Vietnamese participation. But because of their poor track record with the press, US officials felt that the South Vietnamese were likely to abuse their position as censors and that the political fallout from those problems would also outweigh censorship's usefulness.¹²¹


¹²⁰ Herring, America's Longest War, pp. 108-143; and on Johnson's continuing efforts to balance Vietnam and domestic legislation see Kathteen Turner, Lyndon Johnson's Dual War: Vietnam and the Press (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985)

The final major difficulty with censorship would have been the extreme logistical requirements. Not only would the military have had to ensure control over all communications and transportation within South Vietnam, but Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) would also have had to fly over the necessary equipment to view and edit television film, and a large staff of bilingual personnel would have to be trained and maintained to carry out the many duties required by a system of censorship. ¹²²

For these reasons the conference quickly rejected censorship and reaffirmed an open approach to public affairs. Though perhaps lacking the ultimate security of censorship, adopting an open approach to dealing with the press seemed to offer at least two advantages. First, by continuing the policies of “maximum candor,” officials could claim that they wanted to ensure that the public was well informed on Vietnam. Second, by having journalists abide voluntarily by groundrules in exchange for access to military briefings and transportation, the government would be afforded some control over their actions. In the event that a journalist reported anything which compromised operational security, their accreditation could be revoked. In this way operational security, if not political security, could be reasonably maintained. ¹²³

After circulating through the State Department and White House, the recommendations of the conference were adopted. For the most part, the new policy only modified slightly the policies of maximum candor. Over the next several months, the policy was fine-tuned to account for those issues raised by the introduction of more US forces and the greater coverage of combat that accompanied this buildup. The policies were then issued in written form by the Defense Department.

¹²² Hammond, The Military and the Media, pp. 144-145
¹²³ Hammond, The Military and the Media, p. 145
The guidelines were quite simple and did not represent a major restriction for journalists. In order to be accredited by MACV to cover the war, journalists would have to abide voluntarily by a number of groundrules whose purpose was to ensure the maintenance of operational security. Concerning combat information, journalists were expected not to identify specific units going into battle, the exact nature or size of those units, nor the precise number of casualties suffered by a unit in an engagement. Casualties would only be reported as light, moderate, or heavy. Journalists also agreed not to reveal troop movements until the military had determined that the enemy was clearly aware of them. With regard to reporting on the air campaign, journalists could not release information about the kind of aircraft involved in an ongoing mission, their numbers, destinations, tactics, or possible future targets. The military would, however, announce general information concerning these figures—tons of bombs dropped by what types of planes and with what success—after the planes had safely returned. In exchange for following the guidelines, journalists would benefit from military transportation from Saigon to various remote areas in Vietnam, room and board from military units in the field, 24-hour-a-day access to information at the MACV in Saigon, daily briefings and occasional backgrounders on the war’s progress, and most importantly, would not find their news copy subject to censorship.

The result of these press policies was that covering the war was made as easy as it could have been for journalists. The military, in fact, went to great lengths to help reporters do their jobs. Testifying before Congress in 1966, Arthur Sylvester, the

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124 Dale Minor notes that the rule on casualties reporting seesawed. There was so much skepticism of how the terms light, moderate, and heavy were being applied that MACV switched back to using specific numbers, only to return to the policy during the Tet Offensive, when it was determined that revealing actual numbers during a battle could aid the enemy. See Minor, Information War (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1970) p. 50

Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, described the support MACV had provided journalists in the last twelve months,

. . . the MACV information office has: Arranged more than 4,700 in-country trips by newsmen, to include ground and air transportation; Arranged for or conducted almost 6,900 briefings and 108 background meetings; Answered more than 32,000 telephone queries from newsmen; Been consulted individually by newsmen on 3,300 occasions; Conducted daily press briefings in Saigon, 7 days a week; average attendance—130 correspondents; Conducted the U.S. portion of the accreditation of all correspondents arriving in Vietnam. . . We have established daily scheduled plane flights for newsmen out of Saigon to eight major areas throughout the country. We have installed sole-user teletype circuits within Vietnam to assist MACV and the press in providing information, transmitting news copy, and answering questions.126

This impressive list of logistical and informational assistance did not include the more informal and hard to measure aid given to correspondents, especially by units in the field, which provided journalists with information as well as security, room, and board.

The press for the most part concurred with Sylvester about the help it was getting from the military. A Chicago Tribune reporter remarked on the transportation situation, for example, "Military transportation of all types is open to the reporter for the asking. He even gets preference on scheduled flights carrying troops and supplies. If no scheduled flight is available, the reporter need only wait on an air field and sooner or later a plane will come along. The pilot happily gives the reporter a lift."127

Problems Remain

Despite the openness of public affairs policies, the problems plaguing the government did not go away. Publicity, of course, was increasingly difficult to avoid as journalists streamed into Vietnam, matching the deployment of US forces. Once American troops had been sent into battle, their actions and fate immediately became the


most important story in the nation, one that would be covered intensively regardless of what the president might have wanted. Johnson, however, was determined to keep the public from realizing that the United States was irrevocably committed to fighting a war in Asia for as long as possible. To admit the stark truth about the situation would have been to turn 180 degrees from the statements he had made during his 1964 election campaign. At a stop in New Hampshire Johnson had declared that, “I have not thought that we were ready for American boys to do the fighting for Asian boys.” 128 The United States would thus be taking over what Johnson had assured the public was a Vietnamese problem.

Despite such assurances, Johnson made the decision early in 1965 to send two battalions of Marines into South Vietnam to protect the US air base at Da Nang, from which the US was launching air strikes against targets in North Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. 129 Soon after he also gave Westmoreland the authority to send the Marines out to defend the base in depth, and to pursue the Viet Cong when encountered. These new orders reflected a substantial change in mission. Rather than announcing the change publicly, and in spite of the openness of the military’s public affairs policies, however, Johnson endeavored to keep the nature of Marines’ mission and the imminent escalation of the war to include ground combat out of the public spotlight. 130 Until that point, increasing bombing of North Vietnam had been the only publicly acknowledged expansion of the war effort. To talk about a land war in Asia still did not seem a wise thing to do. As Secretary of State Rusk noted privately at the time, “The president felt

128 Braestrup, Big Story, p. 7


130 Herbert Y. Schandler notes that “efforts were made to make the change as imperceptible as possible to the American public...” in The Unmaking of a President: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977) pp. 20-22; Hallin, pp. 59-101
that he must not force the pace too fast, or congress and public opinion, which had been
held in line up to now through the president’s strenuous efforts, would no longer support
our actions in Vietnam.”

Johnson’s orders, embodied in National Security Action Memorandum 328 of
April 1965, made successful implementation of a open public affairs program essentially
impossible. It is worth quoting at length from that document here:

5. The President approved an 18-20,000 man increase in US military
support forces to fill out existing units and supply needed logistic
personnel.

6. The President approved the deployment of two additional Marine
battalions and one Marine air squadron and associated headquarters and
support elements.

7. The President approved a change of mission for all Marine battalions
deployed to Vietnam to permit their more active use under conditions to
be established and approved by the Secretary of Defense in consultation
with the Secretary of State...

11. The President desires that with respect to the actions in paragraphs 5
through 7, premature publicity be avoided by all possible precautions. The
actions themselves should be taken as rapidly as practicable, but in ways
that should minimize any appearance of sudden changes in policy, and
official statements on these troops movements will be made only with the
direct approval of the Secretary of Defense, in consultation with the
Secretary of State. The President’s desire is that these movements and
changes should be understood as being gradual and wholly consistent with
existing policy.

In a memo to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Maxwell Taylor, ambassador to
South Vietnam, revealed the motivation for such a public relations strategy and how it
would be implemented by the US mission in Saigon:

Under the circumstances we believe that the most useful approach to press
problems is to make no, repeat, no special public announcement to the
effect that U.S. ground troops are now engaged in offensive combat

131 Hammond, *The Military and the Media*, p. 151

132 From National Security Action Memorandum 328, April 6, 1965, signed by McGeorge Bundy and
addressed to the Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, and the Director of Central Intelligence, cited in
operations, but to announce such actions routinely as they occur. As the marines move from their present posture of securing the Da Nang airbase “in depth” to actions which can be related only indirectly to Da Nang, military spokesmen will be queried about whether the marine mission has changed and will answer that, while we never discuss the future, current operations speak for themselves. Eventually, of course, the fact that the marines or other ground troops are engaged in offensive combat will be officially confirmed. This low-key treatment will not obviate [all] political and psychological problems...but will allow us to handle them undramatically, as a natural consequence of our determination to meet commitments here.\textsuperscript{133}

Johnson also argued publicly that the infusion of Marines did not represent a change in course. When asked at a press conference, “Mr President, does the fact that you are sending additional forces to Vietnam imply any change in policy...?” Johnson simply replied, “It does not imply any change of policy whatever. It does not imply any change of objective.”\textsuperscript{134} With these efforts Johnson was able to mute most speculation for several months, but eventually predictions of escalation did make the front pages, to be proved correct when Johnson finally announced the planned buildup of US forces publicly in July of 1965.\textsuperscript{135}

By attempting to shun publicity and by misleading journalists as to his intentions, Johnson in 1965 took a large step down the path toward destroying his credibility with the press on Vietnam. In addition, by forcing the US mission in Saigon to follow this public relations ploy, the Johnson administration also degraded the military’s credibility. Instead of letting the more open press policies in Saigon improve official credibility, the administration’s desire to avoid publicity and critical reporting led to the widening of the credibility gap.\textsuperscript{136}

\textsuperscript{133} Berman, Planning a Tragedy, pp. 57-58

\textsuperscript{134} Hallin, The “Uncensored War,” p. 61

\textsuperscript{135} Hallin, The “Uncensored War,” pp. 80-101

\textsuperscript{136} Journalists pounced on Johnson for his dissembling. See, for example, Arthur Krock, “In the Nation: By Any Other Name, It’s Still War,” New York Times, June 10, 1965; Charles Mohr, “War and
Worse, from the administration's view, 1965 marked the arrival of television on a daily basis in Vietnam. Television's power and the problems it could cause presidents was revealed almost immediately. Morley Safer, a reporter for CBS, accompanied marine units on a mission to eliminate all resistance and enemy infrastructure in Cam Ne, a supposed Viet Cong stronghold. Marines were told to destroy any hut from which they received enemy fire. Safer described what happened as the film showed a marine casually lighting a thatched hut roof on fire with his Zippo lighter:

It first appeared that the marines had been sniped at before and that a few houses were made to pay. Shortly after, one officer told me he had orders to go in and level the string of hamlets that surround Cam Ne village. And all around the common paddy fields [camera focuses on a roof being lit by a flamethrower] a ring of fire. One hundred and fifty homes were leveled in retaliation for a burst of gunfire. In Vietnam like everywhere else in Asia, property, a home, is everything. A man lives with his family on ancestral land. His parents are buried nearby. These spirits are part of his holdings. . . .Today's operation shows the frustration of Vietnam in miniature. There is little doubt that American fire power can win a military victory here. But to a Vietnamese peasant whose home means a lifetime of backbreaking labor, it will take more than presidential promises to convince him that we are on his side.\textsuperscript{137}

Safer's report from Cam Ne became one of the defining images of the war and was a symbol to many of the devastation the United States wreaked in Vietnam. The reaction from the Johnson administration was immediate. Arthur Sylvester, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, called CBS News president Fred Friendly to insist that Safer be recalled, arguing that Safer was biased against the military and that because he was a Canadian citizen he did not have the proper appreciation of the situation in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{138}

\textsuperscript{137} CBS News broadcast August 5, 1965, cited in Hammond, p. 188

\textsuperscript{138} Hammond, \textit{The Military and the Media}, pp. 185-193, Doncovan and Scherer, pp. 79-83
Frustration and tension with the press thus persisted after 1965. As the war heated up there were inevitably more problems, and more casualties, to report. Civilian officials also worried how the public would react to the yet larger numbers of troops planned for Vietnam. In late 1965, therefore, Washington officials discussed plans to sustain the fragile public support for the war, primarily focusing still on ways to keep the facts of the US build-up from confronting the public head on.\footnote{Hammond, \textit{The Military and the Media}, pp. 207-208}

Even as they did so, however, actions taken in Vietnam served cross purposes, facilitating journalists’ access to information and to combat zones. MACV’s logistical and communications infrastructure was inadequate to meet the needs of the rapidly growing press corps. In response, Sylvester carried out several improvements in early 1966 making travel to remote areas in Vietnam easier, improving the communications within Vietnam, and upscaling the information center at Da Nang, which had become a popular spot for journalists with the expansion of the air war in the north. The accreditation process was also liberalized, so that journalists only needed a letter from their editor in order to get access to the many benefits the military provided.\footnote{Hammond, \textit{The Military and the Media}, p. 232} These improvements made it easier for journalists of all kinds to cover the war, making the administration’s task of playing down the war that much more difficult.

The administration’s various attempts to ensure positive coverage eventually raised suspicions in Congress. In August 1966 Senator J. William Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, held a hearing to investigate news policies in Vietnam. According to Fulbright, “Almost continuously over the past two years the Defense Department has been charged by responsible journalists and newspapers with managing, or mismanaging, the flow of news from Vietnam.”\footnote{“News Policies in Vietnam,” p. 63} Statements at the
hearing by Fulbright and others made it clear that the Johnson administration was implicated thoroughly in those charges. In defense of the administration and Defense Department policies, Arthur Sylvester argued that the military was in fact doing all it could to provide the press with logistical support and information.\(^{142}\)

Jack Raymond of the *New York Times* seconded the cooperativeness of the military with respect to access to the battlefield and complained that the real problem in covering Vietnam lay not with public affairs policy itself, but with the government’s attempts to assert things that journalists found simply were not true. Raymond wrote, “Far more serious are the sporadic clashes between the press and officialdom over the very facts of the war. Dispatches from Vietnam from time of time have questioned the accuracy of official statements. In retaliation, government spokesmen—military and civilian officials alike—have questioned the competence, good judgment and even patriotism of correspondents. As a consequence, an undercurrent of doubt greets much of the news from Vietnam, official and unofficial.”\(^{143}\) The committee seemed somewhat less than convinced by Sylvester’s testimony that government news policies were truly open and not geared toward manipulating news coverage. Nothing came of the hearings, but their very existence revealed that the administration’s attitude and policies toward the press were causing concern and doubt in many circles.\(^{144}\)

By 1967 domestic antiwar sentiment had begun to grow, along with concern that the US was not making the sort of progress envisioned against the communists. Press reports began to reveal cracks in the administration’s unity on Vietnam policy. Even television, which until this point had rarely questioned official reports of progress, began

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\(^{142}\) "News Policies in Vietnam," pp. 66-113

\(^{143}\) Jack Raymond, “It’s a Dirty War for Correspondents, Too,” *New York Times*, February 13, 1966

\(^{144}\) Aronson, *The Press and the Cold War*, p. 226

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to reveal the doubts many people were having.\textsuperscript{145} Realization of these trends struck fear into the administration. First, both Johnson and others believed strongly that public dissent would lengthen the war because it convinced Hanoi that the US did not have the political resolve to continue. As Henry Cabot Lodge, Ambassador to Vietnam, noted, "[demonstrations] make Hanoi think all they have to do is hang on and we'll fall apart."\textsuperscript{146} Second, officials had begun fearing that Johnson's reelection would be at risk if the public became convinced that the war was deadlocked. As a result, the administration took every opportunity to attack its critics and to portray the war in a favorable light, while encouraging the US mission in Saigon to do the same. As Hammond notes, "In conjunction with the administration's efforts, the Military Assistance Command and the US mission in Saigon strove continually to temper news stories that tended either to reflect poorly on the South Vietnamese government or to embarrass President Johnson."\textsuperscript{147} These efforts, however, did not produce the desired results.

In an effort to combat criticism of the war and growing perceptions of stalemate, Johnson twice drafted Westmoreland to travel to Washington to speak publicly about the war's progress in 1967. On his first trip in April, Westmoreland spoke in positive terms about the progress of the war before a gathering of newspaper editors, but caused an uproar both in Congress and the press by adding that he was dismayed by the "unpatriotic acts at home" of those opposed to the war.\textsuperscript{148} Johnson was promptly accused of bringing Westmoreland home for the purely political purpose of quieting dissenters, although one


\textsuperscript{146} John H. Fenton, "Lodge Finds War Hurt by Critics," \textit{New York Times,} April 27, 1967

\textsuperscript{147} Hammond, \textit{The Military and the Media,} p. 265

\textsuperscript{148} Hammond, \textit{The Military and the Media,} pp. 287-290
commentator noted that it was more credible to hear from Westmoreland than Johnson.\textsuperscript{149} By deleting reference to the question of home front unity, Westmoreland put a damper on this criticism in his second speech, given before a joint session of Congress. Westmoreland delivered what many considered an excellent speech, again offering a very optimistic assessment of the war.\textsuperscript{150}

Westmoreland’s performances gave Johnson a brief boost in the polls, but they hurt Westmoreland himself, as he had feared.\textsuperscript{151} Prior to his trip to Washington, Westmoreland was a highly credible and trusted source for journalists. Much of what he told reporters on background would end up in newspapers almost verbatim. Westmoreland’s trip to Washington, however, damaged his credibility. The military had now been fully absorbed into the political sphere. As Hammond notes, “Suspecting that Westmoreland had become a tool of the Johnson administration, newsman replaced their favorable coverage with more skeptical appraisals.”\textsuperscript{152}

After a short honeymoon during which the public seemed to believe that the war was going fairly well, doubts began to creep back into press coverage. It became increasingly clear to many that South Vietnam was not carrying its own weight in the war, and the press offered many pessimistic accounts to this effect. Further, it seemed that the communists were ably matching increased US efforts with increased efforts of


\textsuperscript{151} Westmoreland notes in his memoirs that he had serious reservations about going to Washington and entering the political sphere, \textit{A Soldier Reports}, pp. 224-225

\textsuperscript{152} Hammond, \textit{The Military and the Media}, pp. 289-290
their own. By the middle of 1967, most observers in the media were pronouncing the war a stalemate.\textsuperscript{153}

Officials in Washington and Saigon, however, believed that the war they were losing was actually on the public relations front. Westmoreland’s distress over the impact of public relations is evident in an entry from his diary at the time, “There is... an amazing lack of boldness in our approach to the future. We are so sensitive about world opinion that this stifles initiative and constantly keeps us on the defensive in our efforts to portray ourselves as a benevolent power that acts only in response to an initiative by the enemy. Therefore we become victims of our own propaganda and subject to political attrition.”\textsuperscript{154} President Johnson was also beginning to take an even more serious interest in the war’s public image. Thus officials once again stepped up their efforts to convince the public that the war was going well.\textsuperscript{155}

The administration’s determination to improve public opinion of the war was felt in Saigon. Johnson urged the mission in Saigon to “search urgently for every occasion to present sound evidence of progress in Viet Nam.”\textsuperscript{156} Ward Just of the \textit{Washington Post} noted the motivations for the White House pressure, “Quantify us some hearts and minds, the Administration has in effect told its agents in Saigon, or lacking that, give us a measure of how the war is being won. Because if the American people are not convinced that the war is being won, dissent will grow, the polls will plunge, and the public demand

\begin{footnotes}

\textsuperscript{154} Cited in Hammond, \textit{The Military and the Media}, p. 282

\textsuperscript{155} Herring, \textit{America’s Longest War}, pp. 181-185

\textsuperscript{156} Cited in Herring, \textit{America’s Longest War}, p. 183; also see Hammond, \textit{The Military and the Media}, p. 328
\end{footnotes}
to disengage would become irresistible. In response the US mission undertook an organized effort to showcase various forms of progress from the past two years. Successes from various non-military initiatives were highlighted, and the declassification of captured enemy documents was sped along in order to show doubters that even the communists believed that the US efforts were having an impact. These efforts were not enough to comfort Johnson, however, and he once again asked Westmoreland to come to Washington to respond to war critics.

In Washington Westmoreland had several opportunities to promote his views, including testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, an interview on the television program “Meet the Press,” and most importantly, as it turned out, a speech before the National Press Club. At that speech, Westmoreland made his most optimistic projections of the war. He argued that the US and South Vietnam had made substantial progress, that the enemy was wearing down and had not won a major battle in the last year. As after his first public relations trip to Washington, Westmoreland’s appearance before the National Press Club raised many questions; many in the press derided Westmoreland’s appearances as blatant attempts to “sell the war.”

Despite such criticism, however, Westmoreland’s remarks received widespread play in the media, and the “progress campaign” succeeded in assuaging much public

157 Cited in Dale Minor, The Infor, nation War, p. 69. Minor notes that other opinions about the war’s progress were evident in the press. Hanson Baldwin, for example, military analyst for the New York Times was writing at the same time that North Vietnam could no longer be seeking a military victory. See Minor, pp. 69-74


159 On Westmoreland’s trip see Braestrup, Big Story, pp. 48-61; Oberdorfer, Tet!, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) pp. 102-108; Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, p. 234

160 Westmoreland’s speech is reprinted as Appendix I in Braestrup, Big Story.

doubt that the war was going well. Johnson’s popularity rose eleven points after Westmoreland’s visit and administration public relations efforts continued to cement the shift in public opinion.\textsuperscript{162} Administration officials made the rounds of television and radio programs to shore up the image of progress and to rebut critics’ charges.\textsuperscript{163} By January of 1968 the administration was feeling somewhat more secure in its public standing, only to be stunned along with the public by the Tet Offensive.

Launched in the early morning hours of January 30, 1968, the Tet Offensive involved near simultaneous attacks on five of South Vietnam’s most important cities including Saigon, thirty-six provincial capitals, sixty-four district capitals, fifty hamlets, and even a nineteen man suicide attack on the US embassy in Saigon.\textsuperscript{164} The attacks took place during the Tet holiday (the Lunar New Year), a time of great celebration and of a yearly cease-fire, catching ARVN troops almost completely off-guard and US forces only somewhat less so. Suffering nearly 59,000 dead, the communists fought to hold ground they had taken and continued harassing US and South Vietnamese positions. Although in most areas communist forces were quickly thrown back, fighting in several areas went on much longer, and the outcome in many places was not clearly known for some time. Action was particularly heavy at Hue and Khe Sanh, the latter of which became a beacon for press coverage as Marines there were pinned down for 77 days before US air strikes finally liberated them. The US and South Vietnam also suffered heavy casualties—the highest numbers seen in such a short period thus far in the war. The US lost almost 4,000 men and South Vietnam almost 5,000.\textsuperscript{165}

\textsuperscript{162} Louis Harris, “Johnson Regains Popularity,” \textit{Philadelphia Inquirer}, December 4, 1967

\textsuperscript{163} Hammond, \textit{The Military and the Media}, p. 338-9

\textsuperscript{164} The best single work documenting Tet is Don Oberdorfer, \textit{Tet!} (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971)

\textsuperscript{165} Don Oberdorfer, \textit{Tet!}, citing official US figures in the dedication page.
Although the attacks achieved tactical surprise against the US and South Vietnamese forces, and despite the unprecedented allied losses, Westmoreland immediately began assuring the press that Tet in fact was a grave blow to the enemy.\textsuperscript{166} Westmoreland argued that the offensive represented a recognition by the communists that US military pressure was winning the war, and that drastic measures were needed to tilt the political balance in their favor since a military victory was impossible. While historians now agree with Westmoreland's assessment of the situation, the media painted a much different picture of events.

As Peter Braestrup has forcefully argued, the media portrayed Tet as a defeat for the United States and a blow to the Johnson administration's strategy for pursuing the war. Braestrup has argued that the Tet crisis played against journalism's inherent weaknesses. In short, the press jumped to the conclusion that Tet was a defeat before it could have possibly known for sure.\textsuperscript{167} And despite the mistakes made in the rush to report breaking events, Braestrup argues, few news organizations made efforts to correct them later. Thus, once Tet had been reported a failure, it remained a failure. In addition, in its rush to find drama and good television pictures, the press swarmed to cover the battles at Hue and Khe Sanh. Braestrup notes that stories from Saigon, Hue, and Khe Sanh represented 90% of all battlefield coverage, even though those battles accounted for only 15% of the total activity of allied forces.\textsuperscript{168}

Braestrup also argues that television, for the first time capable of truly covering the war firsthand during these battles, transmitted to the public a distorted picture of what was happening at Tet. The images from those scenes, the bloodiest and most chaotic of

\textsuperscript{166} Braestrup, \textit{Big Story} pp. 120-123; for Westmoreland's views of Tet in hindsight, see \textit{A Soldier Reports}, pp. 310-334

\textsuperscript{167} Braestrup, \textit{Big Story}, pp. 508-529

\textsuperscript{168} Braestrup, \textit{Big Story}, p. 218
the war so far, overwhelmed any comforting or positive predictions made by officials.\textsuperscript{169} Another observer of the Tet period, Don Oberdorfer, argues that Tet was television's first "superbattle." By 1968, he notes, there were 100 million television sets in use in America, with a potential audience of 96% of the population. Viewing rates, especially during the winter months, were very high. Estimates show that nearly 20 million homes tuned into CBS and NBC news programs every night during the first weeks of Tet. For the first time, television brought the shock of battle into the living rooms of a massive number of homes. The impact of this fact on public opinion, leaders assumed, was tremendous.\textsuperscript{170} Finally, Stanley Karnow also notes the special character of television, "But newspaper accounts paled beside the television coverage, which that evening [January 31] projected the episode [US embassy fight], in all its vivid confusion, into the living rooms of fifty million Americans. There, on color screens, dead bodies lay amid the rubble and rattle of automatic gunfire as dazed American soldiers and civilians ran back and forth trying to flush out the assailants."\textsuperscript{171}

Aside from any inadequacies of journalistic practice and judgment, however, responsibility for the press reaction to Tet lay heavily with Lyndon Johnson. The administration had, after all, spent the latter part of 1967 trying very hard to convince the public that the war was being won. Westmoreland himself had played a central role in lending the public relations blitz credibility. When television reports from Saigon showed the US embassy under attack, both the press and public found the General's optimism, past and present, hard to swallow.\textsuperscript{172} As George Herring notes, "Televised accounts of the bloody fighting in Saigon and Hue made a mockery of Johnson and

\textsuperscript{169} Braestrup, \textit{Big Story}, esp. pp. 509-520

\textsuperscript{170} Oberdorfer, \textit{Tet!} pp. 159-160, 238-277

\textsuperscript{171} Karnow, \textit{Vietnam: A History}, p. 526

\textsuperscript{172} Braestrup readily admits this point, \textit{Big Story}, pp. 48-74; pp. 468-471
Westmoreland’s optimistic year-end reports, widening the credibility gap, and cynical journalists openly mocked Westmoreland’s claims of victory.”\textsuperscript{173} \emph{Newsweek} added, “Both in Vietnam and America [the enemy attacks] aroused searing doubts about U.S. strategy in the Vietnamese war and about the man entrusted with its execution—Gen. William Westmoreland. These doubts, however, did not appear to extend to the Administration, most of whose members continued to insist publicly that the enemy had suffered a major defeat . . .”\textsuperscript{174}

In Washington officials responded defensively to press coverage of Tet. Johnson responded by claiming that the enemy had been dealt a blow and denying that the communists had won a political or psychological victory over the US, but for the most part let his subordinates do the talking.\textsuperscript{175} Secretary of State Rusk showed a frustration many felt when he berated journalists at a press conference, “Whose side are you on? Now, I’m secretary of state of the United States, and I’m on our side! None of your papers or your broadcasting apparatuses are worth a damn unless the United States succeeds. They are trivial compared to that question. So I don’t know why, to win a Pulitzer Prize, people have to be probing for the things that one can bitch about when there are two thousand stories on the same day about things that are more constructive.”\textsuperscript{176}

For Johnson, Tet represented the ultimate failure of his public relations strategy for the war. The public in 1967 had been unsure that he was guiding the country to a quick and certain end to the war. In trying to maintain support for the war, Johnson had glossed over the sacrifices the war would yet demand. His failure to warn the public

\textsuperscript{173} Harring, \textit{America’s Longest War}, p. 191

\textsuperscript{174} Braestrup, \textit{Big Story}, p 141

\textsuperscript{175} Johnson urged Westmoreland, for instance, to say something positive everyday during the crisis to ease the shock in the US. Braestrup, \textit{Big Story}, p 468

\textsuperscript{176} Aronson, \textit{The Press and the Cold War}, p. 245
about the possibility that the enemy still had a lot of fight left, and his inability to convince people after Tet that he had a plan that could end the war, left him without credibility and without support.

From Johnson’s perspective, the most important symbol of this loss of support was CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite. Cronkite, the “most trusted man” in America, traveled to Vietnam during Tet to get a firsthand look at the situation. Reporting from Vietnam in a CBS special on the crisis, Cronkite dashed the administration’s attempts to persuade the public that the war was going well:

...It seems now more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in stalemate. ...To say that we are closer to victory today is to believe, in the face of the evidence...optimists who have been wrong in the past. To suggest we are on the edge of defeat is to yield to unreasonable pessimism. To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic, yet unsatisfactory, conclusion. ...But it is increasingly clear to this reporter that the only rational way out would be to negotiate—not as victims, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to victory and democracy and did the best they could.177

Johnson felt that once he had lost Cronkite, he had lost middle America. After watching Cronkite’s report Johnson is reported to have said, “It’s all over.”178 In the wake of Tet Johnson’s approval rating sank to an all-time low of 36%, while support for his handling of the war dropped to 26%.179 On March 31, after a reassessment of his Vietnam strategy, Johnson appeared on television to discuss the situation in Vietnam, announcing a new peace proposal and shocking the nation with the news that he would not run for another term as president.180

177 Oberdorfer, Tet!, p. 251

178 Halberstam, The Powers That Be, pp. 716-717

179 Braestrup, Big Story, p. 501

180 Johnson told the country, “I have concluded that I should not permit the presidency to become involved in the partisan divisions that are developing in this political year...Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your president.” Karkow, Vietnam: A History, p. 565
Johnson's successor, Richard Nixon, thus inherited a poisoned government/press relationship, with government and military credibility at its lowest ebb. Although Saigon public affairs policies remained open and for the most part cooperative in terms of access and logistics, Nixon's approach to public relations, like Johnson's, would often contradict those policies.\textsuperscript{181} What he might have gained in credibility through reliance on an open relationship with the press, Nixon disregarded in favor of secrecy and attempts to circumvent the press.\textsuperscript{182} And, like Johnson, Nixon's Vietnam policies aroused great domestic protest, leading American society into a period of unparalleled divisiveness.

After Tet, press coverage became distinctly less favorable to the war effort and the government. Nixon could not count on the sort of patriotic coverage, especially from television, that Johnson had enjoyed early on in the conflict.\textsuperscript{183} But Nixon did not wait for the press to report favorably on his actions. Nixon, like Johnson, went to great lengths to promote his war policies. In fact, Nixon sought time on television so frequently to discuss his Vietnam policy that the Federal Communications Commission felt obliged to give opponents of the war an opportunity to give their views under the Fairness Doctrine.\textsuperscript{184} Of Nixon's television appearances, the most effective was probably the November 3, 1969 "silent majority" speech. In that speech, Nixon castigated

\textsuperscript{181} Interview with William M. Hammond, April 18, 1994. Hammond notes that public information officers tended to be less knowledgeable about the war after Tet, less likely to tolerate opposing viewpoints about the war from the press, and generally less helpful to journalists on an individual basis. Official policies did not change much, however.


\textsuperscript{183} Hallin, \textit{The Uncensored War}," pp. 167-210

\textsuperscript{184} Broadcasting is a federally regulated industry. The Federal Communications Commission created the Fairness Doctrine in order to ensure that although the number of available television channels was limited, the number of political viewpoints broadcast would not be limited. With Nixon on television so frequently to promote his views on Vietnam, it was felt that under the regulations opposing viewpoints should be given airtime.
domestic critics of the war, defended the United States’ commitment to South Vietnam, spelled out his plans for Vietnamization, and asked the silent majority of Americans who supported the war effort to stand behind him. The speech raised public support for the war appreciably, giving Nixon political breathing room, and fueled Nixon’s belief in using television as a tool to mobilize public opinion.\textsuperscript{185}

Later, Nixon would try to use television to deflect the opposition he knew he would face over the Cambodian incursion, also undisclosed until the last moment. Nixon argued, “If when the chips are down, the world’s most powerful nation acts like a pitiful helpless giant, the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy will threaten free nations and free institutions throughout the world.”\textsuperscript{186} By this point, however, Nixon had run up against the limits of television’s usefulness. Instead of support, Nixon watched the antiwar movement stage the largest demonstrations of the war. Congress also showed its displeasure, by voting to terminate the 1964 Tonkin Gulf resolution which had allowed Johnson to escalate the war in the first place.\textsuperscript{187}

Nixon’s attempts to control Vietnam press coverage are best symbolized by his secret decision to approve and carry out a massive fourteen month bombing campaign of communist positions in Cambodia in 1969-1970. The military had long wanted permission to extend the air war against Cambodia, a neutral country, in order to disrupt and destroy communist logistical efforts and headquarters located there. Thus far

\textsuperscript{185} Herring, America’s Longest War, p. 230; This speech also led to Agnew’s series of attacks on the press. Nixon was extremely upset at the instant post-speech analysis of his remarks by the networks. He felt that they were ruining his ability to speak directly to the public in his own words. He thus gave Agnew to task of publicly attacking the “nattering nabobs of negativity,” and the liberal establishment press. Agnew’s attacks fared quite well with the general public, but did little to improve the administration’s relationship with the press. See, for example, Hallin, The “Uncensored War,” pp. 181-191; Spear, Presidents and the Press, pp. 114-121

\textsuperscript{186} Herring, America’s Longest War, p. 236

considerations for public and international reaction had restrained such action, but Nixon gave the military the go-ahead.

The administration and the Pentagon kept the operation hidden from public view by creating an elaborate system of accounting for the air strikes, with the official Pentagon histories showing that other targets had been struck instead of those actually hit in Cambodia. Although early on the New York Times reported that the US had bombed Cambodia to obstruct communist supplies coming into South Vietnam based on leaks from sources in the administration, no notion of the scale of the bombing was offered, nor did reports discuss the fact that such attacks were in essence widening a war Nixon was professing to be ending.

With the Nixon administration and the military refusing to comment in any way on such missions, the issue died. In fact, in 1969 the reports failed to stir any public reaction. The news accounts did, however, enrage Nixon and Kissinger, who worried about public and international reaction should the bombing become widely acknowledged publicly. Their concern led to the illegal wiretapping first of Nixon national security aide Morton Halperin, and later to several journalists and other government employees.\(^\text{188}\) As William Shawcross notes, “The secrecy, the wiretaps, the burning and falsification of reports, were principally intended to conceal the administration’s widening of the war from the American people.”\(^\text{189}\)

It was not until four years later that Congress discovered the deception and its scale, after an Air Force major wrote letters to the Senate Foreign Relations committee telling members of his role in the operation. In 1973, the revelations had a much greater impact, fueling congressional and public antagonism for Nixon, who was by that point reeling from the Watergate scandal.\(^\text{190}\)

\(^{188}\) Shawcross, Sideshow, pp. 19-35

\(^{189}\) Shawcross, Sideshow, p. 94

\(^{190}\) Shawcross, Sideshow, pp. 34-35
The military, in an awkward position fighting a war many Americans simply wanted to end, by 1970 had begun to withdraw into itself. Public information officers, though often bitter toward the press, stopped trying to “sell the war” as had been done previously so frequently. General Creighton Abrams, who took over from Westmoreland in 1968, tended to let the war speak for itself, rather than attempt to put a good face on events. He also preferred to take a less public tack with journalists. As Major General Winant Sidle (USA, Ret.), head of the Military Assistance Command Office of Information from 1967-1969, noted, “Westy liked to have press conferences; he liked to have backgrounders; he liked to get on television I’m not knocking Westy at all, but it turned out in the end to be somewhat counterproductive. Now General Abrams took an entirely different view of this. He had no press conference the whole time I was there. . .(but) he spent literally hundreds of hours in one-on-ones with every significant newsman in Vietnam who wanted to talk to him.” Abrams, unlike Westmoreland, also resisted attempts to draft him into a more political role in the public view.

Despite a lower key public affairs effort in Saigon, military and other officials were still plagued by the press and its coverage of events in Vietnam. The My Lai massacre and Lt. Calley’s conviction for “at least 22 murders” received extended attention in 1969 and the public’s view of the military soured further. Journalists after 1968 also began to travel in greater numbers to North Vietnam to report on the war from there. The first person to do so had been Harrison Salisbury of the New York Times in 1966. The animosity he had engendered among officials with his reporting had not been

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192 Cited in Braestrup, Battle Lines, p. 71

forgotten. Many, especially in the military, felt that any reporting from the other side in war was an act of treason.\footnote{William V. Kennedy, *The Military and the Media*, pp. 87-90; Salisbury even being in North Vietnam was a problem for many. But worse, he reported that the US had been hitting civilian targets and killing North Vietnamese civilians in Hanoi, something US officials had denied. His statistics came from North Vietnamese government documents but without noting that they were the source of his story. Even journalists who supported Salisbury’s trip to Hanoi felt that this was a big mistake. See Hammond’s discussion of Salisbury’s trip, *The Military and the Media*, pp. 274-279; *Columbia Journalism Review*, “A Salisbury Chronicle,” Winter 1966-67, pp. 10-13} As Peter Braestrup notes, journalists reporting from North Vietnam were seldom critical of their hosts, a fact which further frustrated US officials.\footnote{Braestrup, *Battle Lines*, p. 72} In addition, officials believed that many of the journalists who went to Vietnam after Tet were firmly opposed to the war, and were interested in promoting that view in their writing. Nixon’s Cambodian incursion of 1970 and the bombing of Laos in 1971 reinvigorated antiwar forces at home, and coverage of the domestic dissent produced the least favorable press coverage of the war.\footnote{Hallin, *The “Uncensored War,”* pp. 18 -210} By the end of the war, military/media relations were at their lowest point in history. Many military officers felt that the press, especially television, deserved a large share of blame for America’s defeat in Vietnam. Many journalists, on the contrary, felt that the press had saved the country by exposing the corruptness of the war to the public, thereby shortening the war.

**Military and Media Attitudes at the End of the War**

A great deal of effort has been exerted in order to defend, to criticize, and to assess the impact of the Vietnam press coverage on public opinion, policy makes, and the course of the war.\footnote{For a brief review of claims and counterclaims made about the media’s impact during Vietnam see William M. Hammond, “The Press in Vietnam as Agent of Defeat: A Critical Examination,”} At present, the academic world seems comfortable with the conclusion that the press did not have the impact that both its critics and supporters have claimed. Daniel Hallin has demonstrated convincingly that the press was not nearly so
critical of the government as has been argued, and that press coverage only became more negative after elites and the public had turned against the war.\footnote{Hallin, The “Uncensored War.”; Concurring arguments are made by George A. Bailey, The Vietnam War According to Chet, David, Walter, Harry, Peter, Bob, Howard and Frank: A Content Analysis of Journalistic Performance by the Network Television Evening News Anchormen 1965-1970 (Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1973). Oscar Patterson III, “An Analysis of Television Coverage of the Vietnam War,” Journal of Broadcasting, Vol. 28, No. 4, Fall 1984; Todd Gitlin, The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980); Michael Arlen makes the same point in a non-academic fashion in his series of articles in the New Yorker. See Michael Arlen, The Living Room War (New York: Penguin, 1982) Arlen is credited with coining the term “living room war.”} John Mueller has shown that public support for Vietnam followed the same pattern as in Korea, falling in proportion to rising casualties, casting doubt on the notion that the television or the press turned America against the war.\footnote{John Mueller, War, Presidents and Public Opinion (New York: Wiley, 1973) Mueller’s analysis is buttressed by a study done by Burns Roper for Peter Braestrup’s book Big Story. Roper analyzed the polls before, during, and after Tet and found that the crisis did not have much impact, if any, on public support for the war.} Lawrence Lichty has analyzed television broadcasts and discovered that only a minute portion contained “bloody” footage of war, dispelling the myth that television carried death and destruction into living rooms on a daily basis and further calling into question television’s role in America’s defeat.\footnote{Lawrence Lichty, “The War We Watched on Television: A Study in Progress,” American Film Institute Report, Vol. 4, No. 4, Winter 1973; also Lichty, “Video Versus Print,” The Wilson Quarterly, Vol. 6, No. 5; and Michael Mandlebaum, “Vietnam: The Television War,” Daedalus, Vol. 111, No. 4, Fall 1982} And Clarence Wyatt has argued that the majority of press accounts from Vietnam relied heavily on government sources, and thus reflected more of the government’s viewpoint than many critics of the press seem to have believed.\footnote{Clarence Wyatt, Truth From the Snares of Crisis: The American Press in Vietnam (Unpublished Master’s Thesis, University of Kentucky, 1984)} This consensus, however, obscures the enduring impact of Vietnam press coverage. To the extent that Vietnam weighs in current calculations, it is not “truth,” but rather perceptions from Vietnam that have influenced military and media actions and attitudes in more recent conflicts. And by the end of the war, antagonism between the military and the media was in full bloom.
Diametrically opposed opinions on how the press had reported the war led to a gaping rift between the institutions.

*The Military View*

Many military officers ended the war with the belief that the press had played an integral role in America's defeat in Vietnam. Perhaps the best articulation of how the military felt about the role of the press is actually that of a journalist. Robert Elegant, who covered Vietnam in the 1960s, wrote that

During the latter half of the 15-year American involvement in Viet Nam the media became the primary battlefield. Illusory events reported by the press as well as real events within the press corps were more decisive than the clash of arms or the contention of ideologies. For the first time in modern history, the outcome of a war was determined not on the battlefield, but on the printed page and, above all, on the television screen.\(^{202}\)

Military and other observers have offered several reasons for what they consider the poor performance and negative impact of the press in Vietnam. First, for a military which had experienced relatively smooth relations with the press in World War II and Korea, the fact that journalists in Vietnam questioned US tactics and later US involvement in the war came as an unhappy surprise. Vietnam coincided with the growth of the sense within the media that journalists do not owe allegiance to their country, but to humanity more generally and to the tenets of journalism. As Daniel Hallin has noted, “...it was a war in which journalists clearly did not think of themselves simply as ‘soldiers of the typewriter’ whose mission was to serve the war effort.”\(^{203}\) Malcolm Browne, a journalist who had covered Vietnam since the Kennedy years, revealed this ethic in a 1965 article:

Our concern is not what effect a given piece of news will have on the public. Our concern is to get the news before the public, in the belief that

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\(^{203}\) Hallin, *Uncensored War*, p. 6
a free public must be an informed public. The only cause for which a correspondent must fight is the right to tell the truth and the whole truth.\textsuperscript{204}

This lack of patriotism, at least professional if not personal, aggravated military officers committed to fighting a war that their Commander in Chief had ordered them to fight. S. L. A. Marshall, a retired general then covering military affairs for the Detroit News, noted the breakdown of the old system,

In the days of yore the American correspondent... was an American first, a correspondent second. This old-fashioned standard seems to have been forgotten in South-East Asia. Some old timers still play the game according to the rules. There is a new breed that acts as if it believes a press ticket is a license to run the world.\textsuperscript{205}

The military also criticized the fact that journalists in Vietnam seemed more interested in furthering their careers than how the war was going. As Robert Elegant argued, “Covering the biggest continuing story in the world was not absolutely essential to a correspondent’s rise, but it was an invaluable cachet.”\textsuperscript{206} Vietnam indeed represented a chance to make a name for oneself, several Pulitzers had been awarded to the early crew of journalists in Saigon. But critics argued that the resulting competition for recognition created a push for the dramatic and sensational, rather than for well-reasoned and careful news stories, further distorting Vietnam coverage.\textsuperscript{207}

Worse than a simple lack of team spirit, however, was the perception in the military that the majority of journalists were opposed to the war personally and had abandoned the journalistic tenet of objectivity to criticize the war in their reports. Major General Winant B. Sidle argued years after that

The quality of reporting from Vietnam suffered from advocacy journalism. Too many reporters, especially the younger ones, arrived firmly convinced

\textsuperscript{204} Malcolm W. Browne, “War Correspondent 1965,” \textit{The Quill}, July 1965, p. 25


\textsuperscript{206} Elegant “How to Lose a War,” p. 74-75

\textsuperscript{207} Braestrup, for example, \textit{Big Story}, pp. 29-47
that the war was unjust, immoral, or whatever, and that the US should not be there. This trend became more noticeable after Tet. These advocacy journalists seemed to think that Americans are incapable of reaching sound, reasoned opinions based on plain old factual, complete and objective reporting. So the reporter tried to convince his audiences via his news coverage that his opinions should be their opinions.\(^{208}\)

Military officers believed that the media’s antiwar bias hurt the US cause. General Hamilton H. Howze argued “The worst feature of the war was the fracturing of our society. This took the form we all know so well; heavily slanted, anti-administration and anti-military reporting in the news media.”\(^{209}\)

The military also complained that the press was simply not equipped to cover the war in Vietnam. In assessing press performance, Barry Zorthian, head of JUSPAO from 1964 to 1968, noted: “Perhaps the most complex of these problems was the question of qualification of correspondents for this new form of war—an insurgency war with its compound of military, political, social, and psychological elements.”\(^{210}\) The group of military correspondents who had distinguished themselves in earlier wars had not been replaced by a younger generation. By the 1960s, there were few military affairs specialists able to cover Vietnam. Thus in Vietnam, many in the press corps, it was argued, were too young and inexperienced, were ignorant of Vietnam and its language, history, and customs, and were completely unversed in military affairs. Moreover, few journalists stayed in Vietnam long enough to gain the necessary experience to report competently.\(^{211}\)

Critics argued that journalists thus painted a distorted picture of the war because they could not competently judge the situation in Vietnam for themselves. Because they


\(^{211}\) Braestrup notes that the average tour for a television correspondent was six months, while a print reporter was between a year and eighteen months, Big Story, pp. 12-13; see also Kennedy, “Third View,”
could not speak Vietnamese, they did not cover the South Vietnamese government and military sufficiently, thereby missing a large piece of the war story. Without military experience, most journalists could not form independent judgments about the military situation. As a result, correspondents had to depend heavily on military sources to provide them with an assessment of the war. But with senior officers under pressure to keep the US role limited in the early years and to report optimistically about the war's progress, journalists soon stopped talking to them. They turned then to lower-ranking officers for their information. Journalists claimed that this practice led to good reporting. But many in the military felt that the press only talked to those who were unhappy with US policy, leading to a misrepresentation of how well US and South Vietnamese forces were doing against the communists. General Winant Sidle, head of MACV from 1967-1969, argued that poor press performance had a direct impact on what the public learned about Vietnam:

There were too many inexperienced reporters....One newcomer, representing a major US newspaper, asked me at the end of his initial briefing, ‘what’s a battalion?’ He proved to be so ignorant about military and political matters than he was fired at the end of a year. But during that year, think of what his many thousands of readers ‘learned’ about Vietnam.

Some in the press agreed with this assessment. Hanson Baldwin, military editor for the New York Times, wrote to lament

...the failure of some of the press, television, and other media representatives in Viet Nam to provide a balanced and factual picture of the war...some of the correspondents in Saigon simply are not capable of adequately reporting military operations. And some of the TV reporters have delivered generalized editorial judgments that they have neither the competence nor the knowledge to sustain.

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212 See, for example, Charles Mohr, "Once Again—Did the Press Lose Vietnam?" Columbia Journalism Review, November/December, 1983

213 Sidle, "The Role of Journalists in Vietnam," p. 110

214 Kennedy, "Third View," p. 32; Other doubts about media performance in Vietnam along these lines include: James McCartney, "Can the media cover guerilla wars?" Columbia Journalism Review, Winter, 1970-71, pp. 35-37; Fred Friendly, "TV at the turning point," Columbia Journalism Review, Winter 1970-
Finally, the military reserved its harshest judgment for television. As noted, Vietnam marked television’s first large-scale appearance in the battle zone, and for the first time the vast majority of the public could watch television from their own living rooms. By 1966, a majority of the public was reporting that it got most of its news from television, and felt that television was in fact the most credible source of news. The potential impact of television seemed apparent to all.\textsuperscript{215}

To the military, the consequences of the television presence in Vietnam were disastrous. Many officers felt that television’s blood and gore interpretation of the war had turned the public against both the military and the war. And television accounts like Morley Safer’s at Cam Ne convinced many that television journalists were deliberately trying to attack US policy in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{216} Westmoreland, for example, offered this assessment:

\ldots television’s unique requirements contributed to a distorted view of the war. The news had to be compressed and visually dramatic. Thus the war that Americans saw was almost exclusively violent, miserable, or controversial: guns firing, men falling, helicopters crashing, buildings toppling, huts burning, refugees fleeing, women wailing.\textsuperscript{217}

Others argued that television was giving a major advantage to the enemy. Lieutenant General Lewis W. Walt, for example, argued that, “The camera, the typewriter, the tape recorder are very effective weapons in this war—weapons too often

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{215}] Oberdorfer, \textit{Tet!}, pp. 238-277
\item[\textsuperscript{216}] For the military reaction to Cam Ne see Hammond, \textit{The Military and the Media}, 185-193
\item[\textsuperscript{217}] Westmoreland, \textit{A Soldier Reports}, p. 420
\end{itemize}
directed not against the enemy, but against the American people."218 An explanation of how this happened was offered by Richard Fryklund of the Washington Star:

Television's day-to-day coverage of the war in Viet Nam—uncensored, biased and deeply emotional, is becoming a national problem. . . . The presence of the camera can 'create' news where none otherwise would have existed. . . . The interviewed soldier who understates has no impact. He sells no soap. His little segment is dropped, and something with maximum drama is substituted. . . . The Viet Cong have a policy of deliberate torture and assassination. . . . But they don't permit uncensored television coverage, and their people don't have sets. Our side permits reporters and cameramen to go everywhere and record everything.219

These perceptions of press performance on military attitudes were both deeply and widely held. Bruce Kinnard, who served as a general in Vietnam, surveyed the opinions of Army generals who had also served in Vietnam to understand how they felt about the war, the Army itself, the political leadership, and the press. Kinnard's findings indicate the depth of the military's antipathy for the role the press played in Vietnam.220 As Table One reveals, an overwhelming majority of the Army general officers who served in Vietnam felt that television was harmful to the American cause. Very few felt that the press had played an important role by informing the public about the war.

Table One

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper Coverage of the war was:</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Generally responsible, and played an important role in keeping the United States informed</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Uneven. Some good, but many irresponsible</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) On the whole tended to be irresponsible and disruptive of United States efforts in Vietnam</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

218 Cited in Kinnard, *The War Managers*, p. 124


220 For a discussion of military attitudes toward the media see Bruce Kinnard, *The War Managers*, pp. 124-135. The responses to the survey questions about the media are found on pp. 132-133
Television coverage of the war was:

(1) Good for American people to see actual scenes of fighting about when they occurred 4%

(2) Probably not a good thing in balance because such coverage tends to be out of context 39

(3) Not a good thing, since there was a tendency to go for the sensational, which was counterproductive to the war effort. 52

(Source: Bruce Kinnard, The War Managers)

These attitudes did not ease with time. New York Times military correspondent Drew Middleton, writing nearly ten years after the peace accords in Paris, reported that,

But whatever readiness there is today to concede to the justice of some specific criticisms of the Army’s doctrine and tactics in Vietnam, there is deep, abiding resentment in the officer corps against the manner in which, by and large, the war was reported by the American printed and electronic press. 221

Middleton’s findings are bolstered by several studies by military officers at the Army War College. These studies reveal a continuing sense that the press is a determined adversary of the military, that journalists are incompetent to study military affairs, and that only sensationalist news of scandal or failure will make the evening news. A 1982 study found that “The top leadership of one of our society’s basic institutions—the Army—is very distrustful of another basic institution—the media. . . . A sense of mutual trust and confidence must be reforged lest we relive the painful experiences of Vietnam.” 222 A 1983 survey of officers at the War College found that 63% felt that the military did not get “good press” and that 90% believed that most officers they knew did not trust the


media. A similar survey in 1986, three years after the Grenada invasion rekindled the military/media dispute, found that officers at the war college not only retained a very negative attitude toward the press, but also overwhelmingly supported the restrictive press policies of the Grenada operation.

With such a long list of complaints with the press in Vietnam, it is significant that the military did not charge the press with a crime often discussed today—undermining operational security. Despite some early concerns over the aid journalists might be giving Hanoi through their dispatches, the guidelines for protecting tactical military information worked extremely well. According to Barry Zorthian, "In the four years [1964-1968] that I was in Vietnam with some 2,000 correspondents accredited...we had only four of five cases of security violations...of tactical military information." William Hammond, author of the Army’s official history concerning public affairs in Vietnam, goes even further, "We could not confirm even one breach, never one where the enemy was able to take advantage, where they didn’t have other ways of knowing." Thus in Vietnam it was the media’s perceived impact on public opinion and the political process, rather than on the military situation, that spurred the military’s animosity.

*The Press View*

The press interpreted its role in Vietnam quite differently. In Vietnam, many journalists believed, the press had fulfilled its constitutionally intended role of government watchdog: fiercely independent, skeptical, telling the public the whole story.

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225 *Vietnam 10 Years Later*, p. 52

about the war to allow people to pass reasoned judgment on US policies. In an article written during the fall of Saigon in 1975, James Reston of the New York Times articulated the media's growing realization of their great influence over policy, and at the same time issued a challenge to any who would question the appropriateness of that power:

The reporters began by defending the policy of American intervention, but reported facts that suggested it wouldn't work. Presidents Johnson and Nixon vilified them for challenging the official line that all was going well, and refusing to "get on the team," but in the end, the reporters came nearer to the truth in Vietnam than the officials.

There may be an important point here: It is no longer possible for a free country to fight even a limited war in a world of modern communications, with reporters and television cameras on the battlefield, against the feelings and wishes of the people.

Maybe the historians will agree that the reporters and the cameras were decisive in the end. They brought the issue of the war to the people, before the Congress or the courts, and forced the withdrawal of American power from Vietnam.

One result is that the reporters of the press and radio and television are now being blamed for the defeat of American policy and power in Indochina, which is another way of challenging the whole idea of democracy.

Many journalists believed that the press had proven itself to be a needed brake on government officials out of touch with public opinion and the best interests of the nation. Fred Friendly, former president of CBS News, made an argument that more television coverage, not less, would have been better: "It may be an overstatement to say that the presence of news cameras at Mylai might have prevented that massacre. I doubt it."

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227 For this general argument see James Boylan, "Declarations of Independence," Columbia Journalism Review, November/December 1986


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The press also challenged the blanket criticisms of its performance. Charles Mohr, correspondent for *New York Times*, argued, “Not only ultimately, but also at each major milestone of the war, the weight of serious reporting corresponds quite closely to the historical record.”\(^{230}\) In addition to comparing its product to the historical record, a fairly stiff challenge for journalism, the press had a more meaningful way of judging its own performance—to compare the accuracy of press reports with what the government was saying at a given time. It became an article of faith for many journalists and others that the press was usually closer to the truth than the government, even before the Johnson administration made credibility gap a household phrase.\(^{231}\) As David Halberstam viewed it, “. . . we had to be critical of the representatives of our government who created a policy of optimism about the war that simply was not justified. There was no choice for us. We had our duty to our newspapers, the public that reads them, and that was to tell the truth.”\(^{232}\) Not all government officials disagreed with the press’ assessment of its performance. Barry Zorthian admitted later of the 1964-1968 period, “More often than not, the press was more accurate in covering the situation in Vietnam than the official government public reports—at least until Tet.”\(^{233}\) And William Hammond notes that David Halberstam’s memoirs of the early Vietnam years “reads like the author saw the State Department’s classified file on the period.”\(^{234}\)


\(^{231}\) Sydney Schanberg propounds this view from a post Tet Offensive perspective: “Escape and evasion about sum up the attitude that most American officials in Vietnam have taken toward newsmen most of the time—an attitude that, notwithstanding areas of guarded coexistence, generally consists of suspicion, distrust, and sometimes outright animosity.” See Schanberg, “The Saigon Follies, or, Trying to Head Them Off at Credibility Gap,” *New York Times Magazine*, November 12, 1972, p. 38


\(^{234}\) Hammond, *The Military and the Media*, p. 393
Many journalists also have defended their record during Tet. Charles Mohr took issue with Braestrup’s conclusions about the performance of the press at Tet. He argues that the public and Congress took Tet to be a defeat for the US not because of press coverage, but as a result of the Johnson administration’s public relations efforts to convince the public that the enemy could not launch such an attack. Television also had its defenders. Leonard Zeidenberg, writing for *Broadcasting*, argued that, “All three networks did remarkable work in covering the Communists’ massive Tet Offensive of 1968. . .”\(^{235}\) John Laurence, a correspondent for CBS at Tet, also has disputed Braestrup’s charge that journalists’ work suffered during the offensive. Laurence notes that “. . .I recall that the men and women of the American press corps went about the job of trying to get the story in a professional, hardworking, and dedicated way. And—with one or two minor exceptions—they maintained the old tradition of ‘grace under pressure.’”\(^{236}\)

Laurence also makes an argument common from those who covered Vietnam, namely, that journalists depend on the accuracy of information from their sources to write good stories. Because US officials did not speak openly enough of the time, journalists were often forced to rely on other sources, many of whom may be less favorably inclined toward the US government. And because officials were not perceived as honest much of the time, journalists went out on their own and found evidence that challenged official reports. Thus, Laurence argues, if the government had wanted to be believed at Tet, it should have been more forthcoming in the years before.\(^{237}\)

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\(^{237}\) Laurence, “The Tet Offensive,” pp. 172-176
Finally, along with a budding appreciation of its political power, the press developed its more adversarial and independent stance toward government. This grew primarily from the accretion of perceptions among journalists that government and military officials were not to be trusted to tell the truth. The secrecy of the consecutive administrations as they escalated and widened the war, the Johnson administration’s continuous misplaced optimism, Nixon’s secret bombing of Cambodia, the incursions into both Cambodia and Laos, and the banal MACV briefings in Saigon convinced many journalists that more skepticism and a greater willingness to dig behind official explanations were necessary. Evidence of the press’ new found courage to stand up to government was the 1971 publication of the Pentagon Papers.

Commissioned by McNamara as an official Defense Department history of decision making on Vietnam, the Pentagon Papers were leaked to Neil Sheehan of the New York Times by Daniel Ellsberg, a former Pentagon employee who had turned against the war. Sheehan and the Times, after some debate over the possible repercussions, decided to publish the documents along with commentary by Sheehan and others. After several weeks holed up at a hotel digesting and summarizing the papers, the Times ran with a front page headline: “VIETNAM ARCHIVE: PENTAGON STUDY TRACES 3 DECADES OF GROWING US INVOLVEMENT,” along with a large selection of the study itself as a first installment.

Not surprisingly, the Nixon administration was horrified. Arguing that the disclosure of the historical review was a risk to US national security, the administration sought and won a temporary injunction against the Times, forcing it to stop publishing. The Supreme Court finally heard the case and ruled 6-3 to uphold the right of the Times and other newspapers (which had also received some of the study by that point) to publish. After a 15 day halt, the Times then published the rest of the study. Journalists were emboldened by the Times decision to publish the papers. As A. M. Rosenthal, then managing editor at the Times, said, “The First Amendment did not mean that we were
free to print what the Government decided we would print; it meant quite the contrary. We were free to print what we felt was necessary for understanding.”

Conclusion

On paper and in practice, the government's policies for dealing with the press were the least restrictive in US history. For the first time in the century, censorship was not implemented on the battlefield. Further, the military was in fact quite helpful to journalists covering the war, providing transportation, accommodations, and information to thousands over the years. The biggest limitations on journalists were of their own making. As they themselves admit, ignorance of Vietnam and of military affairs did not help them cover the war. But these shortcomings did not prevent journalists from uncovering the central truths about the war and offering them to the public.

That public affairs policies were so unrestrictive was largely a result of political considerations stemming from the Vietnam strategies of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, which centered first on keeping the conflict and US involvement out of the public consciousness, and later on convincing the public that all was well. Given the government’s approach to the war, its press policies ironically hastened the deterioration of the government/press relationship. Instead of enhancing journalists' trust in military and civilian officials, the policies allowed journalists to discover and report that the war was not going the way government spokesmen were proclaiming.

Both the press and its critics agree that press coverage of Vietnam influenced policy dramatically, but they disagreed vehemently over whether this impact was for the better or for the worse. The military felt that the press, by distorting the war through its reporting and especially on television, had destroyed US morale and turned public

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opinion against the war, making it impossible for political leaders to commit the nation and the proper resources to the battle, thus presaging defeat. The press, however, felt that it had done the nation a great service, by performing its constitutionally prescribed role of government watchdog, challenging government lies and obfuscations, and bringing the true picture of the war before the public, who in turn eventually judged that it did not want to pay the price for Vietnam.

Finally, Vietnam set the stage for future battles between the military and the press, though as we will see it did not prompt military innovation in public affairs. The military ended the war with a deep-seated hatred of the media. The press returned the feelings to a degree, but more importantly felt satisfied with the role it had played in American politics during the war. The press would come to enjoy an almost mythical confidence that it had helped end the war earlier than misguided politicians and military leaders would have done otherwise. Academic observers have cast grave doubts on the stories and myths of both sides; neither was the press as negative as critics often claimed, nor did it have the impact on public opinion or policy that journalists believed. Academics, however, have had little observable impact on the beliefs of the feuding institutions. It is these powerful and deep rooted beliefs, in turn, which helped spawn the conventional explanation for the restrictiveness of current wartime press restrictions.
Chapter Three

URGENT FURY: The “Off-the-Record” War

The 1983 US invasion of Grenada marked the turning point in modern public affairs. Breaking with the policies of Vietnam, the Reagan administration and the military kept the press off the small island of Grenada and away from the action for the first forty-eight hours of the operation. It marked the first time in US history that the press had not covered a war firsthand, prompting Newsweek to label Urgent Furry an "off-the-record" war.\textsuperscript{239} The administration and the military became the sole sources of information about the conflict; independent analysis was impossible. The high level of public support for the invasion in turn was attributed by some to the barring of the press from the island. Reagan public relations maestro Michael Deaver later claimed that the public approved of the action because “they didn’t have to watch American guys getting shot and killed. They can’t stand that every night.”\textsuperscript{240}

Journalists and most other observers at the time pinned the blame for the harsh treatment of the press on the military, reasoning that its bitter memories of Vietnam were still so strong that it had shut the press out in Grenada as revenge. After Vietnam, many argued, military officers determined how they would restrain the press next time to avoid a repeat of that troubled experience. Drew Middleton, New York Times military

\textsuperscript{239} "An Off-the-Record War," Newsweek, November 7, 1983

correspondent, summed up the conventional wisdom: "The majors and commanders of
the Vietnam War who believed the media had worked against the American command
there had become influential generals and admirals determined not to expose the Grenada
operation to what they continue to view as a hostile adversary."\textsuperscript{241}

On the surface, this argument seems strong. The military’s list of complaints
about the press in Vietnam was long and it seems logical that the military would have
wanted to do something to improve its lot the next time out. Moreover, observers noted
that Grenada came on the heels of the British experience in the Falklands, in which the
government censored press dispatches, did not allow television to cover the conflict, and
purposely misled the press in order to deceive the Argentineans. The US military, some
argued, had learned from the British experience how to solve their problems from
Vietnam. And indeed, British officials remarked after the Falklands conflict that the
American troubles in Vietnam spurred their restrictive press policies.\textsuperscript{242}

As straightforward and obvious as this argument is, however, it is false. While
Vietnam certainly taught the military that the press could cause problems during war, by
no means did the military "learn" how to solve those problems. As determined as
Middleton and others may believe officers were to keep the press from ruining the
Grenada operation, they nevertheless had \textit{no plans} in place before the conflict to deal
with the press in such a contingency. Instead, efforts to cope with the media were made
only in the period directly before H-Hour and after the invasion had begun. Thus, while
Vietnam certainly had a great impact on the military’s relationship with the media, it did


\textsuperscript{242} Robert Harris, \textit{GOTCHA! The Media, the Government, and the Falklands Crisis} (London: Faber and
Faber, 1983); Derrik Mercer, ed., \textit{The Fog of War: The Media on the Battlefield} (London: Heinemann, 1987); Phillip
Humphries, "Two Routes to the Wrong Destination: Public Affairs in the South Atlantic War," \textit{Naval War College Review},
Integrity, 1991) pp. 61-66
not lead directly to new and improved plans for dealing with the press in any fashion, much less in a fashion so restrictive as in Grenada.

I will argue in this chapter that the Grenada episode revealed several pieces of evidence which strongly contradict the conventional wisdom. First, as noted the military did not have any plans in place before Grenada to deal with the press. This clashes with the assumption of many critics that Grenada represented the culmination of organized military efforts to find an answer for Vietnam. This is an important point on which to be clear. It is one thing to assert that the military’s disposition toward the press has been affected by Vietnam, or that individual officers’ decisions were influenced by their experiences there. It is an entirely different and far more serious matter to claim that the military as a whole made plans to undermine and restrain the constitutionally protected institution of the free press. That said, other military professional concerns did operate to make restricting the press an attractive option to military leaders, even without the precedent of Vietnam.

Second, a better explanation of the government’s press policies during the invasion of Grenada can be constructed from an analysis of the Reagan administration’s approach to dealing with the press on a daily basis which, in turn, was a result of the imperatives of the rising importance of the press in politics discussed in Chapter One. The administration’s adversarial attitude toward journalists and its sophisticated strategy for ensuring favorable press coverage led to a strong desire to restrict press coverage of the Grenada crisis. As important as controlling press coverage was for the administration during peacetime, it became even more so during the conflict. Thus, the administration, more than the military, set the tone for relations with the press during Grenada.

Finally, the changes in public affairs made after the invasion provide further evidence that neither Grenada nor future press policies were a simple reaction to Vietnam. To avoid the bitter military/media dispute which arose during Grenada, the military turned back to the guidelines used in Vietnam as part of an attempt to ensure a
smoother relationship in future conflicts. The military's willingness to do so defies the overly simple argument that the military somehow learned not to do what had been done in Vietnam.

This chapter follows the format I will use to study each of the more recent conflicts. After a brief summary of the historical and political background of the Grenada conflict, I examine the Reagan administration's tactics for dealing with the press on an everyday basis and how these were used to pursue the administration's political interests during the crisis. I then assess military planning for public affairs and the military's implementation of its information plans during the conflict. Next I look at how the press covered the conflict and how it dealt with the dilemmas posed by government policies. And finally, I trace the development of public affairs policy after Grenada and how it was shaped by events during the invasion.

Background

Trouble had been brewing on the small island of Grenada since 1979, when Maurice Bishop and the leftist New Jewel Movement took control of the government in a bloodless coup d'état while Prime Minister Sir Eric Gairy was out of the country. Bishop was a very popular figure in Grenada, but began to chart a course for his country that would make him very unpopular with the United States.

Although Bishop and the new People's Revolutionary Government promised to hold elections soon after taking power, they never did. Instead, within weeks Bishop had


suspended the constitution, moved to shut down the press, put political opponents in jail, disbanded the police and army, and had created the People’s Revolutionary Army (PRA). More disturbing, however, was Grenada’s move to establish close relations with Cuba and the Soviet Union, along with reports soon thereafter that Cuba was shipping arms to Grenada. Seeking to avoid outright confrontation, the Carter administration settled for giving economic aid to every Caribbean nation but Grenada with the hope that this might influence the PRG to become more democratic. But because the PRG showed few signs of being cooptable the administration ended up simply downplaying the issue.

A year later when Reagan took office, however, increased attention was given to Grenadian activities. Conservatives worried about Grenada’s movement into the Cuban and Soviet orbit, as well as its continued militarization. The PRA now claimed over 2,000 members, making it by far the largest armed force in the Caribbean and the cause of concern to Grenada’s neighbors. Bishop’s rhetoric had a distinctly anti-American tone and Grenada was not shy about its allegiance to the Soviet Union—voting against the UN’s declaration on the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. To Reagan officials, Grenada represented the same type of threat posed by Nicaragua and El Salvador. Committed to combating the spread of communism in the Western Hemisphere, the administration adopted a more aggressive policy of isolating Grenada economically and politically in order to induce its leaders to turn away from the Soviet Union and Cuba.

By 1981 the US had cut off all diplomatic ties with Grenada and was working to obstruct Grenada’s flow of aid from the international community. The administration even tried flexing some military muscle in the area, staging a large NATO maneuver in the Caribbean, code-named "Amber and the Amberdines" in unsubtle reference to Grenada and the Grenadines. The PRG simply used the occasion to denounce the American effort to destabilize their economy, claiming that the exercise was a tune-up for an imminent US invasion.
These efforts led some observers to claim that Reagan’s policies had helped drive Grenada further into the arms of the Cubans and Soviets. Hugh O’Shaughnessy writes, for example: “It is ironic that the Cuban-Grenadian relationship should have been fostered by Washington, whose constant harping on the supposed strategic threat from a tiny Eastern Caribbean island caused the New Jewel Movement to militarize their society more than they might otherwise have done.”245 US efforts may indeed have frightened the PRG, though it is hard to believe the Grenadians actually imagined defending themselves against the US. And on the political side, Robert Pastor makes a convincing case that Bishop and company had been dedicated to following a Marxist-Leninist path since taking power.246 Either way, subsequent events would drive the two nations yet further apart.

In March 1983 during his famous Star Wars television speech, Reagan showed the nation satellite photos of a runway being built on Grenada with Cuban aid and workers. He claimed that "The Soviet-Cuban militarization of Grenada can only be seen as power projection into the region."247 Grenadian officials protested that they were building the airport to promote increased tourism, and replied to Reagan with their own angry rhetoric.

Then, in late May of that year, Bishop made a trip to the United States, ostensibly to revive their bitter relations. The primary rationale behind this effort was probably Grenada’s sagging economy.248 Accounting for 40% of its GNP, tourism in Grenada had

245 O’ Shaughnessy, An Eyewitness Account, p. 105. For other accounts critical of US policy toward Grenada before the invasion, see Burrows, Revolution and Rescue, Schoenhalns and Melanson, Revolution and Intervention, and Kenworthy, “Grenada as Theater.”

246 Robert Pastor, “The US and Grenada: To Leap or Be Pushed?” Pastor makes use of PRG Central Committee documents captured during the invasion.


dropped off markedly since Bishop took power, due in large part to poor relations with the US. Although he asked to be received by President Reagan, his request was denied, and he met instead with Assistant Secretary of State Kenneth Dam and National Security Adviser William Clark. By all accounts the meeting was routine, with Bishop expressing his interest in improving US-Grenada relations and the US officials warning Bishop on the unacceptability of Soviet influence in the Caribbean. Neither side seems to have been moved by the meeting to change its views; US-Grenada relations remained strained.

By October 1983, relations within Grenada were not well, either. A split had evolved between Bishop his deputy, Bernard Coard. Coard had the support of a majority of the PRG Central Committee and of General Hudson Austin, commander of the PRA. On October 13th, Bishop was put under house arrest by the Coard faction. Six days later a crowd of Bishop supporters, reportedly as many as 10,000, went to Bishop’s home and freed him. They then marched with Bishop to Fort Rupert in St. George’s, ending up in a face off with soldiers of the PRA. The soldiers fired on the crowd, killing about fifty civilians. Bishop was taken into custody again, this time to be shot hours later along with five other ministers, including his wife. General Austin and a group called the Revolutionary Military Council claimed control of the island and declared a shoot-on-sight curfew. The execution of Bishop on the 19th and subsequent actions by the RMC initiated the chain of events that would culminate with the October 25 American invasion.249

Grenada’s neighbors, never happy with Bishop’s ascent to power, were very unhappy with the situation in Grenada after the 13th of October. Never before in the region had there been a military-backed coup, and Grenada’s military was the only serious armed force in the region. Caribbean leaders convened in Barbados on the 15th under the auspices of CARICOM, the regional economic organization, to discuss the

249 New York Times
situation. Of the options discussed, economic and political sanctions were unanimously supported, though no consensus was reached about any military options.

The smaller OECS nations threatened most by recent events, however, along with the more hawkish governments of Barbados and Jamaica, met separately from CARICOM and agreed to request US military intervention. After Bishop’s arrest, Prime Minister Tom Adams of Barbados had discussed with US officials the possibility of a mission to rescuing him. The day after Bishop’s murder, Adams had privately asked the United States to intervene. Then, on the 21st of October, the group of OECS states along with Barbados and Jamaica transmitted a request for military intervention to the United States. This action, by most accounts, paved the way for the final decision by Reagan to go ahead with a full-scale invasion.

While Caribbean nations worried about possible threats from Grenada, the US was far more concerned over the presence on Grenada of the St. George’s Medical School, attended by nearly 600 American students. As the State Department received reports of chaos in the streets and the shoot-on-sight curfew enforced by the anti-US Revolutionary Military Council now in control of the country, the specter of a hostage situation arose. With the Carter administration’s Iran hostage debacle fresh in mind, administration officials feared a replay in Grenada. At the State Department an interagency group chaired by Assistant Secretary of State Langhorne Motley began monitoring events on October 13th.

As the turmoil continued in St. George’s, US officials began to argue that the administration should plan for an evacuation of the medical school students. On October 17th at a meeting of the Restricted Interagency Group monitoring Grenada, Undersecretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger recommended that the Joint Chiefs of Staff begin to draw up contingency plans for evacuation of US students.250 On October

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250 Hooker, “Presidential Decisionmaking and Use of Force: Case Study Grenada,” Parameters, Vol. 21, No. 2, Summer 1971, p. 64
19th, following the demonstrations and Bishop’s death, US Ambassador Milan Bish warned the State Department that US citizens in Grenada might be facing “imminent danger.” In addition, the CIA had no agents in Grenada to provide timely intelligence, forcing the administration to deal with added uncertainty about the safety of US nationals. In response to this news, Secretary of State George Shultz recommended to Reagan a military takeover of Grenada.\textsuperscript{251}

On October 20th, in response to the rush of events and Ambassador Bish’s warnings, the Special Situation Group of the National Security Council was convened, chaired by Vice President Bush.\textsuperscript{252} One participant at that meeting, Constantine Menges, special assistant for Latin American affairs, writes that the group gave serious attention to the Iran hostage analogy, and that those present considered a military solution necessary.\textsuperscript{253} \textit{T’ne} magazine quoted a participant as saying everyone was “gung-ho” about an invasion.\textsuperscript{254} After the meeting National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane briefed Reagan, who ordered plans for a military takeover of Grenada to move ahead. Reagan also gave Bush approval to divert the aircraft carrier USS Independence and the USS Guam, carrying Marines for duty in Beirut, to the Caribbean. The operation by now had been code-named “Urgent Fury.”

Late on Friday, October 21st, the OECS formally requested US intervention, having been urged to do so by Ambassador Bish, whose task, undoubtedly, was to help provide full justification of any US actions. Word of the OECS request was passed to

\textsuperscript{251} Ibid., p. 65

\textsuperscript{252} The National Security Council normally includes the Vice President, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the Director of the CIA, and the National Security Adviser. Special Situation Groups also include specialists in the areas, such as Grenada, under consideration during a crisis. The SSG met in the afternoon after a morning meeting of the Crisis Pre-Planning Group. The CPG is made up of the lower ranking officials with expertise in the affairs of various regions and is used to develop options for consideration at the SSG and NSC meetings. It was this group that wrote the background memorandum for the Vice President’s preparation for the SSG.

\textsuperscript{253} Constantine Menges, \textit{Inside the National Security Council}, (New York: Touchstone 19880 pp. 54-90

\textsuperscript{254} “D-Day in Grenada,” \textit{Time}, November 7, p. 27
President Reagan at around three in the morning on October 22nd. Later that morning Reagan signed a draft of a National Security Decision Directive authorizing an invasion.\textsuperscript{255} Reagan, along with Shultz and McFarlane, was on a long-planned golf outing in Augusta, Georgia. They had determined that to change plans could alert Grenada and Cuba to possible US actions. Reagan would keep in touch with Washington by secure telephone link.

At 9 a.m. on October 22nd the Special Situation Group met to review the situation with Reagan participating for about five minutes by phone. An updated NSDD was passed around at the meeting, offering three bases for the decision to intervene in full force:

1. “Ensuring the safety of American citizens on Grenada.”
2. “In conjunction with OECS friendly government participants, the restoration of democratic government on Grenada.”
3. “Elimination of current, and prevention of further, Cuban intervention on Grenada.”\textsuperscript{256}

Efforts to keep Urgent Fury quiet were tragically enhanced by the early morning news on Sunday the 23rd of the bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut, which left 241 Marines dead. Reagan returned to Washington immediately. During the day Sunday Reagan met with the National Security Planning Group to discuss both Beirut and Grenada. In the wake of the bombing the political risks of the Grenada operation loomed larger. How would the public react to more casualties? Would people see Grenada as merely an attempt to assuage the frustration of Lebanon? Reagan resolved to go ahead. It seems clear that he saw a window for taking decisive action not only to protect American lives, but to strike a blow against communism in the Western Hemisphere.

\textsuperscript{255} A National Security Decision Directive is a file containing all the materials: intelligence reports, military readiness reports, maps, memos, etc., upon which the President will base his decision and which he must sign to formally authorize an operation.

\textsuperscript{256} Bennet, “Anatomy of a ‘Go’ Decision,” Reader’s Digest, February 1984
Reagan reportedly told Bush, “If this was right yesterday, it’s right today, and we shouldn’t let a couple of terrorists dissuade us from going ahead.”

The invasion began in full force near dawn on October 25th, as Marines and Army Rangers hit the beaches and parachuted onto Grenada’s two airports. The invading force would secure the airfields to ensure Cuba could not reinforce Grenada by air, then move to rescue both Governor General Paul Scoon and the medical students, after which they would take control of the capital. Resistance was expected to be fairly light, although intelligence on both the terrain and the disposition of Grenadian forces was quite poor. In addition, there were questions about whether the Cuban construction workers were perhaps in fact military personnel. To avoid taking any chances, Urgent Fury planned for substantial reinforcements to the landing force soon after H-Hour. US casualties turned out to be relatively light (29 dead, 152 wounded), and most of the fighting was over within two days, at which point all that remained was to flush out General Austin and Bernard Coard, both of whom had gone into hiding.

Meanwhile, the US media watched in frustration from afar, stranded in Barbados by the decisions of the Reagan administration and military leaders. The press was not allowed onto Grenada until 48 hours after the initial assault, when almost all of the fighting was over. At that point the military began letting small groups of journalists take military-led tours of the island, frustrating the hundreds more waiting to see the situation for themselves. It was not until five days after the invasion began that all journalists were allowed to travel to and stay on Grenada as long as they wanted. What the public saw and read about the first days of the invasion, therefore, was determined in great part by what US civilian and military officials decided to make known.

The Reagan Administration and the Press

257 Adkin, Urgent Fury, p. 121
Although it is impossible to conclude precisely how and by whom the decision to bar the press from the island was made, it is clear that senior civilian officials gave the ultimate permission to the military to do so. While the military had motives to keep the press away from Grenada, the administration’s desires alone are strong enough to explain the decision. Moreover, given the central importance of public relations to the Reagan administration, it is very unlikely that civilian officials would have allowed the military to make any big decisions about press policy for the invasion unless the military’s recommendations benefitted Reagan from a political standpoint. The press ban, as it turned out, did just that.

The Reagan administration harbored an adversarial attitude toward the press and considered control over press coverage integral to its governing strategy. The administration’s political interests during the crisis reinforced this predisposition toward controlling the news and made the press ban an appealing action to take. In addition, many of the administration’s tactics for influencing press coverage on a daily basis were employed during the Grenada crisis. David Gergen, Reagan Communications Director, noted this in discussing the strategy for pushing the administration line on television during the invasion, “We had a whole phalanx of people out there. It’s part of the process, and there’s nothing unusual about it, though it was intense.”

Reagan Administration Press Strategy: Us Against Them

The attitude of the Reagan White House towards the press is best summed up by a quote from White House spokesman Larry Speakes’ memoir: “For my six years as White House spokesman, it was Us Against Them.” It was no secret at the time that the Reagan administration went to great lengths to influence the daily news coverage of its activities in order to receive favorable treatment in the news and especially on television.  

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258 Lou Cannon and David Hoffman, “Invasion Secrecy Creating a Furor,” Washington Post, October 27, 1983
Speakes' desk was a sign that read, "You don't tell us how to stage the news and we don't tell you how to cover it." The press, of course, was not always as accommodating as officials would have liked, and a president as controversial as Reagan always had critics ready to take their case to the media; the White House never took good press for granted.

White House communications strategy was directed by James Baker (Reagan's Chief of Staff), Richard Darman (Presidential Assistant), Michael Deaver (Deputy Chief of Staff), and David Gergen (Communications Director). Baker and Darman were involved most heavily with setting strategy, while Deaver and Gergen were responsible for implementation on a daily basis. Each of these men believed that the key to an effective presidency was the ability to sell one's policies to the public, and thus organized their communications efforts around fulfilling Reagan's political agenda.260

Planning the administration's attempts to shape press coverage started every morning with a "line of the day" meeting at 8:15, with Baker chairing and Darman, Gergen, Deaver, and Speakes participating. The object was to focus media attention on a particular policy, presidential initiative, or event favorable to the president. The line of the day was sent out via electronic mail and phone calls to all senior administration officials and press spokesmen of various departments. This was an attempt to make sure that everyone in the administration was talking about the same thing, making it more likely that the press would pick it up as news, and minimizing the chance that some other news item, possibly negative, would get front page coverage. In addition to the daily guidance, the White House gave each of the departments a press strategy for special


260 Hertsgaard, On Bended Knee, pp. 22-23
issues. The White House meetings determined which agency would have the primary voice on an issue, when information would be withheld entirely, and when the President would take the lead. Typically, the White House gave cabinet members the point position on controversial issues, reeling stories back in for Reagan to publicize once good news had developed.\(^{261}\)

Having set the line of the day, shaping television coverage of Reagan’s presidency became the central element of the administration’s public relations strategy. As Larry Speakes noted, "Underlying our whole theory of disseminating information was our knowledge that the American people get their news and form their judgments based largely on what they see on television."\(^{262}\)

As a result of television’s primacy, the administration worked hard to ensure that it had “good visuals” to accompany the stories they wanted told on the news. Without good film footage, events have a much harder time making it onto the nightly news. The Reagan communications team knew this well, and used their knowledge of the operating routines of the networks to plan how to get the most flattering images of Reagan onto the news.\(^{263}\) A further advantage of television, from the administration’s perspective, is that it focuses the viewer’s attention on the image rather than the words being spoken. As Sam Donaldson of ABC told an interviewer, “a simple truism about television: the eye always predominates over the ear when there is a fundamental clash between the two.” Thus, for example, the administration had Reagan announce his decision in early 1984 to pull the Marines out of Lebanon in front of a crowd of cheering Republican supporters. By obscuring a major foreign policy failure with positive images, White House officials

\(^{261}\) Hertsgaard, *On Bended Knee*, pp. 32-37

\(^{262}\) Speakes, *Speaking Out*, p. 217

\(^{263}\) Ibid., pp. 217-219
felt that they could soften the negative impact on public opinion. Many journalists agreed.264

In addition to its sophisticated approach to influencing news coverage, the administration also took a hard-line view towards the principles of a free press with respect to national security and matters of secrecy. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger spoke for the administration when he noted that the First Amendment should not impinge on "the equally legitimate tradition of the government’s need for secrecy, especially in national defense."265 The administration's unprecedented efforts to limit the availability of information becoming public regarding security issues included an expansion of the classification guidelines to ensure that more information would be classified, a fight to weaken the Freedom of Information Act, lifetime censorship for government employees who had access to classified materials, and a proposal to use lie detector tests to identify bureaucrats who may have leaked news to the press.266 As Floyd Abrams, a First Amendment lawyer, noted of the Reagan administration's attitude toward information and national security: "It is a view that not only focuses on security but equates security with secrecy, and treats information as if it were a potentially disabling contagious disease that must be controlled, quarantined, and ultimately cured."267 These efforts to enhance the ability of government to keep information from the press, while not all successful, reveal the perspective from which the Reagan administration approached dealing with the media during Grenada. When tradeoffs had

264 Hertsgaard, On Bended Knee, p. 25


to be made between issues of national security or defense, which the administration
defined quite broadly, and the media's access to information, the administration gave far
greater weight to the former.\footnote{268}

Reagan officials have expressed satisfaction with the press coverage the
administration received during Reagan's first term. Michael Deaver went as far as to say
that "Ronald Reagan enjoyed the most generous treatment by the press of any President
in the postwar era."\footnote{269} Journalists for the most part agree with that assessment, often to
their chagrin.\footnote{270} One scholarly observer notes, "The art of message management was
never carried to a higher form than during the Reagan years in the White House."\footnote{271} And
during the Grenada invasion, the administration set the media agenda by controlling
information and access while offering its own packaged explanation for events. Thus,
where it counted most, on the front pages and on television, the administration's views
and positive images of the conflict went uncontested.

\textit{Reagan Administration Political Interests During Urgent Fury}

To understand how the Reagan administration approached dealing with the press
in Grenada we must appreciate Reagan's political agenda during the crisis.\footnote{272} We know
that the administration's daily public relations activities revolved around its political

\footnote{268 Congress held hearings on the administration's efforts to limit the free flow of information during the
invasion. The hearings are an excellent collection of arguments against such actions. See Hearings before 98th Congress, First Session, House Committee of the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Courts, Civil Liberties, and the Administration of Justice, November 2, 1983}


\footnote{270 See, for example, Chris Hanson, "Gunsmoke and sleeping dogs: the prez's press at midterm," in \textit{Columbia Journalism Review}, May/June 1983, pp. 27-36.}


\footnote{272 By the very nature of such events, only incomplete accounts of high-level administration planning are
available. We must thus rely primarily on deducing political aims from what is known about the
administration's general views, from the political climate of the time, and from subsequent administration
behavior and rhetoric.}
goals. Uncovering what goals the White House pursued during Grenada will help reveal why the administration used the tactics it did to influence press coverage.

First and foremost, in ordering the invasion Reagan was committing troops to combat for the first time since Vietnam and doing so without the assurance of public support ahead of time. The country, however, remained deeply suspicious of using military force abroad—not to mention the fact that the Administration was locked in mortal combat with Congress over military support of pro-US forces in Central America. Any military action Reagan took was sure to be protested by his political foes, especially in the absence of a public effort at solving the crisis by diplomatic means. This meant that Reagan would have to work hard to justify and legitimize the invasion in order to avoid a backlash of public and congressional opinion.273

Second, as plans for Urgent Fury moved ahead the bunker of the US Marines on a peacekeeping mission in Beirut was destroyed, killing 241 and raising questions at home reminiscent of Vietnam about what exactly the US objectives were in Lebanon and whether they were worth the price.274 Beirut demanded not only that casualties be kept to a minimum, but that the human cost of the Grenada operation had to be portrayed as worth the benefit, or perhaps downplayed entirely.

Third, Reagan won an election and staked his reputation on being the antithesis of Jimmy Carter. His administration did not want to face a crisis in which Reagan might come out appearing ineffectual or incompetent, as Carter had during the hostage crisis. This fear had been enhanced by America's frustration over the Beirut bombing, for which


Reagan was unable to retaliate. The tough talk Reagan made himself known for, especially his anticomunist rhetoric, made it imperative that his administration strike a firm pose with respect to events in America's backyard. For Reagan there could be no Desert One, no failed rescue missions. The operation had to appear decisive and professional, especially against such a weak opponent.

Finally, in late 1983 Ronald Reagan must have already had an eye on the 1984 election. His approval rating, until then quite low, was picking up along with the economy. Nevertheless, he was running near even with hypothetical democratic candidates in the polls with the campaign season just around the corner.\textsuperscript{275} Reagan, in short, was vulnerable. He could ill afford to make more enemies. It would be essential to make sure that Reagan distance himself from any negative fallout from the operation as well as get credit for those things which went well.

\textit{Administration Planning for Urgent Fury Public Relations}

Setting the tone for the entire conflict, the administration's planning for Grenada public relations did not include its frontmen, spokesman Larry Speakes and the communications director David Gergen. They were informed about the invasion only after it had begun. Leaving Speakes and Gergen out of the loop, however, should not be interpreted as a sign that the administration was ignoring the problem of public relations. It was, in fact, a calculated move to keep the press from learning anything about the invasion. As James Baker said later in an interview, "That White House was leaking like a sieve, and there were American lives at stake. . . . It was my view that because the military operation depended on surprise, and lives therefore depended on surprise, we should make certain there was no risk of premature disclosure."\textsuperscript{276} This statement

\textsuperscript{275} In early October, 46\% approved and 37\% disapproved of Reagan's performance. For these statistics and the trial heats with Democratic challengers, see George H. Gallup, \textit{The Gallup Poll Public Opinion 1983}.

\textsuperscript{276} Hertsgaard, \textit{On Bended Knee}, p. 214
reflects the distrust some of the top Reagan aides felt for Gergen in particular, who was seen as too close to the press, and too likely to give away information. Baker also argued that keeping Speakes out of the planning was a way of protecting him from having to lie to the press about the invasion.277

As Speakes notes in his memoir, however, the result was that he was indeed forced to mislead the press, albeit unwittingly. When reporter Bill Plante of CBS, acting on information from a ‘trusted source’, asked Speakes if the US were planning to invade Grenada, Speakes called Captain Robert Sims, spokesman for the NSC, to get information. Sims in turn went to John Poindexter, the deputy National Security Adviser. Poindexter, acting on Baker’s orders, told Speakes to “knock it down hard,” and that the idea was preposterous. Speakes repeated these very words to Plante and was upset to then have to announce the invasion at a noon press briefing on the 25th of October. In his view, and in that of many journalists, the credibility of the administration suffered greatly.278 The credibility of the president’s spokesman, many have pointed out, is based on the understanding that he has access to the president and the policy process. When he is lied to or left out of administration planning, reporters may stop trusting what they hear through him. This tactic agitated the press and strained its relationship both with Speakes and with other administration officials, but not as much as the press ban would.279

The centerpiece of the administration’s public relations strategy was the exclusion of the press from Grenada during the first 48 hours of the operation. Reports about exactly how and why this decision was made and by whom are conflicting and incomplete as a result of administration dissembling about the process. The

277 See Speakes, Speaking Out, pp. 151-155
278 Ibid., p. 156
administration gave the public and press two rationales for its decision to keep the press off Grenada and said that the decision had been made by the military. As Weinberger said in the first Pentagon press conference of Urgent Fury,

The reason [for the exclusion] is of course the Commander's decision, and I certainly don't ever, wouldn't ever dream of overriding Commanders' decisions in charge of an operation like this, their conclusion was that they were not able to guarantee any kind of safety of anyone including of course anybody participating and that you have to maintain some kind of awareness of the problems going into areas where we don't know what kind of conditions totally will be encountered. Where the airport was obviously heavily overloaded with all kinds of activity and we just didn't have the conditions under which we thought we would be able to detach enough people to protect all of the newsmen, cameramen, gripmen, all of that.280

At the same conference, General Vessey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, offered another rationale for barring the press which soon became the standard government explanation,

I think that one of the most important reasons we didn't [let in the press] is the need for surprise in this operation. We were going in there very quickly and we needed to have surprise in order to have it successful.281

Later, Admiral Metcalf, the commander of Urgent Fury forces, backed up his superiors' statements, claiming responsibility for the decision and told the press he would keep journalists off the island until it was safe for them to go there, "I want to get you there, but by golly I'm going to insist that you can be supported when you get there."282

Few journalists believed the administration's public rationales for its actions. New York Times columnist William Safire, who supported the invasion, blasted the administration's press strategy:

The excuses given for this communications power grab were false. Caspar Weinberger, with an inarticulate martinet at his side, pretended that reporting was denied because of concern for journalists' safety, which is

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280 News Conference by Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger and General John W. Vessey, Jr., U.S. Army, chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, at the Pentagon, October 26, 1983, p. 5

281 Ibid., p. 5

282 "Admiral Says It Was His Decision to Tether the Press," New York Times, October 31, 1983
absurd: The Reagan Administration would hail the obliteration of the press corps. Another reason advanced—that the military was too busy to provide the press with tender loving care—is an insult calculated to enrage journalists. 283

Subsequent press accounts, as well as Admiral Metcalf's own writings a decade later, did in fact conflict with these first public statements.

The argument that the administration had barred the press from Grenada for its own safety struck journalists and others as ludicrous. Over fifty correspondents died covering the Vietnam War, and at the same time Grenada was taking place, CBS alone had over two dozen personnel covering war-torn Lebanon. 284 As CBS president Edward Joyce noted in congressional testimony during the invasion, journalists routinely signed waivers with foreign governments to absolve them of any responsibility for death or injury. 285 Given the strong historical precedent in both American and foreign conflicts, the idea that the Reagan administration suddenly felt such a strong responsibility for journalists' welfare seemed extremely unlikely.

Second, some journalists challenged the argument that the press would have posed a threat to operational security or given away the element of surprise. Safire again:

"The nastiest reason (for the press ban), bruit'd about within the Reagan bunker, is that even a small press pool would have blabbed and cost American lives. Not only is this below the belt, but beside the point: We know that the Cubans knew of the invasion plans at least a day in advance." 286

The New York Times on the 23rd reported that, "Throughout the day, Grenada's Government radio broadcast statements that the island was calm but also warned that a

283 William Safire, "Us Against Them,"

284 Hearings before Civil Liberties Subcommittee, p. 9

285 Hearings before Civil Liberties Subcommittee, pp. 34-35

286 William Safire, "Us Against Them,"
'military invasion of our country is imminent.' However, it is not clear that most of the media took Grenada's warnings seriously, as they were located well inside both the Times and the Washington Post, suggesting that one should not necessarily believe all one heard. Of course, events did transpire as Grenada radio predicted, and several days after the invasion Prime Minister Tom Adams of Barbados admitted that word of the invasion had leaked from the OECS meeting in Port of Spain at which the invasion had been discussed. Finally, two weeks after the invasion Prime Minister Edward Seaga of Jamaica told reporters that the leader of the Revolutionary Military Council, Hudson Austin, had actually been told of the invasion plans 36 hours before Urgent Fury began, although he was not informed of the precise timetable. Although the press could not have known the extent of the breach in operational security that had already occurred, many like Safire believed that keeping the press away from Grenada did little if anything to enhance security. And once the invasion was underway, this argument should have faded away.

Third, the decision to bar the press from Grenada was not, as portrayed by Weinberger and others at the time, purely a military decision. Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Michael Burch told a reporter two weeks after the invasion (long after the crisis had passed and the invasion had garnered huge public support) that Weinberger had affirmed the press ban after discussions with military leaders. Burch did not expand on the reasons for Weinberger's approval, but his statements confirm that civilian leaders exercised ultimate control over the decision.

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289 "Grenada Was Told of Invasion Plan," New York Times (from UPI), November 7, 1983

Middleton noted months later in an article that James Baker had also approved of the ban on Reagan’s behalf.291 These revelations contradicted the arguments made by critics charging that the administration had given the military too much control over civilian matters.292

Indeed, we must ask how likely it is that the media-savvy Reagan White House had not already considered how to shape press coverage of Urgent Fury when military officials supposedly requested a press ban. Given the administration’s preoccupation with public relations, it seems just as likely that the press ban was the administration’s idea. Either way, senior Reagan officials approved of the ban, and therefore must bear ultimate responsibility for it. And whether or not military officers initiated the idea of barring the press from Grenada, the administration needed little encouragement to do so. The decision, from what can be extracted from available reports, seems to reflect a high degree of civil-military cohesion on the issue. Having made the decision to bar the press from the island, it is not surprising that the administration quickly made the operational security rationale its central argument. This allowed Reagan to distance himself from the decision and to affirm the administration’s commitment to a free press, reaping the benefits from barring the press from the fighting without admitting to more self-serving political motivations.

If the administration was publicly less than fully honest about why it imposed such restrictions on press access to Grenada, several possible motivations must be explored. The best explanation for the administration’s actions involves a combination of the administration’s attitude toward the press, its political interests, and its appreciation of the military's arguments. First, the press ban appears to be an option in complete


harmony with the administration's adversarial attitude toward the press and its beliefs about the importance of positive television images in particular. Keeping the press off Grenada helped the administration curb press reports which might have contradicted its announcements and to keep potentially negative pictures off television. The importance of doing so may have heightened by the poor state of military intelligence about the situation and enemy forces on Grenada. Keeping the press off the island meant that correspondents would not witness mistakes or accidents which might have been the result of poor intelligence, especially anything involving American casualties. In the absence of footage from Grenada, television news had to resort to safely unsensational maps and graphics to provide visual accompaniment to its reports.

This basic concern over garnering positive press coverage was enhanced by the administration's political considerations of the time. In ordering an invasion without informing the public or receiving public support for such an action beforehand was risky. There was no guarantee that the public or Congress, still wary of military intervention in the wide wake of Vietnam, would approve of Urgent Fury. The administration faced severe opposition to its desire to intervene in Central American affairs, and the possibility existed that similar opposition would rise in response to Grenada. Given such a situation, the administration needed to ensure that the operation went smoothly and quickly and more importantly, appeared to do so. If the press had been allowed to question too closely the performance of US troops or the need for the invasion in the first place more negative coverage could have resulted, making it more difficult for Reagan to claim success and reap the benefits of victory.

Finally, the administration may have agreed with military concerns that the presence of large numbers of journalists on Grenada would make the military's task more difficult. The island of Grenada is small—about the size of Washington, D.C. Several hundred journalists scouring the island for action was not something the military wanted to face. As several observers have noted, however, a concern over large numbers of
journalists should not have prevented the administration or military from allowing a small pool of reporters to cover the invasion from a safe vantage point closer to the action. Admiral Metcalf later admitted, in fact, that he would have been willing to take a group of eight or so reporters on his ship during the invasion.293

Administration Public Relations During the Invasion

The Administration’s public relations efforts during the invasion bolster the argument that press policies resulted from political rather than military considerations. With the press unable to get to the action, the Administration was able to frame the invasion and claim victory in ways that would have been impossible had the press been allowed on the island.

In a 9 a.m. statement to the press on October 25, four hours after US troops had stormed the island, Reagan announced that the invasion of Grenada was underway, offering three reasons for the US intervention:

We have taken this decisive action for three reasons: First, of overriding importance, to protect innocent lives, including up to 1,000 Americans whose personal safety is, of course, my paramount concern. Second, to forestall further chaos. And third, to assist in the restoration of conditions of law and order and of governmental institutions to the island of Grenada.294

To forestall criticism that he might have acted rashly, Reagan also made clear that the US action was in response to an “urgent, formal request from the five member nations of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States to assist in a joint effort. . . .” Interestingly, Reagan did not make the announcement on television, prompting speculation that he was trying to keep his distance from the invasion should it go poorly.295

293 Braestrup, "Background Paper," p. 93

294 The text of Reagan’s address can be found in the New York Times, “Text of Reagan’s Announcement of Invasion,” October 26, 1983.

295 Get NYT cite for this speculation
Reagan’s emphasis on “Americans in danger” is not surprising. As H. W. Brands found in his analysis of US foreign intervention, possible danger to US civilians abroad has been a common theme of presidential rationales. However one might feel about the use of force in theory, it is difficult to argue with a president who acts to protect the lives of Americans abroad. A president using this rationale provides himself more political cover than if he relies solely on abstract political justifications. Beginning with Reagan’s announcement, this justification became the administration’s first “line of the day”. Accordingly, administration officials took every opportunity to push the “Americans in danger” theme.

Later on the first day of the invasion, Secretary of State George Shultz held a news conference to explain the administration’s decisionmaking process and to reinforce the justification of the invasion. Shultz underscored the need to protect American lives and the fact that the OECS has requested US help. He stressed that given the “atmosphere of violent uncertainty” on Grenada, the administration had to act before the situation worsened. Shultz also tried to reject the notion that US actions violated the charter of the Organization of American States, of which both the US and Grenada are members, which provides in the Rio Treaty that “no state or group of states has the right to intervene directly or indirectly for any reason whatever in the internal or external affairs of any other state.” Shultz argued that the OECS member states who had requested the invasion were not party to the Rio Treaty and had instead their own regional treaty, and that therefore US actions did not violate the OAS charter. Shultz failed to mention, though news articles did, that the OECS charter called for unanimous


decisions on collective security issues, and that three members: St. Kitts-Nevis, Montserrat, and, of course, Grenada, did not vote on the decision to request a US intervention.299

On the day after the invasion began, October 26, White House spokesman Larry Speakes reiterated the “Americans in danger” theme. He admitted that the US had received diplomatic cables from the Revolutionary Military Council on Sunday and early Monday before the invasion, assuring the United States that all American lives and property would be safe and that the airport would be open to allow people to leave Grenada. Speakes claimed, however, that the airport was in fact closed on Monday the 23rd. “What they told us, we simply did not trust. There was no way we could be at all assured that their promises would have been kept. We had very real fears of a hostage situation.” Without pointing to any specific examples of danger to American lives, Speakes’ explanations echoed Shultz’s earlier description of the situation on Grenada as being too dangerous to take chances.300

Unfortunately for the administration, however, the “Americans in danger” explanation failed to convince everyone. Democrats in Congress were doubtful of the need to resort to military force; many doubted that enough had been done diplomatically to rescue the students. The chancellor of St. George’s Medical School, Charles Modica, felt that the invasion was unnecessary. Modica stated at a news conference that the Revolutionary Military Council had assured school officials that the students would be safe. Before the invasion, a group of parents of medical students had asked the president to act cautiously, for fear that overt US actions could endanger their children by provoking Grenada’s military factions.301

299 Ibid.

Criticism of the US intervention from abroad was wide ranging and vocal. Few nations seemed to accept that the US had justifiable cause for intervention in Grenada. Most of Latin American and America’s NATO allies were immediately opposed to the action. Even Margaret Thatcher objected, less than a year after the Falkland Islands campaign.  

A *New York Times* editorial summed up the doubts many had at the time, “If there were really a threat to United States citizens, a rescue would obviously be justified. But no threat has been demonstrated. And the invaders are not behaving like a land-and-leave rescue team.”

With its star justification in some early trouble, the administration tried another approach. The day after the invasion, a “senior Reagan Administration official” told the press that the intervention had blocked an impending military buildup on Grenada by Cuba. “I honestly believe we got there just in time,” he said, providing a phrase Reagan would pick up the next evening in his televised speech on Beirut and Grenada. Some administration officials also began suggesting that in addition to construction workers, there were perhaps as many as two battalions of Cuban troops on Grenada. The administration would soon claim, erroneously as it turned out, that there were over 1,000 Cubans on Grenada, about 400 more than the Cuban government had claimed. At a press conference the same day, General Vessey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters that the American forces had run into far greater resistance from the Cubans

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303 *New York Times*, October 26, 1983; After the invasion Robert Pastor testified before Congress that he thought the US had arrived “just in time to prevent an orderly evacuation of US citizens from Grenada.” Kenworthy, “Grenada as Theater,” *World Policy Journal*, p. 638

than anticipated. Secretary of Defense Weinberger added that US troops had overrun what appeared to be a "major Cuban installation."\textsuperscript{305} Over the next two days it was revealed that US troops had discovered large caches of Soviet made weapons, as well as documents detailing plans to expand Cuban presence on Grenada, although these were not immediately made public.

Questions about this new justification were immediately raised. If the administration knew all along about Cuba's plans, why hadn't Reagan mentioned them in his initial announcement of the invasion? Despite doubts, however, the administration's new justification took some steam out of the initial questioning about the safety of the students and the administration's diplomatic efforts, most likely as it was intended to do.\textsuperscript{306} With the government enjoying an information monopoly on Grenada, the press was forced to print the administration's arguments without independent verification or challenge. Standing pat with this explanation for the short duration of the fighting, the administration was relatively quiet. Reagan then elevated the Cuban justification to center stage in his televised speech on Thursday the 27th. His speech would put the final stamp of legitimacy on the already successful operation.

As the Reagan administration knew so well, television was the main battlefield on which it had to prove itself to the public. Happily for the administration, without any network television cameras on Grenada, the only footage of the invasion was provided by the Defense Department. And that film, full of positive images, was not released until two days after the fighting began, when the administration was already claiming success. This meant that the administration did not have to spend much time on spin control; it could instead focus on putting across its message in a proactive and positive manner.

\textsuperscript{305} Weinberger-Vessey press conference, October 26, 1983

Better yet, what network television cameras eventually did find was extremely favorable to the administration. On the day after the invasion the media covered the return of the first students from Grenada. As if directed by Michael Deaver, some of the first students to get off the plane dropped to their knees and kissed the ground, and proclaimed how glad they were to be back in the United States. This made for perfect television; it was run by all the national news programs, and provided the administration with powerful visual reinforcement for their actions. Left out of the television news, however, were those students who felt the invasion had not been necessary. Critics could never overcome those images with mere words.\textsuperscript{307} As Larry Speakes wrote in his memoirs, when he saw that scene he shouted, 'That's it, we've won!'\textsuperscript{308}

Following the administration's routine practice of farming out the responsibility for public relations to the departments to draw fire and generate good news, Reagan had let Weinberger and the military do most of the little talking that took place during the initial fighting. Then, once good news was assured—the students rescued and happy to be back, the casualties light—Reagan appeared on TV to take the credit and to confirm his justifications. At this point he could also take full advantage of the discovery that, unknown to US intelligence before the invasion, Grenada had formed secret military aid agreements with Cuba and the Soviet Union, and that Grenada had been stockpiling more weapons than such a small country should have needed for defense.\textsuperscript{309} This allowed Reagan to forge a greater consensus by framing the invasion in terms of the fight against global communism and the Soviet Union, an issue which he had used to great advantage throughout his career, and one which could add legitimacy to the invasion despite


\textsuperscript{308} Speakes, \textit{Speaking Out}, p. 160

\textsuperscript{309} On the nature of Grenada's military ties to the Soviet Union, North Korea, and Cuba, see Robert Pastor, "Who Pushed First?" and Paul Seabury and Walter A. McDougall, eds., \textit{The Grenada Papers} (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies 1984)
niggling doubts about the pretext for the invasion. Reagan argued that “we got there just in time...”  

He wasn’t referring, as it turned out, to the students whose safety had been his original rationale, but to the communists, who he feared had long viewed Grenada as a stepping stone for exporting terrorism to the Western hemisphere.

Some challenged even this justification, such as New York Times columnist Anthony Lewis. Lewis, in a column entitled “What Was He Hiding?” argued that Reagan appeared to be purposely keeping the public in the dark by not revealing proof of his claims that Grenada was in league with the Soviets. Those in Congress who might have been inclined to challenge Reagan, however, were silenced by polls released the day after his address which showed that a majority of the public approved of the invasion and believed the students had been in danger. This majority grew over the next several days to an overwhelming 71% approval, at which point very few in Congress wished to challenge the administration’s version of events. Of course, because of the absence of the press from Grenada, there was little room for anyone to disprove administration claims anyway.

Military Public Affairs and Urgent Fury

Journalists and other observers argued that Grenada press restrictions were the result of the military’s efforts to avoid “another Vietnam.” This argument, however, usually involved no more than a recitation of the obvious (though compelling) fact that the military resented the media for their role in Vietnam. To critics, the military


restrictions on the press were the inescapable and logical result of its lessons from Vietnam. Sharkey, for example, argues that "the decision to ban the press reflected the abiding dislike that many military commanders had for the media in the wake of Vietnam, and their belief that if media access had been more tightly controlled, the coverage would have been more positive."  

There is much evidence, however, which contradicts this view. First, the military did not take steps after Vietnam to solve the problems it had with the press. There was no decision to keep the press away from the battlefield in future conflicts, nor was a plan developed to restrain the press in any way. As General Winant Sidle noted on the eve of the Grenada invasion about the military's response to Vietnam, "I'm not sure we learned too many lessons. They were there for the learning, but I haven't noticed any great change in how we are operating public affairs at the top level of government. We’re still making the same old mistakes that we made in Vietnam."  

A study done by an officer studying at the Army War College corroborated this view. Lieutenant Colonel Clyde Hennies wrote in June 1983 that "it was discovered that the Army presently has no official formalized media training program (except for Public Affairs Officer Specialty Code 46) for officers, lieutenant colonel and colonel, preparing to occupy positions of greater responsibility which have potential for frequent contact with and exposure to the media."  

Hennies surveyed officers at the War College and found that the majority of them had never spent any time dealing with journalists and felt

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313 Sharkey, Under Fire, p. 70; For similar arguments see Richard Cohen, "Hey!" Washington Post, November 13, 1983;  
315 Clyde A. Hennies, Public Affairs Training for the Army's Officer Corps: Need or Neglect? (US Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, June 6, 1983) p. 5
unprepared to deal with the media. Several other such studies by War College students made in subsequent years reiterate this theme.316

The lack of attention to public affairs at the level of the individual officer was matched by inaction at the organizational level. Far from preparing to restrict the press more heavily in the future than it had in Vietnam, the Army disbanded its Reserve field censorship units in the 1970s, having decided that censorship was unlikely to be considered again. This left the Army without any organized way to implement censorship even if political leaders had decided to sanction it—hardly the act of a military bent on pursuing restrictive press policies.317

Second, the military’s lack of a plan to deal with a contingency such as Urgent Fury reveals that very little thought had been given to the problems the military might face in such a situation and how it would want to deal with the press. Had restricting press access to the battlefield been a priority, one would have expected the military to be able to pull a contingency plan from the files detailing how this was to be accomplished. No such plan existed, however, and further, even in the days before the crisis no such plans were drafted by the military.

The military’s standard procedure for public affairs planning was to require a Public Affairs Annex to be drafted to provide press guidance for upcoming military operations.318 This procedure provided flexibility in dealing with the press, but was quite ad hoc, and was not based on fixed principles such as “limit press access to battlefield.” For Urgent Fury, if the military had been planning all along to restrict the press we would expect to have seen public affairs guidance recommending that the press be kept off the

316 These other studies will be discussed in later chapters.


318 The Army’s procedures for Public Affairs, for example, are contained primarily in FM 46-1, Public Affairs.
island. Instead, however, public affairs officers at Atlantic Command, who would have drafted the annex for the operation, were informed of the invasion only after it had begun. The Chief of Public Affairs at Atlantic Command, Captain Owen Resweber, was told of the possibility of an invasion on the 23rd, but did not receive orders to develop press plans until Wednesday the 26th, twenty-four hours into the operation, when Michael Burch, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs finally received permission from Weinberger to initiate preparations to deal with the hoards of journalists who had already descended on Barbados, the closest nation to Grenada.319

Taken together, the lack of a contingency plan and the last minute nature of public affairs planning for the crisis indicate that the decision to bar the press from Grenada was not the product of an organized and premeditated attempt to solve the press problems of Vietnam. They also reveal that the press ban decision came from a high enough level to circumvent the standard procedures for public affairs planning.

Finally, the military created a panel after the invasion to recommend improvements in public affairs to avoid the problems of Grenada. Far from endorsing the restrictions employed during the invasion, the panel recommended a policy of greater press access. More importantly, the panel also argued that returning to the ground rules used in Vietnam to ensure operational security was a better way to deal with journalists than to keep them away from the battlefield. Weinberger adopted the panel’s recommendations. This development flatly contradicted those who argued that the military learned from Vietnam that the press must be restricted as it was in Grenada.

Military Professional Interests

More important than Vietnam in shaping the military’s press plans in Grenada, and aside from administration influence, were its professional interests and organizational

319 Braestrup, “Background Paper,” pp. 94-95; Sharkey, Under Fire, pp. 81-82
routines. These interests and routines not only made a press ban attractive to the military (whether or not it instigated the ban), they also explain the military’s handling of other press matters during Urgent Fury.

The military’s neglect of public affairs during peacetime resulted in ad hoc and unorganized planning during Urgent Fury. The lack of high-level attention and planning given to public affairs after Vietnam resulted primarily from its low priority within the military. Public affairs, because it does not concern the core function of the armed services—that is, fighting wars—tends to receive little attention in peacetime. And once a crisis breaks, the military is far more concerned about its war plans than its press plans.\textsuperscript{320} Given the extremely short period allowed for planning before the Grenada invasion, it is not surprising that the military did not develop a system for dealing with the press until after the invasion had begun. In addition, the military’s lack of forethought about how to deal with the press may have encouraged uncomplicated solutions such as simply keeping the press away from the island entirely.

The military’s desire to promote itself through favorable publicity and to avoid criticism also had a profound impact on how the military dealt with the press during the crisis. The press ban, of course, prevented the press from witnessing mistakes or setbacks, allowing the military to divulge only those pieces of information it felt would benefit its reputation, while avoiding mention of any problems which may have arisen. Both the military and the administration were quiet about the progress of the invasion until the US victory was complete, and offered very few details about how troops and equipment had performed.

As it turned out, the government’s silence masked the operation’s many gaffes and prevented anyone from confirming independently the administration’s claims about the need for the invasion in the first place. In the weeks following the invasion, reporters

\textsuperscript{320} Hennies, \textit{Need or Neglect?}
seeking to follow up on what actually happened during the fighting uncovered information about intelligence failures, accidental US military deaths, and major errors in the planning of the operation. Urgent Fury was not the shining example of military prowess the military had led the public to believe.\textsuperscript{321}

Another aspect of the military’s attempt to portray itself in a flattering light was the television footage it supplied to the networks. The footage, shot by a DoD team, contained the only available images from the invasion because of the press ban. To the dismay of the networks, however, the film proved less than an Emmy-winning example of wartime television. Instead showing American high-tech weapons in action, the film showed warehouses full of captured Grenadian rifles. Instead of showing US Marines in combat, it showed smiling rescued medical students. One network executive described the coverage as “garbage.”\textsuperscript{322} Undoubtedly the military did not find the footage so distressing.

The military’s concern for operational security before the invasion also influenced how it dealt with the press. Despite critics’ assertions that operational security had already been compromised, it is clear that the military acted on the assumption that any information about the invasion appearing beforehand in the press would put its troops and plans at risk. Victory was never in doubt, but keeping the Grenadians in the dark about exactly when and how the invasion would unfold could have determined how many casualties the US suffered. The desire to maintain operational security and achieve surprise at the outset of Urgent Fury thus led to the decision not to announce even the possibility of hostilities ahead of time.

The desire to ensure operational security cannot, however, plausibly explain why the military banned the press from the island after the invasion had begun, unless in its zeal it simply went too far. There was no need to cut off communications from Grenada.

\textsuperscript{321} Journalists’ efforts to uncover the unreported story of the invasion are covered later in this chapter

There was ample precedent in Vietnam of the media’s willingness to avoid reporting anything which would endanger military plans or forces. A simple set of guidelines and an accreditation system on Barbados like the one in Saigon could have sufficed to remind journalists of the importance of operational security.

Another reason behind the military’s desire to keep the press off Grenada was the fear that having too many journalists nearby would inhibit the military from carrying out its mission effectively. This may have had its root in a simple concern about the logistics of dealing with the press during a fast-moving situation in which there would not be extra personnel around to escort the press. On the other hand, as many in the press believed, it may have been a desire to escape the press’ critical gaze. Admiral Metcalf gave evidence for both of these views in public statements, saying at one point, "We don’t need you guys in our way—I’m down here to take an island,"\textsuperscript{323} and later admitting, "I didn’t want the press around where I would start second-guessing what I was doing relative to the press."\textsuperscript{324} And although the safety of journalists per se may not have been a concern of the military, the possibility that in the confused and fast moving situation on Grenada US troops might accidentally kill an American television or newspaper reporter does seem to have been a real concern. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Colonel Robert J. O’Brien, who was involved in Grenada planning, argued afterwards that, "We would just as soon not have our troops shoot journalists because the pain and grief that we have now would be trivial compared to what would happen if we knocked off an NBC crew. . ."\textsuperscript{325}

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\textsuperscript{323} Sharkey, \textit{Under Fire}, p. 73
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\textsuperscript{324} Braestrup, "Background Paper.,” p. 93
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Contrary to what he himself said in a press conference during the invasion, Metcalf wrote a decade later that the "no press" rule was handed down to him from CINCLANT. Metcalf himself had only been informed he was to head the Joint Task Force 38 hours before the invasion was to begin. He had not, by his own account, considered press coverage at all before that time. After being given this dictate and once the invasion had begun, Metcalf wrote that he had control over when the press would be allowed on the island. He based his decision on five criteria, none of which, he claimed, concerned problems of maintaining operational security:

1. Safety of personnel - soldiers, marines, students, and journalists - was the primary consideration. The media must not interfere with it.

2. Troops in a combat area should not be burdened with the responsibility for the safety of the media.

3. The media should not be exposed to hostile fire

4. Media, if in the area of troops in combat, would be escorted by a PAO

5. Accommodation for the media must be available whether ashore or aboard one of the ships.327

Although Metcalf was apparently given veto capability over press coverage of Grenada early on, once the students had been rescued and pressures from Congress and the press began rising to allow journalists on the island, it seems unlikely that Metcalf alone made the decision to lift the press ban. The timing of Metcalf's lifting of the press restrictions on Sunday is suspicious. Cries from Congress to let the press go to Grenada

326 This section borrows heavily from Peter Braestrup's excellent chapters on Grenada in his "Background Paper," in Report of the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on the Military and the Media and Jaqueline Sharkey's Under Fire (Washington D.C.: Center for Public Integrity, 1991). Both Braestrup and Sharkey conducted many interviews of key public affairs officers and journalists who covered the invasion. They are required reading for anyone interested in wartime public affairs.

were growing, and on Saturday, October 29th, the House passed a nonbinding resolution recommending that the restrictions be lifted. In addition, there are suggestions that James Baker may have sped along the decision.\textsuperscript{328} This fits what we know about the Reagan administration’s approach to both public relations and to management. The administration had complete control over dealings with the press, but in general Reagan used a “hands-off” management style. Either way, Grenada seems to exemplify both of these characteristics. Civilians made or at least confirmed the big decisions—to launch an invasion and to restrict the press, but let the military work out the implementation of both with quite a bit of leeway.

As noted, military public affairs officers did not begin efforts to accommodate the press until twenty-four hours into the operation. Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Michael Burch asked Atlantic Command staffers to put together plans to set up a Joint Information Bureau (JIB) in Bridgetown, Barbados. Admiral McDonald approved the plans and made the decision to send a public affairs team to Barbados later that day. A six man team, led by Navy Commander Ron Wildermuth, set up the Joint Information Bureau on the 27th, to cope with the roughly 370 journalists in Bridgetown trying to get to Grenada.\textsuperscript{329}

The JIB soon received permission from Admiral Metcalf to send a small print-television pool, about 15 people, to Grenada after the medical students had been evacuated. The pool arrived in Grenada at Point Salinas airstrip and was met by Captain Barry Willey, U.S. Army, a public affairs officer from the 82nd Airborne Division. The pool had arrived more than 48 hours after the invasion began. Only sporadic fire fights continued. Captain Willey then took the press on a bus tour to selected spots, none of which included units involved in fighting. Willey had not received any specific orders as

\textsuperscript{328} Speakes, \textit{Speaking Out}, p. 156; Hertsgaard, \textit{On Bended Knee}, p. 216; the House Resolution can be found in Hearings before the Civil Liberties Subcommittee, p.

\textsuperscript{329} Braestrup, \textit{Background Paper},” pp. 94-95, and Sharkey, \textit{Under Fire}, pp. 81-82
to what to do with the pool; he himself had just arrived in Grenada that day. Further, there was no transportation or other support available to him for doing much more with the pool.\textsuperscript{330}

The pool’s trip seems to have been a hastily and ill-planned affair, reflecting both the lack of forethought given to press matters and the fact that the task force on Grenada was still busy wrapping up military matters and had little time to consider the press.\textsuperscript{331} On the other hand, however, it also seems clear that the public affairs officers had at decent sense of what should happen with the pool. As Captain Willey told Braestrup in response to being asked if the press pool’s itinerary had been planned in advance,

\begin{quote}
Yes, I guess it was. We determined that they would be interested in seeing the immediate area around Point Salinas airstrip and some of the important aspects of the operations including the captured weapons warehouses and the prisoner compound, some enemy vehicles that had been knocked out at the end of the airstrip. It was not feasible at that time to take them very far away from the airstrip area.\textsuperscript{332}
\end{quote}

In another interview Commander Wildermuth told Braestrup,

\begin{quote}
That first day when we were finished with the media tour...we allowed the media to interview students and even some U.S. AID people who were there, more or less interviews of opportunity. They couldn’t talk to the Cuban prisoners. But we were held up two hours (in returning) the first day because of military action around the airport.\textsuperscript{333}
\end{quote}

These comments reveal that the military was still concerned, for whatever reasons, about what the press saw and heard. In addition, Wildermuth’s use of the phrase “allowed the media” displays a remarkable sense of confidence. While there is certainly a lively debate about the media’s rights of access to the battlefield, there is no debate

\textsuperscript{330} Braestrup, “Background Paper,” p. 95, Sharkey, \textit{Under Fire}, p. 82

\textsuperscript{331} Braestrup, “Background Paper,” pp. 95-96

\textsuperscript{332} Ibid., p. 96

\textsuperscript{333} Ibid., p. 96
about whether the military has the legal authority to "allow" the press to conduct interviews. It does not.\textsuperscript{334} The pools continued to be quite restrictive, with journalists unable to move around on their own without escorts, until Sunday the 30th by which time, as noted, the uproar over the restrictions had finally reached Congress. Only at that point could the press stay on Grenada as long as they chose without returning to Barbados.\textsuperscript{335}

In the two days before the pools began, the military had implemented the press ban quite effectively. Soon after the invasion began, Admiral Metcalf ordered a ban on all civilian shipping and aircraft. The rationale offered for the action was that the military did not want to shoot at friendly aircraft and ships by mistake. Metcalf, however, made clear years later that the move was in fact a response to hearing that journalists were trying to reach Grenada by speedboat.\textsuperscript{336} The other, and perhaps more useful purpose it served was to allow the military to shoo away any journalists trying to make their way onto the island. One group of journalists in a fishing boat did indeed make it, but others were turned away, intimidated by low passes and near misses with buoys dropped from Navy planes. Back in Bridgetown, the press complained of harassment by military personnel at the airfield and that the JIB was of little use.\textsuperscript{337}

But perhaps the most frustrating aspect of the military’s approach to public affairs for the press was simply the lack of information. The military held very few press conferences, and revealed very little about what was going on at them. The JIB in


Pridgetown was unable to get Metcalf to send over a briefer to give a daily update on the conflict to journalists there. Moreover, the JIB did not even have a direct communications link to Metcalf's headquarters or to the Army units based at Point Salinas on Grenada. This obviously did not encourage the timely flow of news and information to the press.338

What Metcalf did do, however, was to set up a system to send back reports gathered from the field to CINCLANT every half hour. It was this data that Washington relied on to analyze the invasion's progress and which it then relayed to the press, mainly in the form of press releases. As Braestrup notes, however, much of the information in these reports was of dubious quality, especially since almost all of the US troops were facing combat situations for the first time.339 At any rate, however, it put another layer between news of the events and the public. CINCLANT and civilian officials in Washington had a chance to determine what information they would give to the press and what they would keep to themselves.

The first press conference held by Secretary of Defense Weinberger and Chairman Vessey was held forty-eight hours after the invasion began, and represented the high point of the government's openness with the press during the conflict.340 Weinberger gave few details and repeated the administration line on the justification for the action. It was at this time that Weinberger hung the mantle of responsibility for the press ban on the military's collective shoulder and argued that the safety of journalists and concerns for operational security demanded press restrictions.

The Weinberger-Vessey press conference, as uninformative as it was, was unfortunately the only game in town for a press corps unable to get to the story. Instead

338 Braestrup, "Background Paper," p. 94

339 Braestrup, "Background Paper," pp. 105-106

of daily briefings by Weinberger or Vessey on the progress of Urgent Fury, from this point on most information was given to the press in communique form, short press releases with bland wording such as the first of the invasion, “United States armed forces, in conjunction with forces of other countries of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean Countries, have just concluded their first 12 hours of operations in Grenada. Resistance has been encountered, but most objectives have been taken . . .”\textsuperscript{341} It was these from which the newspapers had to write the daily wrap-ups and which television news programs would use as the central story about the invasion each day.\textsuperscript{342}

In the days and weeks following the invasion, it became evident that the military’s dealings with the press had been somewhat less than forthright. Several issues received less than open and honest discussion, including the performance of US troops and the adequacy of US planning, enemy and civilian casualties, and the extent of Cuban involvement in the fighting. This lack of candor was reported in the press, and several articles came out later attempting to uncover what the military had left unsaid or obscured. Few of these revelations, however, made the television news, and did not visibly diminish public support for the operation.\textsuperscript{343}

\section*{The Press and Urgent Fury}

\textit{Newsgathering}

Covering Urgent Fury was a frustrating task for journalists. When the press began arriving in Barbados, the closest they could get to Grenada, problems between the


military and journalists arose immediately. The military gave the press very little help in covering the invasion, and interfered on several occasions with its attempts to cover events in Barbados at the airstrip from which US forces were taking off for Grenada. As one reporter for the Wall Street Journal noted, “The journalists are frustrated. The military men here won’t talk. The embassy here, such as it is, refers all questions to the State Department. There are no briefings, no press releases, no nothing.”

Several intrepid journalists made attempts to go around the press ban by chartering boats to Grenada. Most failed as a result of Metcalf’s cordon, but one group of six reporters did make it to Grenada on Tuesday the 25th. Unfortunately, Grenada had no facilities for filing reports to the US as the telephone and telex lines had been disrupted. Worse, four of the journalists were invited to the USS Guam, Metcalf’s command post, and instead of being able to file they were kept incommunicado for a day. Their stories from the invasion’s early hours were filed only late Thursday night when they finally returned to Barbados.

When the press pools finally began, taking them to Grenada, journalists had to deal with each other. Competition for spots on the initial pools was stiff because not many were available. Soon after the invasion began the JIB had counted over 400 journalists present in Barbados. This number, made higher yet by hundreds who claimed to be members of the press but were not, exceeded the number of journalists at any war in history except during the Tet Offensive in Vietnam. Knowing that such a group could never have agreed on who to send with a pool, the JIB selected those who would go in the

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345 Braestrup, “Background Paper,” pp. 96-100

346 O'Shaughnessy, Grenada: An Eyewitness Account, pp. 204-205

347 Considering the scale of the conflict in Grenada compared to Vietnam, the number of journalists who tried to cover Urgent Fury is staggering. Metcalf noted that there was a journalist for every 18 US troops. Braestrup, “Background Paper,” and "Conference Report on US Military Operations and the Press,"
first days of the pool. This caused predictable grumbling among the press, but no one complained that the situation would be better without the pools.

Though better than nothing, the pools did not solve the media’s problems, and in fact, being led around by the military simply made most journalists angrier. The first group to go over included fifteen journalists from various television, wire, and print organizations. As noted above, the public affairs officer in charge of dealing with the first pool followed Metcalfe’s guidelines. The pool members were severely limited in what they saw, where they went, and to whom they could talk.

Greater numbers of journalists were taken by the pool to Grenada in the following days, until finally on Sunday all restrictions were lifted, due in part to the political ruckus the restrictions had caused back in Washington, where congressional hearings provided a forum for angry media executives and senior journalists to vent their frustrations at the Grenada restrictions. Of course, by Sunday, the story everyone had come to find—the invasion, was long over. All that remained was to write about US efforts to help stabilize Grenada’s political system. This proved relatively uneventful and soon the press began to lose interest. Most of the press corps that had shown up were gone after the final JIB briefing in St. George’s on November 23rd.  

Although the press always leans heavily on official government and military sources for information during wars and periods of armed conflict, in Grenada the media were almost completely dependent on them. Without being able to get onto the island, the press could do little but reprint official pronouncements and press releases. Journalists could not balance administration accounts with their own firsthand experiences, nor could they know what might have been important to know about the invasion that politicians and military leaders did not talk about.

As Brigitte Nacos notes in her case study of press coverage of the invasion, both the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* relied almost entirely on government sources, named and unnamed, for most of their front page stories on the invasion. The Reagan administration played a dominant role as source and theme setter both during and after the crisis in news coverage of the *New York Times, Washington Post*, and *Chicago Tribune*. The press' reliance on the administration in writing their stories was particularly evident on October 26th and 27th, when almost every front page story relied completely or nearly so on administration sources.\(^{349}\)

This overreliance led to inaccuracies in press coverage. As journalist Hugh O'Shaughnessy, who was one of the few to temporarily evade the press ban, points out, both *Time* and *Newsweek* relied almost exclusively on administration accounts of the invasion's planning and execution. As a result, both magazines' special reports on the conflict contain substantial amounts of false information. This situation was worse with newspapers and network coverage on a daily basis, when there was even less time to correct for mistakes or to find out that a source had been misleading or wrong about some event.\(^{350}\)

The media's reliance on government information not only made their task more difficult, but it also prevented journalists from checking on those stories for which the government provided very little information. The most publicized example of this was the government's reluctance to discuss enemy and civilian casualties. While the administration officials of course made very clear that American lives were their highest priority, they made no mention of enemy casualties, to the point of refusing to speculate on their numbers. The Pentagon and the Administration maintained until Sunday October 30th that there had been no civilian casualties. Because the press had no other source of

\(^{349}\) Nacos, *The Press, Presidents, and Crises*, pp. 165-167

\(^{350}\) O'Shaughnessy, *Grenada: An Eyewitness Account*, pp. 214-217
information to turn to for an alternative number, no news story had a response to this, even though it would have been clear to any who considered it that it was highly unlikely that there had been no civilian casualties. The military did not venture any numbers on either enemy casualties or civilian casualties until a November 9th press conference. Later, Grenadians would count 160 dead and 100 wounded. The Cubans suffered 71 killed and 57 wounded. These numbers would have come as a surprise to anyone who had watched coverage on TV, which Metcalf said showed that Urgent Fury, "was going to be a marvelous, sterile operation." Even careful observers of the prestige print press would have had difficulty figuring out what the human toll of the operation had truly been.

The press was also disturbed to discover the bombing of a mental hospital on Grenada, which had gone unmentioned by Admiral Metcalf. It had been taken over by the PRA and US aircraft had been receiving fire from it. It had no markings revealing that it was a hospital. According to initial reports in a story by a Canadian journalist, American bombs killed 47 patients in the hospital compound. Metcalf, however, did not mention the incident until confronted with it after the story broke several days after the bombing. Metcalf argued at first that he had not been informed yet that it had been a hospital, but reporters were unconvinced. Many believed this was a attempt to avoid negative publicity by covering up mistakes. The Pentagon initially reported that the bombing had only killed 12, not the 47 claimed in news reports, but revised its estimate upward over time. Later, Metcalf admitted to knowing that it had been a hospital that


352 Sharkey, Under Fire, p. 78. Admiral Metcalf made these remarks at a conference on military-media issues at Columbia University.

US forces bombed, but claimed he did not mention it because he was too busy with operational matters.354

Finally, several journalists, by digging for stories after the invasion, discovered that Urgent Fury had not been the smoothly run operation the Pentagon portrayed. Unmentioned at the time by the military, US troops were given tourist maps of Grenada because better ones could not be found; Army Rangers showed up a one of the medical school campuses to rescue students only to find out for the first time that most of the students were at another location; most of a special forces team drowned; and forces on the island could not communicate with each other due to incompatible radio equipment.355 By the time these stories were reported, however, Reagan's victory in Grenada was cemented in the public mind; only prestige papers such as the Times, Post, or Wall Street Journal ran such stories following up on the invasion. For those who read regional or local papers, or who relied on television, Grenada dropped from the news before these facts became known.

Press Coverage

The news stories and television footage of Urgent Fury were the product of the government/press struggle described above. Analyzing this product is useful for three main reasons. First, it helps us judge the success of the Reagan administration and the military in achieving their public relations and public affairs goals. Did the government's tactics for generating positive coverage work? Second, by comparing Grenada coverage to both past and subsequent conflicts, we gain an appreciation of trends in wartime press


coverage. This is particularly useful if we are to ascertain precisely how the growth of press restrictions has affected press coverage since Vietnam. Finally, a close look at wartime press coverage helps us to better understand how the press covers war more generally. As I noted in the introduction, for lack of time and resources I have had to concentrate my efforts on the print press, and New York Times coverage in particular. I have made note of when this may have affected my analysis.

A close look at Grenada press coverage uncovers several facts. First, coverage of Grenada went from near zero to total dominance of the New York Times in one day. This reflects a very common pattern in the news business. The only way for a country as obscure as Grenada to make so much news is to be the object of an invasion by the United States. Before the invasion, Grenada was a faint blip on even the powerful and wide-ranging New York Times news radar. As Table 4.1 reveals, Grenada hardly made a ripple in Times coverage until October. Both television and Time and Newsweek follow a similar pattern, although with far less coverage of Grenada beforehand, during, and after.

Table 3.1
Once the *Times* engaged Grenada, it did so with a vengeance. If one includes op-eds, transcripts of official statements, and editorials, the Times ran 65 "stories" in the first two days of coverage alone. Coverage of Urgent Fury's first days was greater than that given to the invasion of Panama, a much bigger operation, probably because Grenada marked the first large scale use of military force by the United States since Vietnam. Coverage ranged from discussion of how the administration planned for the operation through geography and history lessons for those unfamiliar with Grenada. Table 4.2 reveals the breakdown by category of *Times* coverage from October 26th, the first day of coverage, through November 3rd, the day on which the *Times* reported Secretary of Defense Weinberger’s announcement that fighting on Grenada had ended.
Table 3.2

NYT Grenada Coverage by Subject, October 26–November 3, 1983

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Number of Stories</th>
<th>% Total Coverage in Period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reagan Administration</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grenada Scene</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Operation</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>18.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combat</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Politics</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Reaction</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Issues</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>144</strong></td>
<td><strong>100+/-</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Just as during the presidential campaign the press focuses on the “horserace,” or who is ahead in the polls, wartime press coverage also focuses on the horserace, in this case who is winning the battle. And although in Grenada there was a higher number of stories on the international reaction to the invasion, stories about how the invasion was

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356 “Reagan Administration” refers to decisions made by the president, actions taken by Reagan or Reagan officials, or articles on the views of Reagan or Reagan officials. The “Grenada Scene” includes all articles dealing with Grenada politics, society, looting in the wake of invasion, etc. The “Operation” includes articles discussing how the operation was proceeding, how US forces performed generally speaking, how soon combat would be wrapped up, and so forth. “Combat” includes the one article that discussed actual combat operations, as opposed to the military operation more generally. To be designated a combat story an article had to include detail about men under fire, shooting their own weapons at others, or using other machines of war to destroy things. The “Domestic Politics” category includes all antiwar protest, congressional reaction, and nongovernmental opinion about the war, such as from potential democratic presidential candidates. “International Reaction” includes all articles in which the main actor or speaker is a foreign government or an international organization such as the OAS, OECS, or UN. “Media Issues” refers to those articles dealing with the press ban and the government’s press tactics and treatment of the press. Finally, “Miscellaneous” includes stories about the medical students on Grenada, to military families waiting at home for soldiers, to coffins arriving at Dover Air Force Base. In no case was any subject in this category the primary subject in more than two articles. Not included in Table 4.2 are opinion pieces or transcripts of official statements. In the period noted there were 20 editorials and op-eds in the Times, as well as 8 transcripts of official press conferences.
proceeding were by far the most popular front page item. Of thirty four front page stories from October 26th to November 3rd concerning Grenada, fourteen dealt with the status of military operations, compared to only three dealing with international reactions.

The second item of note is the surprising amount of space given by the Times to what Britain, Cuba, the Soviet Union, and the various international organizations felt and said about the invasion. In part, it may have been due to the fact that journalists had very little fodder for stories about the invasion itself because of the press ban and official reluctance to discuss military operations in much detail. As an alternative they turned to foreign sources for an alternative to firsthand coverage of military operations. It may also have been a result of Reagan’s controversial foreign policy and the fact that such an intervention seemed certain to have broader implications for future US foreign policy activities. In retrospect, it may have been a tactical error by the administration and the military not to deluge the press with more information on the invasion itself, because the response of the international community was uniformly negative. Of the forty three stories in this category, all but a handful featured a foreign leader or international organization castigating Reagan for his actions; the word “assail” was used repeatedly to describe reactions to Urgent Fury.

As Table 3.2 also reveals a third observable result—there was only one story in the New York Times coverage of Grenada which focused on combat per se. And even this story was based on interviews several days after the fact, rather than any firsthand experience of the journalist. Due to the press ban and subsequent restrictions on the press pools, there were none of the stories that marked Vietnam coverage, written by journalists who had accompanied troops on patrol, or who had visited US forces about to engage the enemy. The lack of combat stories was mirrored in both Time and Newsweek as well as television broadcasts. Without access to the battlefield there could be no combat coverage.
Comparing Urgent Fury coverage to Vietnam, it is clear that the press restrictions influenced the journalistic product. Although Vietnam coverage was not nearly as bloody or combat-oriented as many recall, a study of Vietnam television coverage found that between 2.9% and 4.1% of all Vietnam stories included film of combat. Another study by the same author of newsmagazine coverage found that graphic pictures of combat accompanied 4.9% of Time Vietnam stories, 4.1% of Newsweek stories, and 6.6% of Life Vietnam stories, while combat stories without pictures represented between 5% (Life) and 32.4% (Time) of total Vietnam stories. Pictures of dead or wounded accompanied between 6% and 18% of Vietnam stories in the same magazines.

The inability to offer the public images and tales of war on the ground annoyed the press. The Times' disappointment was clear in this caption explaining the rather tame photographs released by the Defense Department and the pools which had been allowed to visit Grenada:

> These images of the invasion of Grenada are representative of the photographs released by the Department of Defense and still photographers who were given limited access by the military forces on the island. None of the pictures shows actual fighting or casualties--only the prisoners taken by the invading multinational force, a Soviet-made weapon that was found, the United States troops moving through streets and hills or in other noncombat situations.

Administration officials, however, were undoubtedly pleased by the absence of stories and photographs dealing with casualties. Vivid images of American dead and wounded soldiers might have convinced some of the public that the operation had not been worth the cost. But without such images to compete with, the administration was able to focus attention on the fact that the US had won a quick victory and accomplished its goals in Grenada.

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359 *New York Times*, October 29, 1983
Of all the media covering Urgent Fury, the television networks faced the least appetizing situation. At least print reporters could search out nontraditional and foreign sources for stories—even if just for the inside pages. Television needed pictures, good ones, to go with the story, preferably dramatic action footage involving US troops. Without access to Grenada, however, television had no such pictures.\textsuperscript{360} World leaders objecting to the invasion through a press release don’t make for good visuals. They do not often make the television news, especially during a conflict when everyone knows other more exciting things are happening. During the invasion, television news was stuck with showing maps, graphic illustrations, and their own correspondents reporting from various locations far from the battlefield.

Television’s thirst for images created an opening for the administration and the military to provide the images that the public would see of Urgent Fury. It had long been military policy to send Audio/Visual crews in to document military operations for archival and other purposes. On October 27th, two days into the invasion, the Defense Department finally released to the networks CINCLANT footage of the operation—but only after President Reagan’s television speech to the nation. Much to the networks chagrin, however, the footage was not at all what they would have preferred to run. Instead of combat footage, the film released by DoD featured not a shot, not a drop of blood, and no frightening images of war. As Tom Shales of the \textit{Washington Post} put it, "Most of the film consisted of American students smiling, blowing kisses and flashing the "V" sign as they were escorted off the island under military protection. It looked like a bunch of kids coming home from camp."\textsuperscript{361} Nonetheless, with nothing else to offer, all of the networks ran the DoD footage. Perhaps embarrassed by their inability to get to the story, none of the networks mentioned right away that a press ban had been instituted or

\textsuperscript{360} Michael Kernan, "On TV, Picturing the Invasion," \textit{Washington Post}, October 26, 1983

\textsuperscript{361} Shales, "Grenada: A Question of News Control,"
that they had no firsthand reports to offer. Seemingly annoyed by the whole thing, Dan Rather on CBS made several references to the film having been “cleared by DoD censors.”

*Press Reaction to Urgent Fury*

The evolution of public affairs policy might have followed a different path had the press taken stronger steps to confront the government after the invasion. Although the press was furious with the public affairs system during Urgent Fury, it did little in practical terms to ensure that the next time would be better for journalists. The fact that the public approved highly of the invasion and seemed to support the government’s restrictions on the press weakened the press’s resolve to take on its toughest opponent. This inactivity helped set the terms of engagement for the development of post-Urgent Fury public affairs.

The driving element of journalists’ outrage at the restrictions was the perception that denying access to the press was an assault on journalism’s role in the political process and a violation of the public’s "right to know" what its government was doing. Edward Joyce, president of CBS News, launched the press’ rhetorical attack on the government’s restrictive press policy:

> I am seriously concerned that we may indeed be witnessing the dawn of a new era of censorship, of manipulation of the press, of considering the media the handmaiden of government to spoon-feed the public with government-approved information. If the government is permitted to abrogate the First Amendment at will, to the detriment of not simply the press but the public as well, I am concerned that such action will be taken again and again and again, whenever a government wishes to keep the public in the dark.363

362 Ibid.

363 “Networks Take Censorship Complaints to Congress,” *Broadcasting*, November 7, 1983, p.36 The hearing was before the 98th Congress, House Judiciary Subcommittee on Courts, Civil Liberties, and the Administration of Justice, November 2, 1983
Another, less idealistic motivation behind the media's distress was the simple fact that it could not cover the biggest story of the moment. Predictably, the press gave a great deal of coverage to its own complaints about the public affairs situation in Grenada, the vast majority of it unfavorable to the administration and military. Nacos found, in fact, that on issues indirectly related to the invasion during the first two days, including the press ban and the War Powers Act debate, negative coverage of the administration ran with a greater than two-to-one space advantage over positive coverage. In addition, all three major networks and major newspapers came out strongly against the treatment of the press in editorials. In the end, however, aside from sharp language in many editorials, the only resistance the press gave the government was to write letters of protest to the president and to the Defense Department.

Things might have turned out much differently had a group called Reporters' Committee for Freedom of the Press and its ad-hoc committee of ten major news organizations decided to move forward with legal action in response to the administration's possible violations of the First Amendment. They did not. Braestrup notes that the prevailing feeling was that it was not a good time politically to take the press' case to court. The public, highly supportive of the invasion, might have equated a legal challenge with an attack against the president. Arousing the public's ire was

364 Nacos, The Press, Presidents, and Crises, p. 170


something that editors did not want to do given the media’s concern with its current state of unpopularity in recent polls. Further, First Amendment expert Floyd Abrams felt that the press could very well lose the case, despite its merits. Instead the group decided to initiate negotiations with the Reagan administration to wrangle concessions on future wartime public affairs systems. Unfortunately for the press, however, the subsequent negotiations went nowhere.

Public Affairs After Grenada

*The Sible Panel and the Creation of the Pool System*

On November 6th in response to the hue and cry both from journalists and from lawmakers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Vessey called for a panel to examine the military/media relationship and devise a better system for conducting public affairs in the future. He called on retired information officer Major General Winant Sible, a public information officer in Vietnam, to lead the panel. Vessey appeared on the television news program “Meet the Press” to discuss the panel, which he said would establish guidelines acceptable by both government and the press for future conflicts.

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367 *Time* recorded the media’s distress over its unpopularity and determines that it has resulted, in large part, from the media’s behavior. See “Journalism in Crisis,” 1983

368 Braestrup, "Background Paper," pp. 127-128


The panel met for five days in February of 1984, reading statements from the press as well as interviewing various journalists and public affairs officers. Six months later, the panel released its report and Secretary of Defense Weinberger ordered Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs Michael Burch to take the necessary steps to implement the panel's recommendations. The Sidle Panel report affirmed the basic principle of press access to the battlefield, given the necessities of operational security, and offered eight recommendations for improving the military/media relationship. In summary form, those eight points were:

1. That public affairs planning take place concurrently with operational planning.

2. When pools are necessary, they should be as big as is feasible and their life span should be as short as possible.

3. To consider a standing list of journalists to make up a pool.

4. Voluntary compliance by media with security guidelines should be a basic tenet of media access (as in Vietnam).

5. Public affairs planning should include sufficient equipment and qualified military personnel to help media cover operations adequately.

6. Planners should consider media communications requirements to ensure earliest feasible availability, and perhaps consider facilities dedicated to the media.

7. Planning should include provision for transportation in the theater of operations.

8. To improve understanding and cooperation between the military and the media through increased contact by officers with the press and press issues.

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372 Vessey had planned to include both journalists and military officers on the Sidle Panel, as it became known. Working journalists refused to sit on the panel, however, thinking that participation would signal acceptance of Grenada as a precedent for public affairs. Thus, instead of sitting on the panel itself, journalists gave written testimony to the fourteen panelists for consideration.

Unlike after Vietnam, after Grenada the military actively sought ways to improve public affairs. The military's initiative in repairing its public affairs system actually frightened some observers, who took the Sidle Panel as proof that the civilian leadership had ceded control over press issues to the military. Many believed that the matter of press access to battlezones was properly a matter for civilians to decide.

What these observers missed, however, was that Reagan administration officials had already settled the larger political question of press access to their satisfaction. Baker and Shultz made clear after the Grenada invasion made clear that the administration was happy to keep the press on the sidelines. Baker, who claimed that he had not known about the restrictions in advance but approved of them, said he would approve them again in similar circumstances. Shultz was more openly negative towards the press in such situations, stating that, "These days, in the adversary journalism that's been developed, it seems as though the reporters are always against us and so they're always seeking to report something that's going to screw things up. And when you're trying to conduct a military operation you don't need that."374 Reagan officials were clearly comfortable defending the political decision to exclude the press. The administration has simply left the military to implement the policy of limited access. Thus, rather than an intrusion into civilian responsibilities, the Grenada case is evidence of the comfortable arrangement between the Reagan administration and the military. Had the administration been concerned that the military would not deal appropriately with the press, it certainly could have taken action. It did not, and its failure to reaffirm the principle of press freedom to cover conflicts was a source of consternation to journalists and other observers.375

The Sidle report, aside from supporting the general principle of press access, never entered the realm of politics, and did not discuss the role of civilian political leaders


375 See "Commander, or Censor, in Chief?" New York Times, date; and Battle Lines, p. 5-6
in ensuring press coverage of conflicts. For an essentially in-house report, the panel provided a remarkably penetrating assessment of the obstacles within the military to effective public affairs planning. What the report failed to do, perhaps understandably, was to discuss why these obstacles existed.

Nonetheless, the report’s recommendations provided the basic outline of a new public affairs system. In particular, two items would prove to be of decisive importance: the press pool as a permanent fixture of public affairs planning and the media’s voluntary acceptance of pool ground rules in lieu of censorship.

First, the press pool was established as the option of choice for remote conflicts or those of such a nature (surprise attacks, etc.) as to require limiting press notification and access. The pool concept was an unpopular one with those representatives of the press who spoke before the panel. As the Sidle report notes, “Media representatives appearing before the panel were unanimous in being opposed to pools in general. However, they all also agreed that they would cooperate in pooling agreements if that were necessary for them to obtain early access to an operation”376

It seems clear that the press objected to the pool system on the constitutional or political level, afraid that to agree to such an arrangement would be to admit that the government had a right to limit press access. On the practical level, however, it is also clear that news organizations would not let abstract issues stand in their way of getting to a big story. If agreeing to a pool was the only way the press was likely to get to certain conflicts, that would be better than no coverage at all. The press representatives before the panel argued, and the panelists agreed, that the pool should only last as long as necessary before full coverage could begin. With this promise, the major news organizations were willing to strike the bargain on the pool. At any rate, no actions were

376 Sidle Panel report, section 2
taken to counter the implementation of the report’s recommendations when they arrived in August of 1984.

The second issue of import was the panel’s suggestion to rely on voluntary compliance with public affairs ground rules like the ones used in Vietnam. The press, of course, much preferred such a policy to one involving censorship. This recommendation, along with the reasonable tone of the panel’s report in general, was probably important in enticing the press corps not to fight the administration too vigorously over the issue. By offering the press at least a partial return to the Vietnam-era system it enjoyed so much, the sting of the pool system may have been eased.

The long term implications of the report were not evident when it was released. Although the panel had been asked to consider public affairs generally, in fact its recommendations aimed at making sure Grenada would not happen again. The panel did not envision that the pool would be necessary at all times nor did it discuss making standard practice of limited press access to conflicts. Further, of course, no one could have been sure how the system would eventually work in practice.

And although the press was generally not excited to have to deal with a new set of rules regarding coverage of military actions, the tone of the report was not overly threatening. By declaring support for the role of the press in informing the public during armed conflict, the panel eschewed the hardline position of many in the military and elsewhere that the press would inevitably turn the public against US actions and should therefore be heavily restricted in all situations during a conflict. Further, by recommending that the press comply voluntarily with security guidelines, rather than

377 In a letter to Weinberger accompanying the report, Sidle wrote, “You did not request our assessment of media handling of Grenada and we will not provide it. However, we do feel that had our recommendations been ‘in place’ and fully considered at the time of Grenada, there might have been no need to create our panel.” See Braestrup, “Background Paper,” p. 125


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recommending any form of censorship, the panel also implicitly rejected the public arguments of military and civilian officials during Urgent Fury—that the media could not be trusted to maintain operational security and would endanger American troops.

Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs) Burch met with representatives of several major news organizations in October 1984 to work out arrangements for the media pool. Initial plans were for an eleven person pool, including wire and television reporters, but no daily newspaper representative. The plan was quickly changed to a twelve person pool after print organizations protested at being left out. The pool system proposed by the Pentagon followed roughly the outlines of the Sidle Panel's recommendations; and the groundrules for the pool were copied directly from the guidelines drawn up in Vietnam.379

Institutionalizing the Pool System: 1984-1989

The pool was activated for its first test run to cover exercises in Central America in April 1985. Understandably the first run was not as smooth as anyone would have liked. In fact, by both military and media accounts the test proved a failure.380 The military was concerned about leaks and the pool reporters felt that their stories took too long to be relayed by the military back home. The next test several months later was an easier one, covering exercises in Kentucky, which seemed to prompt few complaints from either side.

Undergoing refinement along the way, the pool system then saw action in Libya381, Honduras382, and the Persian Gulf.383 In each case complaints by both the


None of these deployments offered much of a challenge, however, to the pool arrangements. Each story would have been close to impossible for the press to cover without the pool. Not only was the action almost always in spots too dangerous for the media to venture without military protection, but gathering meaningful information about events without access to military resources would also have been exceedingly difficult. There was no good alternative, for example, to accepting a ride on US naval ships during the reflagging operation. Perhaps more importantly, each of these stories was of relatively minor importance compared with the invasion of another nation. Thus, neither civilian leaders nor the press were threatened enough by events to worry too much about arrangements for press coverage.

Although the pool was not battle-tested until Panama, the years after Grenada did serve as a period during which the military institutionalized the new public affairs system. In order to fix the lessons of Grenada and the Sidle Panel's recommendations in its "bureaucratic brain," the military had to create standard procedures, test them, and


\footnote{George Garneau, "New press pool activated: American reporters accompany U.S. troops airlifted to Honduras as Sandinista-contra battle heats up along the border," \textit{Editor and Publisher}, March 26, 1988}

refine them. By 1989 when Panama loomed around the corner, the military had firmly implanted the pool system in its institutional memory through repeated testing and drafting of the pool and its ground rules. This is not to say that by 1989 the military had implemented all of the Sidle Panel’s recommendations—it had not. But the process had a critical outcome: by the time of the Panama invasion the military’s reflex in a crisis would be to activate the pool.

Conclusions

Administration actions set the tone of Urgent Fury public affairs. The Reagan White House made great efforts to influence news coverage of its actions on a daily basis and Grenada was no exception. The administration’s traditional strategy, followed during the invasion, was to allow the department dealing with an issue to take the lead on public relations until the White House could claim success, garnering positive coverage for Reagan. Even while delegating responsibility for dealing with the press, however, the White House retained final control over strategy. Having authorized the initial decision to shut out the press, civilian officials turned responsibility for public affairs over to the military.

Arguments that the military engineered its public affairs in Grenada to compensate for its Vietnam experience are at best greatly exaggerated and at worst false. The military, for its part, had few established procedures for public affairs before Grenada, and none that were workable in a crisis. There simply was no institutional response to Vietnam to limit press access to covering wars and no evidence in the planning for Urgent Fury to suggest an organized and conscious attempt to “do it right this time.” In addition, the fact that the military looked to the press guidelines from Vietnam in order to plan for public affairs after Grenada, suggests strongly that the military had not so thoroughly rejected Vietnam public affairs as had been argued.
Vietnam could have had an impact in Grenada, however, at a more individual level. Reports and comments of General Vessey and Admiral Metcalf, both of whom served in Vietnam, do suggest that their attitudes, whether shaped by Vietnam or not, indeed had an impact on how they dealt with public affairs. Moreover, because Metcalf appears to have had significant control over local press policies once the operation had begun, this possibility must be given serious weight. Nonetheless, this carries different implications from the argument typically given by those in the press that the military learned its lesson from Vietnam and "did it right" in Grenada.

More important than Vietnam in explaining Grenada public affairs planning and implementation are the military's professional interests and organizational routines. In the days and hours leading up to the invasion, the military was hampered by its lack of attention to public affairs planning. The complete lack of a contingency plan to deal with the media in a situation like Urgent Fury suggests that the military was far less motivated to fix its public affairs problems than many have assumed. And in making its last minute plans for Urgent Fury public affairs, the military showed that once a crisis erupts, public affairs may receive even less attention; the JIB set up on Barbados from many accounts was poorly run compared to past efforts. Then once the invasion was underway, the desire to maintain operational security, to take the opportunity to impress Congress and the public with its competence, and to keep the uglier side of war from public view, encouraged the military to implement the press ban, to restrict the press once it arrived on Grenada, to keep quiet about enemy and civilian casualties and operational miscues, and finally to trumpet victory and praise the troops.

The impact of the press ban on news coverage itself was substantial. Numerous stories were delayed, there was no firsthand coverage of US troops in combat, and what details of the invasion's progress were reported came straight from the government. Administration rationales dominated television and print coverage, and little independent analysis of events was possible. The impact of this dominance, in terms of public and
congressional support, is impossible to know precisely. What is clear, however, is that the administration and the military kept to a minimum the chances that the press would report anything to challenge official reports or to show the public shocking sights of war.

Grenada also marked the birth of what can be called “DoD TV.” The importance of not allowing US casualties to be shown on television news was keenly felt in the administration, emphasized by the sensational coverage and public distress over the tragedy of the Marines in Beirut. Network television never made it to Grenada in time to cover the invasion itself. Meanwhile, the Pentagon supplied the footage, much delayed, full of happy, smiling students and lacking any combat footage—completely sterile, as Admiral Metcalf later put it. The absence of independent television meant that the public did not see any of the events which left 29 dead and 152 wounded American soldiers. The importance of keeping casualties off television was not lost on the Reagan administration. Grenada marked the beginning of a trend away from the unrestricted and at times bloody coverage of Vietnam towards government controlled television, a trend which reached its peak in the most recent conflict in the Gulf.

None of the administration’s or the military’s efforts would have been so successful in limiting press coverage of Urgent Fury, however, without assistance from a fortuitous combination of factors. The fact that the invasion was a surprise, the fact that no press corps was present on Grenada at the time of the invasion, that Grenada was an island and difficult for journalists to get to, and that the operation ended up being so quick and successful all supported the decision by the administration and later by Metcalf to keep the press out. Without this combination of elements, public affairs in Grenada could have been very different. At the least, the government would not have enjoyed the complete information monopoly that it did.

This monopoly was critical, in turn, because it was the very effectiveness of the ban on the press which led to the uproar over the restrictions and thus to the creation of the Siddle Panel. The panel focused on the operational shortcomings of Grenada public
affairs, leaving the larger question of press access aside. Unwittingly, the panel’s recommendations fostered the development of a system which would make a rerun of Grenada more likely, rather than less.

In agreeing to the pool concept the press, in hindsight, made a strategic error. No one guessed at the time that by accepting the system the press would effectively allow the government to determine what reporters would be able to cover during conflicts. By agreeing to limit their numbers and forego unilateral reporting, the press understood the bargain to be limited to the early stages of only those conflicts whose circumstances required the pool. The military also understood the plan in these terms. But as we will see in Panama, once the press pool has been activated during a conflict, it becomes easy for the government to change its mind, and much more difficult for the press to do anything about the situation.

Finally, the failure of the press to respond more vigorously, combined with the public’s support of the restrictions on the press during the invasion, should have made it clear to anyone watching that the government had gained the upper hand in public affairs. For all the potential power of the media, the government had successfully restrained the fourth estate at a crucial moment and escaped any real backlash. Grenada was thus a precedent for similar actions in the future, marking the beginning of the trend towards greater government restriction of the press in time of war.
Chapter Four

Pinning the Press Down in Panama

The trend that began in Grenada continued in Panama. The press pool, designed as a way to get journalists to the earliest action in a conflict, proved a useful tool for officials to control them with instead. Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney activated the pool even though the situation did not call for it, and delayed the pool’s call-up, knowing that this would cause journalists to miss the opening and most critical battles in Just Cause.

During the invasion the military’s continued lack of preparedness for crisis time public affairs hampered the pool’s functioning yet further. Poor logistics and insufficient communications equipment degraded the pool’s ability to move about Panama and to report its stories to the US. This would have been even more serious had the pool had much news to transmit. Unfortunately for the pool, the military’s distaste for battlefield press coverage meant that the pool had little news of interest—and no combat stories—to send home. But things were even worse for those journalists in Panama who were not part of the pool. The pool’s activation allowed the military and the Bush Administration to justify restraints on the freedom of movement of journalists who were not in the pool. Thus, both those journalists in Panama City and those who traveled on their own to Panama once the invasion had begun found the US military an obstacle to their newsgathering efforts.

The government’s handling of the press during Just Cause again prompted press cries of foul play, though fewer than after Grenada. The administration offered a half-hearted apology and the military promised again to do better next time. The press once
more accepted the government response rather than challenge its press policies in a more serious manner. Panama revealed how effective a government tool the pool would prove. This time the press could not say that it had been shut out entirely as in Grenada; it could only complain that a system it had accepted did not work as well as it was supposed to. Thus the press had left itself without a firm basis to challenge the government. Six months later the government’s system for dealing with the press during the Gulf crisis emerged as a yet more highly refined version of what had been done in Panama.

Background

General Manuel Noriega, head of the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF), became the de facto military dictator of Panama in 1983, when he reneged on a powersharing arrangement with other senior military officers. The US looked on Noriega with mixed feelings. On one hand, he was brutal to his political opponents and had become rich through his role in drug trafficking. On the other hand, Noriega had enjoyed a close relationship to the CIA and to the US military since the 1960s, acting as an informant in the drug war and helping the Reagan administration in the 1980s to aid the contras in Nicaragua. For several years the US/Panama relationship remained uneasy but essentially stable.385

Eventually, however, Noriega became public enemy number one. In 1987 the Panamanian public was mobilized by charges leveled at Noriega by Colonel Roberto Diaz Herrera, former PDF second in command, of rigging the 1984 Panama elections, of

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corruption, and plotting to kill Panama's former leader, General Omar Torrijos. Public protest and demonstrations lasted months. A public opinion poll showed that 75% of Panama wanted Noriega to step down. The US began to reconsider its relationship with Noriega. The Senate passed a resolution calling for Noriega to step down. The Reagan administration, after much internal debate, cut off economic aid to Panama in July 1987 after Noriega supporters vandalized the US embassy, but remained uncertain of how far to go in dealing with Noriega.386

Events soon dictated that the administration move more vigorously against the Panamanian leader. In February 1988 two US grand juries indicted General Manuel Noriega on drug trafficking related charges. After the indictments, the Reagan administration felt it had to escalate the pressure on Noriega, even though some at DEA and the Defense Department wanted to keep working with Noriega. Thus, the administration encouraged Panama's president, Delvalle, to fire Noriega. Delvalle tried, but was thrown out of office by Noriega instead. Delvalle fled to Miami, where he was recognized as Panama's legitimate leader, and worked to force the US to take harsher steps against Noriega. In April of 1988, the administration instituted full economic sanctions against Panama and attempted to negotiate with Noriega for his removal. Neither the sanctions nor the negotiations produced results, however, and Reagan was forced to back down during the 1988 election season.387

When Bush took over the presidency he inherited the Panama problem but faced even greater political difficulties dealing with Noriega. During the 1988 campaign Bush had broken from Reagan and staked out his own position on Panama, announcing that he would not deal with an indicted drug dealer. While this move seemed to make good


387 Buckley, *Panama*, pp. 111-144; Kempe, *Divorcing the Dictator*, pp. 236-331
political sense given the country's mood and its desire to prosecute the "war on drugs," it in fact left Bush with yet fewer options for dealing with Noriega. Making matters worse for Bush was the fact that he had already dealt with Noriega—twice meeting him when Bush was the director of CIA. Thus during the 1988 campaign Bush was accused, despite his new stance, of having a cozy relationship with a known drug trafficker. Further, Noriega crowed that Bush would never move against him because he knew Bush's "secrets."\footnote{Buckley, \textit{Panama}, pp. 146-156; Kempe, \textit{Divorcing the Dictator}, pp. 332-349}


Noriega, however, had no intention of allowing a fair election to take place. His troops stuffed ballots, played games with voter registration, and harassed voters at polling areas. Exit polls indicated that despite Noriega's efforts the opposition had taken a three-to-one lead in the voting; even PDF troops were voting for the coalition led by Guillermo Endara, Guillermo Ford, and Ricardo Calderon.\footnote{Lindsey Gruson, "Charges of Fraud Mar Panama Vote," \textit{New York Times}, May 8, 1989} Not impressed by the results, Noriega

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nullified the elections and installed his own candidate. Opposition candidates and their supporters took to the streets, demanding that Noriega and his government concede defeat, but on May 10 Noriega’s Dignity Battalions (civilian paramilitary squads set up by Noriega) made a violent show of force, attacking and wounding opposition candidates.\footnote{392} Television cameras captured the scenes of violence on film, bringing the Panama problem into vivid focus. As Newsweek noted of television coverage from that day:

> The images seared viewers around the world: goons in red or blue T-shirts, slicing like sharks through the crowd, viciously beating their victims with guns and tire irons. The helmeted police quietly watching. The silver-haired candidate, his face and shirt bloody, stumbling away from his attacker, pleading with a soldier, being thrown into a car and driven away.\footnote{393}

Bush could not ignore the images of violence or the charges of fraud made by Carter and other election monitors; the press had proclaimed that Panama had become his first major foreign policy test. Noriega’s continued flaunting of US efforts to oust him were beginning to become a serious political liability for Bush.\footnote{394} Bush condemned the election fraud and the violence, and ordered 1,900 US troops to Panama to join the 10,000 already there. Though Bush took the action ostensibly to protect American citizens from violence, he refused to rule out the possibility of future military action.


\footnote{393} “A Test of Wills,” Newsweek, May 22, 1989, p. 34

Raising the rhetorical decibel level, Bush announced, "...we will not be intimidated by the bullying tactics, brutal though they may be, of the dictator Noriega." 395

Bush also ordered US citizens to move onto US military bases in Panama, recalled the US ambassador, and announced that economic sanctions would continue. 396 In his statement of the measures, Bush also sent a veiled message to the Panamanian Defense Forces that an overthrow of Noriega would be welcome: "The crisis in Panama is a conflict between Noriega and the people of Panama. The United States stands with the Panamanian people. We share their hope that the Panamanian Defense Forces will stand with them and fulfill their constitutional obligation to defend democracy." 397 Meanwhile, Bush also conferred with Latin American leaders on measures to pressure Noriega. 398 Bush's tough stance on the elections proved popular, both with congress and the public. A Newsweek poll found that 73% had confidence in Bush's ability to handle the crisis, and 58% approved of his decision to send additional troops to Panama. 399

On May 17 the Organization of American States condemned the elections, though in weaker terms than the Bush Administration had hoped. The OAS, however, could get no further in negotiations with Noriega than Bush had done. Noriega remained in power and appeared to be firmly in control despite the popular uprisings in the wake of the


The stalemate over the Panama situation frustrated Bush, who despite his
centrally publicized efforts appeared to be headed for a major foreign policy setback. Tensions between Panama and the United States continued at a less visible level throughout the summer, as Noriega’s forces harassed and even at times arrested US citizens and military personnel. The Bush Administration kept up the pressure, expanding economic sanctions in September and tying Noriega more closely to the drug trafficking trade.

After a lull, Panama burst onto the political scene again with the October 3 coup attempt led by Major Moises Giroldi. Giroldi had told the CIA in Panama of the coup and had asked for US military assistance. He wanted the US military to block off the roads from which Noriega’s forces could reinforce him at the Comandancia (PDF headquarters). Uncertain whether the coup plot was real, and fearing US casualties, the Bush Administration ordered its troops to block two of the necessary roads, but failed to barricade the road from the airport. It was from that direction that Noriega’s troops in fact came, crushing the coup within the day.

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404 Buckley, Panama, pp. 197-208; Dinges, Our Man in Panama, pp. 305-306; Kempe, Divorcing the Dictator, pp. 369-397

Noriega and Bush announced that the US might indeed use military force in the future, but took few public actions until December, when the shooting of an American army officer finally precipitated the US invasion.

Lt. Robert Paz was killed by PDF soldiers as he and three other marines sped away in their car from a roadblock near PDF headquarters in Panama City. The marines claimed that they had merely been lost when the PDF troops opened fire. Aggravating the incident, PDF soldiers seized an American naval officer and his wife who had witnessed the scene. They held the Americans for hours while soldiers repeatedly kicked the officer and threatened his wife with sexual abuse.411

President Bush called the December 16 killing "an enormous outrage," and the administration stated that the incident reflected "a climate of aggression that has been developing that puts American lives at risk."412 The press speculated about whether Bush would use military force, but both the Pentagon and the White House refused to discuss what the nature of the administration's response would be. Then, in the early morning of December 20, US forces moved into Panama and "Just Cause" was underway.

Over 20,000 troops were involved in the mission to neutralize key PDF strongpoints, capture and hold airports, radio and television stations, and to capture Noriega. Although by the administration's account Bush did not make the final decision to invade until December 17, the night after the US marine was shot, the military had in


fact been rehearsing Just Cause for several weeks. The plans for such a contingency had been redrawn after the October 3 coup which, according to an unnamed Pentagon official quoted in the *New York Times*, had created a “philosophical turnaround” in the White House and Pentagon and encouraged serious thinking about the possible use of force.413

The complicated operation went quickly with relatively few US casualties (23 dead, 324 wounded).414 Within hours US forces had eliminated the PDF as an effective fighting force and had taken control of most of Panama, causing considerable damage to Panamanian property and killing several hundred Panamanian troops.415 By 7 a.m. Bush was able to claim in his television address to the nation that “Key military objectives have been achieved. Most organized resistance has been eliminated.”416 Despite the best efforts of special operations teams, however, Noriega escaped, only to turn up at the Vatican embassy two days later claiming asylum. A tense standoff ensued until Noriega finally gave himself up to the United States a week after the invasion had begun.417

The press, once again, found itself left behind. This time, instead of being shut out entirely, the press pool was activated too late, missing the early and critical hours of the operation, and never managed to find any combat to cover. In addition, the military kept the hundreds of journalists who flew to Panama on a chartered jet away from the action in a hangar at Howard Air Force Base. The military did not release the “unilateral” journalists until the fighting was over. Those correspondents already in Panama might have expected to have an easier time, but in fact found themselves hiding


414 Those interested in the military operation should see Flanagan, *The Battle for Panama: Inside Operation Just Cause* (Washington: Brassey’s, 1993)

415 The question of how many Panamanians, military and civilian, were killed during Just Cause became a matter of heated debate. This issue is discussed below.

416 President Bush Address to the Nation, December 20, 1989

417 Kempe, *Divorcing the Dictator*, pp. 398-417
out in the Panama City Marriott Hotel trying to avoid being kidnapped by Panamanian forces or accidentally shot by US forces. In sum, the press fared little better covering the invasion of Panama than it had done in Grenada.

The Bush Administration and Just Cause

As in Grenada, the White House’s daily approach to the art of news management became the blueprint for dealing with the press during Just Cause. Like Reagan’s team, the Bush Administration knew the importance of controlling the message and of ensuring that television coverage in particular reveal only those images which would reflect positively on the president’s policies. Though Bush was far less successful than Reagan in creating positive coverage of his domestic agenda, Bush enjoyed stunning success in dominating the agenda during periods of international crisis.418

Bush and the Press

George Bush’s approach to the press was less aggressive and more congenial than his predecessor’s. Early in his presidency, Bush attempted to strike a new chord in press relations by stressing his desire to allow greater access to the White House and by courting journalists individually to impress them with his competence and openness. Bush indeed proved a far more accessible president than Reagan had been, holding almost as many press conferences in his first year as Reagan had held in his entire tenure. But reporters soon began to note that access did not necessarily lead to information. Instead, journalists seemed to agree that Bush was a very secretive president and that his administration was in fact less open than Reagan’s had been.419 And by the end of his term, Rush’s true feelings about the press may have been in evidence. In the last weeks


419 George Garneau, “Where more is less,” Editor and Publisher, January 27, 1990, pp. 7-9
of his 1992 reelection campaign he added to his stump speech an attack on the negativity of the press. Bumper stickers cropped up: "Annoy the media, elect George Bush."

When the Bush Administration sought to dominate the media agenda, its tactics looked much the same as Reagan's. As Newsweek's Thomas DeFrank writes:

For all its apparent spontaneity and geniality, the Bush approach is no less calculating than the Reagan script. It is the product of a detailed, eyes only Fitzwater memorandum last December heavily embellished by the president's own hands-on view of how to deal with the press. The Bush media plan aims to establish the aura of an engaged as well as engaging chief executive—and to reassert firmer control over White House coverage.420

It is not surprising that the Bush program for dealing with the press borrowed heavily from Reagan; after all, not only was Bush a member of the Reagan team, but Marlin Fitzwater, Bush's White House spokesman, had also served in the same post under Reagan during the last year of his presidency, and James Baker, one of the key media strategists in the Reagan White House, served as Bush's campaign manager and then as his Secretary of State. Nor was Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney a stranger to dealing with the press at the highest levels, having served both as a member of Congress and as President Ford's Chief of Staff.

One thing distinguishing Bush's relationship with the press, however, was that Bush found himself a wartime president for so much of his tenure. The Panama crisis escalated and ended with invasion within his first year in office, Desert Shield/Storm came on the heels of Just Cause, and he even managed to round out his term by sending 20,000 troops to Somalia. Thus, much of Bush's relationship with the press and tactics for dealing with the press must be understood in those terms. Given that Bush enjoyed so much more positive coverage during foreign crises, one must wonder what his presidency

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420 Thomas DeFrank, "Playing the Media Game," Newsweek, April 17, 1989, p. 21
and the press coverage of it would have looked like had Just Cause and Desert Storm not taken place.

Just Cause and Administration Political Interests

During Just Cause Bush faced several political challenges encouraging his administration to manage the news and restrain the media's efforts near the battlefield. First, the longrunning failure of first Reagan and then Bush to depose Noriega had reached a politically dangerous stage with the failed October coup. The administration's appearance of amateurism challenged Bush to prove that he was capable of handling himself on the world stage.\(^{421}\) In addition to the criticism the Bush national security team had taken, Bush himself had long suffered from the "wimp factor." Many in Congress believed that Bush needed to show that he was not afraid to wield US power. These factors took on even greater importance because Bush had never sent troops into battle.\(^{422}\) In addition, Bush had been frustrated by the competition with Noriega. It is clear that Bush took the failure to get rid of Noriega personally, and the media had done their part to play up the rivalry, interpreting as a victory for Noriega any setback for Bush.\(^{423}\) During the invasion of Panama the administration would have to work to make sure that the public knew that Bush and his officials had done it right this time, without bumbling and indecisiveness.

Second, Bush needed to explain why an invasion was necessary when Panama posed no threat to US security. This effort was made more difficult by the fact that Bush had argued earlier that to order full-scale military intervention would not have been


\(^{422}\) R. W. Apple, Jr., "War: Bush's Presidential Rite of Passage," *New York Times*, December 21, 1989. A president's first major use of force is an event scrutinized at length by the media and by political elites.

prudent. Thus, in addition to justifying the use of military force, Bush had to explain why it was needed now and not before. Unlike Reagan had with Grenada, Bush could not exploit the public’s fear of communism and the Soviet Union—a relatively surefire method of building support for action. Noriega was detestable and the public thought he should leave power, but he was not a communist. With political pressures mounting to solve the Noriega problem quickly, Bush needed to seize on an immediate and convincing casus belli, one that both the American public and critics and skeptics in Congress would support.

Third, Bush, like every president who sends troops into battle, had to consider how to deal with the problem of American casualties. Would the public support the action if casualties were high, especially given that the operation was not clearly a matter of national security? The administration had to ensure that the US involvement in Panama was not going to last forever and that the costs were worth the prize.

Administration Planning for the Press

The Bush Administration was extremely successful in pursuing its political goals in Just Cause as a result of the swiftness of the US military victory and the judicious use of public relations. It is clear that Bush and his advisers considered media issues at the same time that Bush was making the decision to move ahead with the invasion. Not only did the administration fill the airwaves and front pages with its desired images of the invasion, but the administration’s intervention into the military public affairs process

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425 Fred S. Hoffman, Review of Panama Pool Deployment, December 1989 March 1990, p. 6 (referred to hereafter as the Hoffman Report). After Just Cause the Pentagon asked Hoffman, a veteran journalist and former Pentagon official, to study what went wrong with the press pool. Hoffman’s excellent report is the result of extensive interviews of senior civilian and military officials and remains one of the few primary sources of information on Just Cause media plans.
made it impossible for the pool to fulfill its intended mission of accompanying troops during the early phases of battle.

With President Bush’s blessing, Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney took two actions that made covering the invasion more difficult for the press, each of which violated the spirit of the Siddle panel recommendations adopted by the Pentagon after Grenada. First, he decided that the press pool should be activated. According to public affairs policy, however, the pool was only to be used when an operation took place in a remote area without a resident press corps or the infrastructure to deal with the press. Panama clearly did not fit this description. Not only was there already a large contingent of American reporters in Panama City, but Panama was home to the headquarters of Southern Command and over 10,000 US troops, with the capability of dealing effectively (at least in theory) with the press. Therefore, as originally envisioned, the pool was unnecessary. To make matters worse, Cheney decided to activate the pool in Washington. Although the pool normally would be called up in Washington to travel to a remote area of conflict, public affairs officers at Southern Command felt that a Panama-based pool would have been easier to work with from a logistical and security standpoint.\textsuperscript{426} In addition, a Panama-based pool would obviously have included those journalists most familiar with Panama and the recent history of the US-Panama tensions. Deploying the pool from Washington ensured that the most knowledgeable journalists would be largely shut out of reporting the invasion.

Cheney’s second critical decision was to delay notifying the press pool members until 7:30 p.m. on Tuesday, with H-Hour set at 1:00 a.m. Wednesday. This ensured that the pool could not get to Panama in time to cover the initial phase of the operation, the very time period the pool was created to allow journalists to cover. Cheney admitted later that he did this with the understanding that it would mean the pool would arrive late.

\textsuperscript{426} Col. Ron Sconyers, Chief of Public Affairs, Southern Command, notes this in his after action report. Cited in the Hoffman Report, p. 7
Cheney argued that the timing was the result of the need to maintain the "maximum security possible to avoid compromising the operation and to preserve the element of surprise."\textsuperscript{427} Indeed, despite the tight secrecy imposed by Bush during the planning phase, news organizations were beginning to sense that something was about to happen. But the 7:30 timing meant that a leak about the pool’s destination would at least not make the national evening news programs. Cheney took these actions despite the fact that a key purpose of the pool was to enable the Pentagon to call up a small group of reporters while maintaining operational security. The procedures for doing so were well established and had been practiced a number of times since Grenada. As Fred Hoffman notes, the pool could easily have been called up Tuesday afternoon instead, flown to Panama, briefed, and positioned to witness the initial attacks.\textsuperscript{428}

In addition to these two key decisions, Cheney and Williams kept such a tight rein on information about the invasion that public affairs planners down in Panama were not notified of the pool’s imminent arrival from Washington until 5 p.m. on Tuesday. This proved to be too late for SouthCom public affairs chief Colonel Ron Sconyers to make all of the necessary arrangements to cope with the pool.\textsuperscript{429} Although Cheney argued that the need to maintain operational security drove these decisions and actions, they clearly also had the consequence of severely limiting press access to battle.

\textit{Administration Public Relations during Just Cause}

With the press pool tied down the Bush Administration had almost all day Wednesday to set the tone of press coverage for the invasion. The administration’s efforts to justify the invasion to the public began early. At 1:40 a.m. Marlin Fitzwater

\textsuperscript{427} Hoffman Report, p. 7

\textsuperscript{428} Hoffman Report, p. 9

\textsuperscript{429} Hoffman Report, p. 10
entered the White House news room to announce that, "The President has directed United States forces to execute at one a.m. this morning pre-planned missions in Panama to protect American lives, restore the democratic process, preserve the integrity of the Panama Canal treaties and apprehend Manuel Noriega." Fitzwater added that Bush was monitoring the situation from the White House.430

At 7 a.m. President Bush went on television to outline his rationale for the invasion and convince the public that it had been justified. Like Reagan had done in Grenada, Bush emphasized the "Americans in danger theme." Bush argued that "General Noriega's reckless threats and attacks upon Americans in Panama created an imminent danger to the 35,000 American citizens in Panama. As president, I have no higher obligation than to safeguard the lives of American citizens." And, "I took this action only after reaching the conclusion that every other avenue was closed and the lives of American citizens were in grave danger."431

Bush's senior officials repeated and buttressed his justification in their television press conferences throughout the day from their various vantage points. As New York Times television critic Walter Goodman wrote of their performance, "Nobody could miss the ordered official line: a carefully planned, perfectly executed, entirely successful action provoked by General Noriega."432 They focused on the shooting of the US marine and tried to paint a picture of increasing harassment of Americans in Panama, directed by Noriega. At the State Department, James Baker tried to impress upon reporters the idea that the invasion marked simply the final step in a consistent foreign policy toward Panama.433 At the Pentagon Cheney repeated Bush's rationale almost verbatim in his

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431 President Bush's address to the nation, December 20, 1989 (CQWR, 12-23, p 3534)

432 Walter Goodman, "From the Early Show to the Late Show, It's All Panama," December 21, 1989


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briefing to the press. Aiding in the effort to convince the public that an invasion made sense now when before it had not, Cheney argued that “Noriega had created an environment in which his troops felt free to terrorize and brutalize Americans who had every right to be in Panama...”

Reporters and others questioned the administration's rationales and the legality of the US action. Baker defended the invasion's legal basis on the first day of the operation, citing the United States' right to self-defense under the OAS and UN charters. While many scholars believed that the administration's legal arguments were extremely shaky, if not specious, neither Congress nor the public seemed inclined to split legal hairs on the issue. And the media, having done their duty by raising the issue, did not pursue the matter in the absence of controversy, and in fact helped bolster Bush's position. The New York Times and most other major newspapers in the country ran editorials supporting the invasion and Bush's self-defense rationale.

International condemnation of the invasion came swiftly and from expected places. The Soviet Union denounced the invasion as illegal and Latin American nations criticized it as another incidence of imperialist US intervention in the region. The OAS passed a resolution stating that the organization "deeply regretted" the US action and called for an end to the fighting. European reaction was for the most part muted,

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while Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher announced her support for the move. And at the United Nations the US failed to find much support; the Security Council only failed to vote to condemn the invasion as a result of a US veto.439

For the most part the Bush Administration seemed to ignore international reactions, but the most memorable response to foreign pronouncements came from Bush himself. When asked what he thought of the Soviet Union's claim that the invasion violated international law, Bush said that he needed to let Gorbachev know that "if they kill an American marine, that's real bad. And if they threaten and brutalize the wife of an American citizen, sexually threatening the lieutenant's wife while kicking him in the groin over and over again, then, Mr. Gorbachev, please understand, this President is going to do something about it."440 Often repeated after it was first made, this comment helped Bush to dispel his wimp image and challenged would-be critics to take issue with his decision.

On the second day of the operation the administration began claiming success. Following the time-tested rule that a savvy president should claim credit by personally announcing his administration's successes, Bush announced on television that:

This operation is not over, but it's pretty well wrapped up. And we've moved aggressively to neutralize the PDF, to provide a stable environment for the freely elected Endara Government. . .It helps to insure the integrity of the Panama Canal and to create an environment that is safe for American citizens. . .General Noriega is no longer in power. He no longer commands the instruments of government or the forces of repression that he's used for so long to brutalize the Panamanian people.441

But without Noriega in hand, the administration could not fully convince congressional leaders that the invasion was successful. While very few members of


441 Ibid.
Congress debated whether or not the invasion was justified, almost all of them reserved final judgment of the action until Noriega was captured and it became clear that US forces would not become bogged down in police duty or guerrilla warfare with Noriega loyalists.442

Thus the administration, while claiming that it had restored democracy to Panama, had to wait until Noriega appeared at the Vatican embassy to be assured of a political victory. And once Noriega had surrendered to US forces, Bush appeared on television once more to claim victory:

On Wednesday, December 20, I ordered US troops to Panama with four objectives: to safeguard the lives of American citizens; to help restore democracy; to protect the integrity of the Panama Canal treaty, and to bring General Manuel Noriega to justice. All of these objectives have now been achieved.443

The only real threat to the carefully planned imagery of Just Cause had come on the second day of Just Cause as Bush met the press to discuss the operation. At the same time, Bush was joking with reporters in Washington, the networks were also covering the arrival of coffins at Dover Air Force Base bearing the dead from Panama. Three networks used a split screen to show both the president laughing and the military honor guard unloading coffins from a plane. As Michael Oreskes of the New York Times noted "it was a powerful juxtaposition, and one that clashed with the Administration's effort to put the best face on a conflict that has so far been witnessed by a relatively small number of reporters."444 Administration officials, unaware that the events would both be covered live, were understandably furious. As media managers know, television pictures of a


president laughing next to a solemn row of coffins cannot easily be displaced by words, no matter how sincere.\footnote{Jeremy Gerard, "President Complains About TV's Use of Split Images," \textit{New York Times}, January 6, 1990}

Between the launching of the invasion and Noriega's surrender to US forces two weeks later the administration offered few real details of the operation and avoided discussion of those facts which might have sullied the operation's clean-cut and efficient image. While offering bland details from the Pentagon on the general progress of the operation, the administration did not broach the subject of Panamanian casualties, especially civilian casualties, of which there were a surprisingly high number, nor the subject of the displacement of thousands from their homes due to fires set at least in part by US firepower and the destruction of vast amounts of property in the poorer areas of Panama located near the PDF headquarters. But with journalists unable to reach these areas to report, the administration did not need to comment. Journalists did not even know what questions to ask. And later, when news of these things finally did reach the US, the invasion had already become a political success for Bush. Stories of Panama's problems were not really news. (See Table 4.2 for the rapid drop-off in coverage)

With few independent sources of information, journalists had to rely almost entirely on the administration for news about the invasion and how well it was going. Due to the lack of television or other news of the invasion which might have diverted attention from official pronouncements or perhaps contradicted official assessments of the operation, the administration's justifications and claims of victory went without being seriously challenged. As Walter Goodman noted of the day on which Noriega sought asylum at the Vatican embassy,

\begin{quotation}
In the United States, a pride of the highest American officials went on television Wednesday to declare victory in what some phrasemaker had dubbed Operation Just Cause. Among those dozen points of light were the President, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of State, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and other high-ranking officers. Lieut. Gen.
\end{quotation}
Thomas W. Kelly of the Joint Chiefs gave the operation a 10 on the 1-to-10 scale. The slight static at news conferences by correspondents who had little information other than what they had been granted by the military could not compete with so formidable a chorus. . . . Whatever the problems in the field, the Administration seems to have won easily at home. The polls showed overwhelming support for the invasion even before the nation had had a chance to absorb it.\footnote{Walter Goodman, "The Television Has Become a Weapon in Panama and Rumania," \textit{New York Times}, December 26, 1989}

Bush’s actions and the invasion drew overwhelming popular and congressional support. Both aisles of Congress accepted the president’s justifications for the invasion and supported his actions. \textit{Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report} noted that “Whatever its eventual impact in Panama, one immediate result of the attack was to shore up Bush against widespread criticism, especially from Democrats, that he has been too cautious, even timid, to act decisively on the world stage.”\footnote{Pat Towell and John Felton, "Invasion, Noriega Ouster Win Support on Capitol Hill," \textit{CQWR}, December 23, 1989, p. 3533. Bush had been criticized both for the failed coup in Panama and for not moving quickly to do more about the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe.}

Bush’s public approval in the wake of the invasion gave him a political victory of great magnitude. Bush had succeeded in justifying the invasion to a large majority of the public, convincing them that the victory was substantial and the costs bearable.\footnote{Michael Oreskes, "President Wins Bipartisan Praise For Solution of Crisis Over Noriega," \textit{New York Times}, January 5, 1990} With Noriega behind bars, Bush had finally come out on top. As \textit{New York Times} reporter R. W. Apple opined, “Whatever the other results of this roll of the dice in Panama, it has shown him as a man capable of bold action. . . .”\footnote{R. W. Apple, "War: A Presidential Rite of Passage," \textit{New York Times}, December 21, 1989}

\textbf{Military Public Affairs and Just Cause}

After Grenada, as noted in Chapter Three, the Defense Department and the military services worked to establish the national media pool as the standard procedure
for dealing with the press during military operations. The pool was called up on several exercises and in 1988 had accompanied the Persian Gulf reflagging operation. So far the pool had yet to be tested under extreme conditions; nevertheless, both the military and the press felt reasonably comfortable with the arrangement.

The state of wartime public affairs policy at the time of Just Cause in theory followed the recommendations spelled out by the Sidle Panel in 1984. If necessary in cases where there no journalists were present or in which the operation otherwise demanded it, the press pool would be called up for action. In return for following certain ground rules, pool journalists would gain access to military operations in their earliest stages, accompanying troops and witnessing combat when possible. The ground rules were standard, flowing directly from those used in Vietnam. No discussion of future military operations was allowed, no pictures of dead or wounded were to be released until next of kin were notified, and other details that might give the enemy useful information were off limits for reporting.

According to these policies, what should have happened in Just Cause? As Fred Hoffman notes in his study of Just Cause public affairs, the pool was not originally intended to be used in cases in which a large resident press corps was present and the action was close to the United States. Thus, following the letter of the Sidle Panel’s recommendations, there should not have been a pool at all. Instead, something like the situation that prevailed in Vietnam should have been created, in which journalists were accredited to cover Just Cause by SouthCom (perhaps at Howard Air Force Base as they arrived) and then were then free to find their way to the action. But nothing like this happened. Instead the pool arrived too late to view the initial assault, and failed continually through the first few days to produce anything but news of secondary value. Stated policy did not match its implementation. Why not?

*Military Professional Interests and Planning for the Press Pool in Just Cause*
As discussed above, much of the blame for the pool’s early failures are the direct result of civilian decisions. Had Cheney called up the pool earlier, it would have been in Panama and had the chance (at least in theory) to report on the important first skirmishes. The blame for the pool’s continued poor functioning, however, must be laid at the military’s doorstep for two reasons. First, the military again displayed the lack of high level attention to wartime public affairs planning that was evident in Grenada. As a result, the military was incapable of dealing effectively with the media that showed up to report Just Cause. And second, above and beyond simple incompetence, the military did not seem inclined to let the pool to carry out its mission. The military’s interests in garnering favorable coverage and avoiding the negative fallout that could result from battlefield stories led SouthCom public affairs escorts to severely limit journalists’ access to the actual fighting.

In many ways Panama public affairs were an echo of Urgent Fury. As Hoffman noted in his report,

Some of the key problems that eventually burdened the pool had their genesis in over stress on secrecy and subsequent fumbles at the Pentagon and the Southern Command in November. As a consequence, about a month of possible planning time was lost and, when Operation Just Cause was mounted, there was no public affairs plan. (my italics)\footnote{Hoffman Report, p. 4. For the military’s report, which mirrors Hoffman in all important respects, see United States Southern Command Public Affairs After Action Report, “Operation Just Cause.”}

On November 13, 1989, SouthCom was informed by the Pentagon that an invasion of Panama was possible in the near future and that SouthCom should send a plan for public affairs to Washington. SouthCom faxed a minimally detailed outline of a plan to the Pentagon on November 22. Soon after it reached the Pentagon and began to circulate for comment, however, it was decided that for security reasons the plan should not be widely discussed. Lieutenant Commander Gregory Hartung, an officer in the Pentagon’s public affairs Plans office, was told to “stick it in the safe and forget about it.”
office evidently gave the order for this action after discussing the plan at an interagency meeting. Brown noted in an interview that the plans could have compromised the mission given all that they revealed about the operations involved. Brown's office argued that they only meant for Public Affairs to be careful in planning, not that planning should stop. That, however, is what happened. While the public affairs plan languished in a vault, neither public affairs officers at the Pentagon nor at SouthCom questioned why public affairs planning was not moving ahead.451

The failure to plan ahead caused SouthCom public affairs officers a great deal of grief once the invasion began. The grief was compounded by the manner in which they were informed of the invasion's timing. SouthCom's Director of Public Affairs, Air Force Colonel Ron Sconyers, was informed of the possibility of an invasion only on December 18, a day and a half before it would begin. And then, when Sconyers received confirmation on December 19, he was told not to discuss the operation with anyone in order to ensure operational security. This prevented him from all but minimal planning. Worse yet, Williams did not call Sconyers to inform him that he should prepare to accept the DOD national media pool from Washington until 5 p. m. Tuesday, eight hours before the invasion began. Sconyers until that point had been assuming that a pool would be formed in Panama—his planning went out the window. Without advanced planning and given such short notice, matters went from bad to worse once the pool got to Panama.452

SouthCom public affairs' difficulties with the pool reinforce the argument that public affairs remained a neglected mission area. Though one might believe that not having public affairs plans in Grenada may have been an isolated incident of poor planning, the absence of such plans again in Panama reflects a deeper problem with public affairs. Hoffman's report of Just Cause public affairs makes clear that the

451 Hoffman Report, p. 5
452 Hoffman Report, p. 5-6
military's wartime public affairs capabilities were inadequate. It is unlikely that any other specialty within the armed services suffers from such acute shortages of the equipment, personnel, and transportation to carry out its tasks. In addition, few units within the military would be tolerated if they performed as poorly as did the public affairs offices at SouthCom and the Pentagon during Just Cause.\textsuperscript{453} As NBC Pentagon correspondent Fred Francis, a pool member, argued of the military's poor outing, "I don't believe it was deliberate. They just fucked up."\textsuperscript{454}

Transportation was the biggest problem faced by SouthCom public affairs. By the time Williams alerted Sconyers that the pool would be arriving from Washington, it was too late for Sconyers to request a helicopter to transport the pool, and going by jeep was considered too dangerous. Thus, when the pool finally arrived four hours after the invasion had begun, expecting to head right out to cover the fighting, it was stranded at Howard Air Force Base. And after Sconyers had managed to commandeer a large enough helicopter to transport the sixteen member pool, the helicopter was whisked away on a higher priority mission, stranding the journalists once again to watch television at Fort Clayton. \textit{Las Vegas Morning News} reporter Kevin Merida noted, "We watched television, we got a cup of coffee. We actually watched a Bush news conference. We were right there with the viewer watching CNN."\textsuperscript{455} The pool finally got moving at 10 a.m., nine hours after arriving.\textsuperscript{456}

Inadequate and faulty communications equipment at both the Pentagon and SouthCom proved to be the next major difficulty. The fax machine at the Pentagon that

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[453] This is meant in no way to disparage those individual public affairs officers at SouthCom or the Pentagon. On the contrary, the problems with public affairs stem from organizational, not individual, failings.
\item[454] Chris Hanson, "Wading Around in the Panama Pool," \textit{Columbia Journalism Review}, March/April 1990, p. 19
\item[455] Sharkey, \textit{Under Fire}, p. 94
\item[456] Hoffman Report, pp. 11-12
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
was to receive pool reports malfunctioned. The problem was only discovered several hours after many reports had been sent, and everything had to be transmitted again. Due to the lack of dedicated telephone lines, still photographers suffered severe delays in transmitting their pictures, when Panamanian operators would pick up the lines, ruining the transmission and forcing pictures to be sent again. The only group to avoid these problems for the most part were the television reporters, thanks to the fact that Williams had allowed NBC's Fred Francis to bring along a one ton satellite uplink dish to beam his reports home. These delays and miscues were inconveniences for the first day when the pool reporters were the only ones using the media center at SouthCom. On Thursday evening, however, SouthCom was overrun by hundreds of journalists who had flown in from the US and the inconvenience turned into a nightmare.\(^{457\text{}}\)

Adding injury to inconvenience, the military refused repeatedly to take the pool to cover the fighting as it occurred. SouthCom PAOs argued that the reason behind this was that they feared for journalists' safety, which could not be guaranteed in combat situations. The press corps, however, did not buy this argument. Several pool members argued that this was an attempt to make sure the press did not upset the public with battlefield coverage and to allow the military to put the most favorable spin on events. Aspooler Steven Komarow argued, “Instead of being part of a military operation, we were brought in to view the spoils. The selections shown to us were designed for maximum propaganda impact.”\(^{458\text{}}\) Reporters in the pool were continually frustrated by their public affairs escorts, who kept taking them to places where fighting had taken place, rather than where it was ongoing. As Kevin Merida noted, “It was like forming a White House pool and then showing them an empty hall and saying, ‘This is where the President spoke.’”\(^{459\text{}}\) Instead of being taken to see combat, the pool was taken to

\(^{457\text{}}\) US Southern Command Public Affairs After Action Report, pp. 14-21

\(^{458\text{}}\) Steven Komarow, “Pooling Around in Panama,” Washington Journalism Review, March 1990, p. 49

\(^{459\text{}}\) Stanley Cloud, “How Reporters Missed the War,” Time, January 8, 1990, p. 61
Noriega’s hideouts and to captured arms caches, similar to the pool’s routine during Urgent Fury. Nor at first could reporters interview those who had taken part in the action. One author notes that “the pool was repeatedly rebuffed when it asked to interview senior commanders, wounded GIs, or front-line troops.”^460

As bad as the pool had it, however, the more than two hundred-fifty journalists who arrived in Panama later on a chartered jet from the US faced even tougher problems. First, of course, they had missed almost all of the important action taken by US forces. And second, the military would not let any of them leave Howard Air Force Base, arguing again that it was too dangerous to let them move about the country. To top it off, the already understaffed SouthCom public affairs unit had not anticipated such a horde of journalists, and was simply unable to provide adequate information or services after their arrival.

Once again, journalists did not believe the military’s argument that safety was the reason they were being held at the base. More likely, they reasoned, the military felt that as long as the press pool was covering the operation there was no reason to let other journalists move around and get in the way. Better that a few escorted reporters witness the invasion than hundreds of independent correspondents roaming the streets in search of a story. After the fighting had died down, those journalists who had stayed on at the base (many had simply gone home) were finally allowed to leave and go wherever they wanted to go. The story at that point, of course, was not combat but the continued search for Noriega and the impact of the invasion on the Panamanian public and their country. These were worthy stories, but they were not what most journalists had gone to Panama to cover.

There is currently no direct evidence to support the view that the military, at Southern Command or elsewhere, planned ahead of time to make sure that the press did

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^460 Christopher Hanson, “Wading Around in the Panama Pool,” p. 19
not cover combat. However, the facts that the pool never witnessed any combat and that the military penned up the rest of the press corps at Howard Air Force Base until the fighting was over suggest one of three possible scenarios. First, someone may have told SouthCom public affairs escorts at the last moment that they should not take the press anywhere where there could be fighting in order to minimize press coverage of military operations. Second, public affairs officers at SouthCom could already have been inculcated with the military’s professional interests in such a situation. Thus, without needing to be told, they either consciously or subconsciously decided to further those interests by steering the pool away from possibly negative topics and towards stories they felt would enhance the military’s prestige and public support. Finally, although it seems unlikely, there is no real way of proving that the military did not indeed want to ensure the pool’s safety and therefore kept it away from dangerous areas.

Indirect evidence, however, suggests that the best explanation for the military’s handling of the pool in Panama probably had more to do with fostering a positive image of the invasion and the military’s role in it than with keeping journalists safe. While public affairs escorts were keeping the pool from reporting anything of note, senior military officials with responsibility for keeping the public informed about the invasion were less than candid concerning several issues, and strove to paint a picture similar to the one the Bush Administration was offering. Military officials kept very quiet about casualties and how they occurred, especially among Panamanian civilians, lied about the Stealth fighter’s maiden performance, and helped the Bush Administration to demonize Noriega for public consumption.461 Such efforts were far more likely to succeed as long as the pool in Panama did not have access to any information which would contradict official claims. Without access to the invasion, the press could not challenge the

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461 Jaqueline Sharkey, Under Fire, pp. 95-102; Hanson, “Wading Around in the Panama Pool,” pp. 19-20; Komarow, “Pooling Around in Panama,” p. 49 It is educational to read newspaper coverage of official statements about these issues and compare it with what actually happened as revealed gradually long after the fact.

\textbf{The Press and Just Cause}

\textit{Newsgathering}

The press pool, rather than easing their way, provided a tremendous obstacle to journalists trying to cover Just Cause. Not only did the pool itself fail to produce noteworthy film, photos, or stories, the pool's very existence made things more difficult for other journalists who came to cover the invasion. Despite this, most journalists agreed that having limited access in Panama beat having zero access in Grenada.

Three distinct groups of journalists covered the invasion, each with its own advantages and disadvantages. First, as already discussed, there was the press pool. On the plus side they were the first journalists to get to Panama and they had access to military personnel, relatively safe transportation, and communications facilities. Had civilians not intervened, the pool might even have witnessed at least some of the opening moments of the fighting. On the negative side, of course, the pool found itself with very limited independence and little ability to move about the country, saw little or no combat,
faced military officers who were distrustful of the pool and journalists, and produced very little worthwhile copy for their efforts.

Second, there were those journalists who were already stationed in Panama City, most of whom were based at the Marriott Hotel. Among their advantages was the fact that they were independent of military control and could move about freely and report whatever the chaotic situation allowed. As CBS correspondent Juan Vasquez, one of those at the Marriott, noted, “those of us who were in Panama at the time of the invasion were able to file the only on-the-scene reports of the war not filtered through Pentagon handlers.”

463 Topping their disadvantages, however, was their high visibility as journalists and attractiveness as potential hostages. Several journalists were kidnapped by PDF forces, although all were released unharmed in the end. 464 In addition to danger from opposing forces, journalists on their own found that the middle of the war zone is not the safest place to be roaming around. Most of the journalists at the hotel did not venture outside, but filed reports from their rooms based on telephone calls and what they could see from the roof or from their windows. When reporters did venture outside to seek stories, they faced an uncooperative US military—MPs detained several reporters for hours who had arrived at Howard Air Force Base seeking information. 465 US roadblocks also kept reporters from pursuing stories at local hospitals and in the Chorrillo neighborhood, home of PDF headquarters and scene of the worst destruction. Just Cause also cost one unlucky Spanish journalist his life when US soldiers mistook one of their own convoys for the enemy and hit the photographer in the ensuing crossfire.


465 Vasquez, “Live from the Marriott,” p. 46
Finally, there was the massive group of journalists who began arriving on the night of the December 21 once the military gave permission for their chartered jet to land at Howard Air Force Base. Of all reporters, these faced the least appetizing situation. By the time they arrived, the big story—US forces in combat—was all but over. They had also been beaten to Panama by both the pool and by those already in Panama City. And worst, as mentioned, the military did not allow this group to leave the base until even the low-level fighting had subsided. All that was left for this group was to seek the follow up stories. Many, in fact, had already gone back home, frustrated by their inability to get past the military.

*Press Coverage of Just Cause*

An examination of press coverage during Just Cause reveals again the consequences of government restrictions on the press in wartime. The military’s denial of access to the battlefield meant that in many ways press coverage of Panama mirrored that of Grenada. As during Urgent Fury, the press relied almost exclusively on government sources to write about how the operation was progressing. In addition, there was once again almost no firsthand coverage, print or television, of American troops in combat, the most important story of Just Cause according to journalists. But press coverage of Panama echoed coverage of the earlier conflict in other ways as well which reveal much about how the press covers war more generally.

Table 4.1 shows how both Panama and Grenada went from obscurity and occasional newsworthiness to dominate the news once crisis struck, and how they both sank back into obscurity once the dust from the invasions had settled.

**Table 4.1**
Table 4.2 goes further and reveals that not only did overall coverage follow a similar pattern, but that during the crises themselves Panama coverage also mirrored Grenada coverage in almost every facet. The breakdown of coverage by subject area for Just Cause is extremely close to that for Urgent Fury. The margin of difference in most categories is only a few stories. During Just Cause as in Grenada, the biggest front page story was the "horserace," how US forces were doing against the PDF, whether they were successful, how well they had done, and when the fighting would be over. Of 33 front pages stories from December 20 to January 4, when Noriega surrendered to US forces, 14 dealt with the operation and the effort to capture Noriega or get him to come out of the Vatican's place. International reactions and the activities of various international organizations like the UN and OAS once again formed the basis for slightly more stories than did the operation, but only one such story—about the Vatican's dealings with the
Bush Administration over Noriega once he had sought asylum, made the front page. And as usual, almost every article based on foreign sources reported negative responses to the invasion.

Table 4.2

*New York Times* Coverage of Panama and Grenada Crisis Phases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Panama</th>
<th>Grenada</th>
<th>Subject</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bush Admin.</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>Reagan Admin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panama Scene</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>Grenada Scene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Operation</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>The Operation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combat</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>Combat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Politics</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>Domestic Politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Int’l Reaction</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>Int’l Reaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Issues</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>Media Issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noriega Trial, etc.</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Transcript of Off. Stmts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trsct of Off. Stmts</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Transcript of Off. Stmts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another similarity is that during neither conflict did the press call seriously into question the president’s justifications for action or criticize the conduct of the operation in *regular news stories*. While editorial boards and op-ed writers freely offered varying opinions about the invasions, day to day press coverage was overwhelmingly centered on

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466 Table includes 152 NYT stories from October 23, 1983-October X, 1983 on Urgent Fury, and 133 stories from December 20, 1989 to January 4, 1990 on Just Cause. In each case the table covers the period from the launching of the invasion until the point at which officials announced that the mission had been accomplished. For an explanation of what precise types of stories each category contains, see Table 4.2 in Chapter 4. This table does not include opinion pieces or editorials.
transmitting official perspectives on the operation. This dynamic seems to differ from coverage of domestic issues. During the health care reform debate in 1994, for example, routine news coverage encompassed a spectrum of viewpoints about the presidents policies and decisions. The rationale most frequently offered for the drop off in diversity of opinion in news stories during crisis is that both Congress and the public have a tendency to rally behind the president, to support him during international crises, at least until the dust settles. Thus, the media, acting as conveyors of opinion, especially of elite political leaders such as members of Congress, simply have fewer opposing viewpoints to pass on to readers and viewers. Whatever the reason, presidents benefit from the fact that the media act as if the important story is not whether the invasion should have been launched, but rather whether it is succeeding. News coverage that accepts presidential justifications without appealing to those with differing views legitimizes the president’s actions.

The differences between the emphases in coverage from Grenada to Panama are easy to understand and do not indicate a different approach to producing the news from one conflict to the next. For example, because the New York Times had a reporter already in Panama at the time of the invasion (Lindsey Gruson), they printed more stories about the Panama scene than they had published about Grenada when no reporters were present. At the same time there was relatively less coverage of the domestic political reaction to Bush’s move than of Reagan’s, primarily because Bush enjoyed bipartisan support for his action and thus there was less to report of interest. Similarly, while many nations assailed Bush for the invasion, Bush’s foreign policy was not nearly so controversial as Reagan’s, and thus Just Cause prompted less outcry (especially from US allies) than Urgent Fury had done. (One contrast between Grenada and Panama which does not show up in these

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467 Daniel C. Hallin makes this argument quite convincingly using Vietnam as a lengthy test of this hypothesis, The "Uncensored" War: The Media and Vietnam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986)
tables was the fact that most of the nation’s major newspapers supported the decision to invade this time. The *New York Times, Washington Post, Boston Globe, Los Angeles Times, Wall Street Journal,* and *Chicago Tribune* all endorsed Bush’s action.\(^{468}\)

Three conclusions follow from this conformity of coverage. First, the restrictions on the press in both cases prevented the press from covering combat. The ill-fated pool did little to change the basic fact of reporters’ lack of access to the battlefield. Second, the continued emphasis on reporting the day to day status of the operation, war’s horserace story, provides printed proof that the story journalists want and try to cover during war is, unsurprisingly, the fighting itself. Even though journalists had to rely entirely on government sources to write these stories, these formed the core of *New York Times’* and other papers’ and television’s coverage of Just Cause, just as they did in Vietnam and Grenada.\(^{469}\) Third, the comparison of Grenada and Panama coverage reveals that news organizations such as the *Times* are bureaucracies driven to reduce the complexity of their task by following established procedures.\(^{470}\) Instead of trying to reinvent war coverage in Just Cause, journalists relied on trusted formulas for producing news stories. The beat system ensures that stories will come from the same government agencies and departments that they did the last time, and journalists often end up writing stories almost identical to those written about previous crises, but with the names changed. From the perspective of an organization trying to understand and report in a clear manner a fast moving situation like war, it is easy to see why journalists rely on formulas and trusted official news sources. A journalist trying to make sense of a war on his own will not get very far without information and opinion from military officers and

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\(^{469}\) Need the footnote here by Wyatt or Patterson on the six newspapers in Vietnam study--ap and upi wire wrap up was basis of story, came entirely from military briefing in Saigon.

\(^{470}\) This concept has been excellently documented and discussed by several scholars, see Leon Sigal, *Reporters and Officials,* Grossman and Kumar, *Portraying the President,* Timothy Cook, “Domesticating a Crisis,” in Bennett and Paletz, eds., *Taken by Storm* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994)
other government officials. The most efficient way to elicit this information and opinion is through routine channels, the beats, pursued in peacetime.

More importantly from the perspective of the government/press struggle, however, the predictable journalistic search for news during a crisis plays into the hands of officials trying to manage the image of the conflict. Presidents have used the knowledge that journalists will flock to the White House, State Department, and Pentagon for information during a crisis to control the image of the conflict reaching the public. By making sure that senior officials at each department’s press conference of the day reinforce the approved spin, presidents can be fairly sure of the news stories that will result. Both Reagan and Bush took advantage of news organizations’ standard operating procedures. And with journalists unable to independently verify or challenge official statements, there was little need in either case to worry about damaging surprises.

Television fared little better in its efforts to cover Just Cause than it had in covering Urgent Fury. Coverage of the early hours of the invasion were particularly difficult for the networks, as their cameras missed almost all of the fighting. As television critic Tom Shales noted, “We seem to be at war. It’s a little hard to tell. Since 1 a.m. Wednesday, when US forces invaded Panama, the networks have had precious little footage from the scene of the fighting. . . . At one point you had Jane Pauley and Deborah Norville on the screen alone discussing the situation in Panama and possible courses of action.”

The first pool footage did not arrive until after 5 p.m. on the first day of the operation. Some footage from an independent television agency was available earlier, but as Broadcasting noted: “But for the most part, the pictures did not match the drama of the story. Throughout the night, viewers saw and heard the anchors reporting on


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developments. They were reading from wire copy or interviewing colleagues in Panama City by telephone."

Both CNN and NBC did, however, manage to provide at least a small sample of action coverage. NBC caught on film the firefight between 82nd Airborne troops and PDF forces as the Americans came to rescue the journalists trapped at the Marriott Hotel. And CNN, by means of a hidden camera, revealed the chaos and looting on the streets of Panama City. In addition, CNN unleashed an innovative newsgathering technique during the invasion. CNN provided viewers in Panama with a toll-free phone number to call in and report what was going on in their neighborhoods. Many did, providing CNN with vivid details of the invasion, albeit of unverifiable accuracy.

I argued in Chapter Three that analyzing the media product of the invasion was necessary and useful to answer the question of whether the administration was successful in its efforts to garner positive news coverage of their actions. In this case, the answer must be yes. None of those things a president fears from press coverage—violent television pictures, coverage of controversy or arguments among his advisers, or reporting critical of the invasion’s progress or justifications—appeared in the major news outlets. As Eric Boehlert argued:

Looking back, the White House must have been generally delighted with the coverage. Most of the highs were highlighted and the lows were subordinated. The first, albeit slightly restricted press pool pictures from Panama were nothing short of an Army recruiting film: helicopters silhouetting the sky; soldiers dodging through the foreign, predawn streets, and the opposition headquarters engulfed in flames... Where, you may have wondered, were the hundreds of dead and thousands of injured? Where was the violence so many soldiers described?

Press Reaction to Just Cause Public Affairs

472 Broadcasting, “Media go to war: Piecing together the Panama story,” December 25, 1989

473 “Media go to war,” p. 26; Tom Shales, “Phone-in War,”

Predictably, both journalists who had covered Just Cause and many who had watched it from afar fumed at the government’s restrictions. Journalists heaped most of the blame on the military and its handling of the pool.\textsuperscript{475} In addition to being guilty of incompetence, they charged, the military in Panama was extremely reluctant to aid the press and unexcited by the prospect of battlefield coverage from Panama.\textsuperscript{476} As Kevin Merida argued, “...what happened in Panama seemed designed to render the American people blind and deaf to much of the US troop activity. During the four days the pool was in operation, military officials either didn’t understand or ignored our needs as journalists.”\textsuperscript{477}

The press experience in Just Cause destroyed any beliefs that the pool existed to get journalists to the battlefield. They now understood that the pool could and would be used against them. As Stanley Cloud, an editor at \textit{Time} magazine, noted of the pool, “From the government’s point of view, it’s a way not so much of helping disseminate information but a way to control the press. This is a limited pool that makes individual initiative impossible. Pool members are completely at the mercy of the Pentagon.”\textsuperscript{478} Nor were journalists pleased that it appeared the military was using the pool as an excuse to restrict the movements of nonpool reporters.

Just Cause also prompted a good deal of handwringing among journalists about their performance. Many felt that, despite obstacles, the press failed to challenge official


\textsuperscript{476} Fred Francis, NBC Pentagon correspondent and member of the pool, championed the incompetence argument along with Fred Hoffman. Also see William Boot, “Wading Around in the Panama Pool,”

\textsuperscript{477} Kevin Merida, “The Panama Press Pool Fiasco; The Military Let Journalists Do Everything Except Cover the News,”

statements, failed to dig out the important stories in Panama, and failed to provide the public with a complete explanation of events. Columnist Tom Winker argued that “The more one looks into President Bush’s invasion of Panama, the more one should—and the more one wonders why those of us in the press have been so uncritical about both the ‘justification’ and the consequences of this egregious misuse of US military power. The Army’s own Southern Command had provided more essential information than many news organizations in this country.”

Despite their displeasure with how things had gone in Panama, however, journalists and their news organizations did little to improve their lot. Apart from seconding the conclusions of Fred Hoffman’s scathing report of Just Cause public affairs operations, the press did nothing to challenge the Pentagon or the White House to run things differently the next time such a crisis appeared. Perhaps because the press could not claim to have been shut out as it was in Grenada, and because many felt that the press had covered the invasion so poorly, its post-invasion complaints carried less weight. In either case, Just Cause did not prompt news organizations to prepare for their next wartime engagement with the US military.

Public Affairs After Just Cause

SouthCom’s disastrous dealings with the press during Just Cause prompted the Pentagon to call for an in-depth investigation of its public affairs planning and policies. To carry out the investigation the Pentagon called in Fred Hoffman, a Pentagon reporter and the most recent former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs. After interviewing scores of officials and visiting Panama, Hoffman offered a blunt assessment of the military’s public affairs performance. Castigating Cheney for delaying the pool out


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of an excessive concern for secrecy, he charged Williams with failing to plan and coordinate public affairs adequately for the crisis, and found that the Pentagon’s standard operating procedures for dealing with the pool were out of touch with the necessities of dealing with the press during crisis. Hoffman did not feel, however, that there had been any attempt by either civilians or the military to manipulate the pool.481

Several of the recommendations Hoffman offered to improve public affairs planning and the pool’s functioning provide further evidence that the military’s distaste for public affairs planning had not yet changed. Hoffman advised, for example, that the both the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs as well as the Joint Staff be involved in public affairs planning as soon as a military operation came under consideration. Neither Colin Powell nor the Joint Staff were aware of or involved with public affairs during Just Cause. Without such high level involvement, he argued, officers in the field were unlikely to take the press pool or public affairs seriously. Nor would public affairs plans be likely to be well integrated with operational planning.

While the press hailed Hoffman’s report and vented steam against Cheney and Williams, the direction of public affairs within the Pentagon did not change substantially. Williams, while noting that he was in basic agreement with several of Hoffman’s recommendations, never committed himself to adopting any of them. This was in contrast to the period after Grenada when angry journalists and the Sible Panel’s report helped spur the Pentagon, with Secretary of Defense Weinberger’s approval, to change its policies. Given Bush’s popularity with the public in the wake of Just Cause, civilian officials had little to fear and little incentive to alter press policies.

Nonetheless, though civilian Pentagon officials did little in the wake of Just Cause, the Joint Chiefs did respond to Hoffman’s report by issuing “Annex F: Planning Guidance—Public Affairs.” The guidance did not depart radically from established

481 Hoffman Report, pp. 1-3
procedures. Fred Hoffman had argued that it was the implementation of the pool that needed work, and that the concept itself was sound. The JCS intended for Annex F to reinforce in commanders' minds the points stressed by Hoffman in his report. Specifically, the Chiefs emphasized that CINCs [Commanders In Chief] should plan for public affairs concurrent to operational planning, that large numbers of media should be expected to show up for wars, and that CINCs should prepare to host the press pool if the Secretary of Defense called it into action.\textsuperscript{482} In addition, the guidance spelled out in detail the various responsibilities of public affairs planners: conducting daily briefings, media accreditation, security review, establishing a Joint Information Bureau and public affairs field communications, setting forth media access guidelines, providing transportation and logistical support for the media, and so forth.

Like most official documents, the guidance said all the right things about how the military would treat journalists and information in future conflicts. Security review would never be used to avoid embarrassment but would only be used to protect operational security. The press pool would go with units to battle at the outset of hostilities, and public affairs would provide all the necessary transportation and communications for journalists in the theater.

Just as before Just Cause, however, policies and guidances did not determine future actions. What was written on paper did not match what happened. Between March 30 when the JCS issued their guidance and August 2 when Iraq invaded Kuwait, nothing more was done to ensure that commanders had gotten the message that public affairs planning needed to change. No guidance was offered on how one should go about making improvements. No follow up was taken to make sure that commanders understood that public affairs was being taken more seriously at the highest levels. As a result, the overall impact of the March 30 guidance was close to zero. And, as we shall

see in Chapter Six, this guidance was virtually ignored as the Bush Administration and the military dealt with the media during Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

Conclusions

As in Urgent Fury, the administration set the tone for public affairs in Just Cause. By deciding to use a Washington-based pool and by causing the pool to miss the opening stages of the invasion, the Bush Administration ensured that the government would play the dominant role in providing information and images during Just Cause. Not only did the Bush Administration have an easier time in getting its themes across to the public as a result of its decisions, its actions also allowed the military to indulge its own desires to restrict press access to the battlefield.

The Bush Administration, thanks in part to the restrictions on the press and the ease with which its officials filled the airwaves and front pages with their arguments and announcements, basked in success after the quick victory in Panama. Panama, however, like Grenada, raises questions about how much the public learns about such military actions through the media. Not only did Bush’s justifications for the invasion fail to get critically examined for lack of information, but the administration and the military’s statements about how the invasion progressed passed straight from journalists’ notepads to the news without qualification because no journalist saw what had happened. Explanations of the performance of the troops, the Stealth fighter, and of Noriega’s actions all had to be taken at face value. Even when many of these explanations turned out to include a significant amount of sugar coating, the public’s attention had long since moved to another topic. Stories detailing the problems caused by the invasion—20,000 homeless Panamanians, the burnt-out neighborhoods, and the civilian death toll—were thus buried in the inside pages. Had journalists gotten the information sooner, many of these stories would have been front page material with political implications for Bush and the military. A better strategy for avoiding such scrutiny would be hard to devise.
Enduring institutional distaste for public affairs and the deep-seated desire to shine for the public explain the military’s handling of public affairs during Just Cause. The fact that the military once again lacked a detailed plan for dealing with wartime public affairs adds weight to the argument that public affairs is a neglected mission within the military. This neglect, as I have noted, is understandable to a degree. When a crisis is fast approaching in which soldiers may be sent into harm’s way, other issues press harder on a commander’s mind than how things should be explained to the press. This neglect also strengthens the argument that military public affairs since Vietnam have less to do with that war than with organizational realities and the course of recent history. If the military still believed that the media may cost the United States victory and yet did not have an effective public affairs planning process more than fifteen years after Vietnam, then we must seriously question whether current policies are the result of a rationally planned institutional response to the public affairs problems of the 1960’s.

The military, which had done a poor job by even its own standards in planning for public affairs, then followed the administration’s lead during Just Cause by not allowing the press pool to carry out its intended mission. The pool’s short history in Panama strongly suggests that the military purposely kept the press pool from witnessing battle of out self-interest, and not out of an interest for journalists’ safety as claimed. The press did not report the destruction and death which the US military inflicted in Panama. Despite confidence that such actions were necessary the military believes that it will benefit by keeping the public’s awareness of those things to a minimum. In addition, keeping the press pool in limbo allowed senior military officers in Washington to tell the public without challenge that the military had done a fantastic job in Panama, omitting any errors, lapses in judgment, or setbacks which might have tarnished the military’s image.

Finally, journalists learned two things about the press pool and war coverage from Just Cause. First, they learned that the press pool was in effect a trade-off not between
independence and access, as they had assumed (and been told), but a trade-off between independence and personal safety. A journalist in Panama could have one, but not both (in neither case did a journalist get much access). Just Cause reemphasized that covering a military operation can be extremely dangerous for the press if it does not have the military’s help. Those journalists in the pool may not have seen much, but neither did the journalists holed up in the Marriott, many of whom were kidnapped and shot at for their efforts. The uncomfortable truth about war coverage for journalists is that they are often forced to choose between dodging bullets in a strange land and settling for a less than Pulitzer-quality story written from a relatively safe place. As noted, after Just Cause the press did little to press for major changes in the pool system. Whether conscious or not, this is a bow to the fact that even though the military reneged on giving the pool the type of access it desired, journalists very often need the military’s help to cover a war effectively. If the pool was sometimes going to be the only way to get to the story, news organizations were not ready to stand on pride and announce that they would rather miss the story than submit to government control.

The second thing journalists learned was that the pool’s presence in a situation was likely to mean very limited access to the action not only for the pool, but for any journalists the military could physically keep under control. As discussed above, an unexpected side effect of press pool was that the military felt comfortable restraining unilateral reporters because public affairs officers thought the pool was the limit of their obligation to allow press coverage of the operation. This expansion of the pool concept worried journalists, who had slowly begun to realize that the military was not so interested in making the pool work as it was in making sure the press did not cause headaches. And worse for the press, the military had the resources and nominal authority to restrict press movements on and near the battlefield until ordered to stop by civilian authorities. Since no such order was forthcoming in Panama (nor did anyone really expect a president or secretary of defense to send more journalists to the front of any
battle), the press had little alternative but to put up with the military’s policies. It would not be a matter of who was right in an argument over access, it would be a matter of who had the power to enforce their will. In Panama and, as we will see, most of the Gulf War, it was clearly the military who had this power.
Chapter Five

Press Restrictions in the Persian Gulf

The Gulf War was both the most widely covered war in history and the one in which the US government imposed the greatest restrictions on the press. This seeming paradox was not a coincidence. In the media-saturated environment of a global military crisis which would make or break George Bush’s presidency, the White House faced pressing incentives to control the press and manage news coverage. Over a thousand journalists descended on Saudi Arabia determined to cover every aspect of the war in the desert, while hundreds more lay in wait in capitals around the world to report presidential missteps, miscues, and mistakes. Not only did the press come out in record numbers, it also brought with it a greater technological capability to report breaking events live from the battlefield, from behind enemy lines, and from the home front to viewers and listeners around the world. This increased the likelihood that journalists might broadcast the sorts of scenes that many believed would turn the public against war. Moreover, the White House did not expect the press to treat its policies kindly; officials knew that the press would focus on controversy and failures rather than successes. The press’ anger over its experience in Panama had put a point on reporters’ determination to get to the battlefield this time.

The White House thus believed that without some control over press coverage of the crisis, its tasks of leading the international coalition facing Iraq and building public support for war would be far more difficult, if not impossible, to carry out. The transformation of American politics into a media dominated realm was by now obvious;
no president could go to war without a strategy for managing the news to his advantage and to keep the press from unraveling his policies and successes. The comparison between Lyndon Johnson’s and George Bush’s approach to the press illustrates just how much the government/press relationship had changed since Vietnam. While Lyndon Johnson helped choose targets for bombing and left the details of Vietnam press matters largely to the military, George Bush let the military decide where the bombs would fall and instead helped choose which military officers would give the daily televised briefings to the press. By crafting a restrictive policy for the press on the battlefield and through sophisticated use of public relations, Bush and his officials managed with great success to ensure favorable press coverage of the administration’s actions during Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

The military faced this unprecedented media onslaught at ground level, where the logistics of dealing with so many journalists surpassed its limited public affairs capabilities, where the media’s technology raised parochial fears of what the public might think about its troops if television showed too much combat, and where the institutional cultures of the press and the military clashed to produce tension and recrimination. The military was horrified to watch almost 1600 correspondents and media personnel show up in Saudi Arabia to cover the war with their cellular phones, laptop computers, and television cameras. The military, with its traditional lack of attention to public affairs, found itself incapable of dealing efficiently with so many reporters. If so many journalists were allowed to roam free and unattended the threat to operational security, in military eyes, would skyrocket. More importantly, commanders were not thrilled about the prospect of journalists prowling around their units looking for stories which might make the military look bad in the public eye. Thus, the military happily implemented the White House’s plans for restricting the press, and at times added its own unofficial twists to make life more difficult for journalists in the Gulf.
The press found covering Desert Storm an uphill battle. With the administration and military keeping tight control over information about the crisis and imposing multiple restrictions on access to the battlefield and the troops, journalists found it difficult to offer alternative perspectives on events; the official line dominated. Reporters bemoaned the heavy focus on official statements but proved unable to overcome the restrictions. The Gulf War revealed in stark terms that the nature of the press industry makes its almost impossible for the press to confront the government with a unified message. As a result of this failing, the government was able to maintain the restrictions it had imposed on journalists despite the fact that the press was extremely unhappy with them, and despite the fact that the press enjoys a critical role in politics. The power of the press, though greater than ever, is in fact not one that can be easily harnessed at will by journalists.

**Background**

On August 2, 1990, Iraqi tanks rolled into Kuwait City. The bickering between Iraq and other Arab nations over oil production and with Kuwait over possession of the Rumalia oil field had ended in a rapid nighttime invasion. Iraq occupied Kuwait, installed a new government, and declared that Kuwait had been annexed as Iraq's nineteenth province. Within days, Iraq had massed thousands of troops near the border of Saudi Arabia, less than 300 miles from its capital, Riyadh. Iraq's power grab stunned and surprised the world, sending the Middle East into panic and financial markets reeling as the price of oil jumped. World leaders quickly denounced the action, and the United

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The next morning President George Bush and his senior officials met to discuss the invasion and assess its implications. The US economy, already tilting toward recession, did not look like it could easily tolerate an oil shock, nor did the economies of the other industrialized nations. Worse, little stood in Iraq’s way from threatening Saudi Arabia’s vast oil fields to the south. No one knew what Saddam Hussein’s intentions might be. There was also the matter of US and other Western citizens now effectively trapped in Kuwait, unable to leave after Iraq sealed the borders. Bush had General Norman Schwarzkopf, Commander in Chief of US Central Command, the command in charge of Middle East preparations, outline possible military options at a meeting of top advisers. Though the meeting ended without a firm decision about how the US should deal with the situation, accounts indicate that Bush was already leaning toward a military response of some sort, at least to safeguard Saudi Arabia from attack.\footnote{US News, \textit{Triumph Without Victory}, pp. 27-39,47-51; Woodward, \textit{Commanders}, pp. 202-210.}

Bush’s first steps were to label the invasion “naked aggression,” to declare a US trade embargo against Iraq, and to freeze $30 billion in Kuwaiti and Iraqi assets in US banks. The administration then called on the UN to impose a worldwide economic embargo upon Iraq, which it did only days later.\footnote{Paul Lewis, “Washington Calls on UN To Impose Boycott on Iraq,” \textit{New York Times}, August 4, 1990.} Over the week following the invasion Bush lobbied world leaders for their support in isolating Iraq and to convince them that urgent action was necessary to keep Iraq in check.\footnote{R. W. Apple, “Invading Iraqis Seize Kuwait and Its Oil: US Condemns Attack, Urges United Action,” \textit{New York Times}, August 3, 1990; Clyde H. Farnsworth, “Bush, In Freezing Assets, Bars $30 Billion to Hussein,” \textit{New York Times}, August 3, 1990.}
Bush quickly decided that the United States should dispatch forces to Saudi Arabia to deter Saddam Hussein from further adventurism. The administration publicly emphasized its concern about Hussein's intentions. Although Bush had initially announced that he had not foreseen sending troops to the Middle East, he executed an about-face and announced that he would support Saudi Arabia in "any way we possibly can" if requested.\(^{488}\) And only days later on August 5, Bush went further, effectively declaring that US policy would center on an Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait: "I view very seriously our determination to reverse this aggression. . . . This will not stand. This will not stand, this aggression against Kuwait."\(^{489}\) In response to Bush's claims Iraq stiffened its own resolve, and its government in Kuwait warned that Westerners in Kuwait would be held as "guests" if the international community acted against Iraq.\(^{490}\)

As Bush staked out his position publicly, the administration worked behind the scenes with Saudi Arabia's King Fahd to convince him of the threat to his kingdom posed by Iraq and to persuade him to invite US forces as a defensive buffer against Hussein's tanks. After meeting with Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney, Fahd agreed to accept a defensive force. US military preparations, already underway in expectation of Fahd's approval, accelerated.\(^{491}\)

On August 7 the Bush Administration announced that it had sent the first installment of troops and equipment to Saudi Arabia.\(^{492}\) Then, in a televised address to the nation the next morning, Bush laid out the rationale behind his actions and their goals:


Four simple principles guide our policy. First, we seek the immediate unconditional withdrawal of all Iraqi forces from Kuwait. Second, Kuwait’s legitimate Government must be restored to replace the puppet regime. And third, my Administration, as has been the case with every President from President Roosevelt to President Reagan, is committed to the security and stability of the Persian Gulf. And fourth, I am determined to protect the lives of American citizens abroad.

Bush emphasized that the mission of US forces in Saudi Arabia was defensive:

America does not seek conflict. Nor do we seek to chart the destiny of other nations. But America will stand by her friends. The mission of our troops is wholly defensive. . . . They will not initiate hostilities but they will defend themselves, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and other friends in the Persian Gulf. 493

Bush’s decision to deploy troops to Saudi Arabia won broad support from Congress, the international community, and the public. A New York Times/CBS poll found that 61% supported the move, and Gallup polls indicated that roughly 80% approved of Bush’s handling of the crisis. 494 Bush’s support held even as the Pentagon revealed that the eventual number of troops in the Gulf would reach 100,000, not 50,000 as previously discussed. Bush was also bolstered by the speed with which the international embargo of Iraq took effect and the vote by the Arab League to send troops to be part of the coalition defenses. 495 Despite its rally to the President, however, much of the American public remained somewhat skeptical of Bush’s actions. Many thought that the decision to send


troops had been made hastily, and many simply did not understand where America's interests lay in involving itself in such a troubled region.\textsuperscript{496}

Once the embargo had been installed, a tense waiting game ensued. As the US military build-up grew, the inevitable scrutiny and criticism of Bush’s policies also grew. Over the next several months, the political stakes for Bush rose as debate emerged over the costs and benefits of confronting Iraq in the desert. Questions arose over whether the US should spend money and lives protecting non-democratic nations like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and whether the US might find itself in a never-ending commitment to the region. Doubts also percolated about exactly what motive lay behind the US action. Many felt uncomfortable with the idea that the US should be willing to expend American lives for oil and cheap gasoline.\textsuperscript{497} Military and regional experts worried about various scenarios for ending the crisis. Would it be enough to have Iraq withdraw, or would Hussein’s military forces have to be destroyed to bring stability to the region?

Turning up the heat on Saddam Hussein, Bush addressed a joint session of Congress on September 11. In that televised speech, Bush asked the public to give sanctions time to work, but sent a message to Iraq that the world community would not wait forever:

I cannot predict just how long it will take to convince Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait. Sanctions will take time to have their full intended effect. We will continue to review all options with our allies, but let it be clear: We will not let this aggression stand.\textsuperscript{498}

Though the administration was not prepared to spell out what these “options” might include, it was clear to all that offensive military action was now on the policy menu. Postwar accounts reveal that in addition to believing that Hussein was unlikely to yield to sanctions, Bush and his aides feared that sanctions would simply take too long for Bush


\textsuperscript{498} "Transcript of President's Address to Joint Session of Congress," \textit{New York Times}, September 12, 1990
to win a political victory even if they were successful in the end. Bush himself told US News and World Report after the war that "I became convinced early on that, if diplomacy failed, we would indeed have to use force.\textsuperscript{499}

Later in the speech, Bush warned Hussein that US policy would not be swayed by Iraq's hostage taking. Bush also used the speech as an opportunity to remind the American public that the Gulf action was not a solo effort by the US. The international community was arrayed in consensus against Iraq, argued Bush, and the US had used the forum of the United Nations to coordinate Gulf policy. And finally, Bush also brought up a new rationale for opposing Iraq which would resound with the American public more than almost any other: curbing the spread of nuclear weapons, which Iraq was feared to be very close to developing.\textsuperscript{500}

Rhetorical attacks and counterattacks by Bush and Hussein intensified after the September 11 speech. Bush carried the verbal fight into Iraq with a recorded message replayed on Iraqi television, warning Iraqis that because of Saddam Hussein Iraq found itself on the brink of a war which it would lose.\textsuperscript{501} Bush then reiterated at a press conference that the US was prepared to take further measures to ensure an Iraqi withdrawal. Hussein's Revolutionary Command Council responded by promising a long confrontation on Iraqi television:

Everybody must realize that this battle will be the mother of all battles, and that God wanted us to wage the battle of liberating the nation and humanity, the battle of liberating Jerusalem and the holy shrines on the land of Iraq... There is not a single chance for any retreat, for any retreat

\textsuperscript{499} US News, Triumph Without Victory; pp. 172; Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney saw early on that Bush would not consider anything short of an Iraqi withdrawal a success. See Bob Woodward, Commanders, pp. 283-284

\textsuperscript{500} "Transcript of President's Address to Joint Session of Congress," New York Times, September 12, 1990

from waging the battle according to principles of honor and deep faith and
determination to achieve victory.  

At the same time, Iraq bolstered its forces in Kuwait, digging in for the war that
Bush was foreshadowing. Iraq also threatened that it would attack Israel and Saudi
Arabia rather than be strangled by the international embargo: "We will never allow
anybody, whoever he may be, to strangle the people of Iraq without having himself
strangled."  

As the summer slipped into fall, it became clear that the crisis in the Gulf would not
end soon. The economic sanctions had begun to bite, but seemed unlikely to force
Hussein to withdraw from Kuwait or concede defeat in the near future. In late November
CIA Director William Webster testified before Congress that his best estimate was that
sanctions might take as long as six months to a year to make an impact. But letting the
stalemate with Iraq drag on carried even greater political risks for Bush. It became clear
that such a large military force could not be sustained indefinitely in the desert without
some sort of rotation policy, especially since the administration had called up thousands
of reservists unaccustomed to long stints away from home. Morale in the desert was low
because troops were uneasy about whether they would have to fight. Experts now also
questioned how Bush could end the crisis successfully, and Congress warned Bush that
he must get their approval for any military action. Many, including administration
officials, questioned how long the US could hold together the coalition.  

502 Alan Cowell, "Leaders Bluntly Prime Iraq for 'Mother of All Battles,'" New York Times, September 22, 1990

503 John F. Burns, "Iraqis Threaten to Attack Saudis and Israelis If Nation is 'Strangled' by Embargo," New York Times, September 24, 1990


506 Woodward, Commanders, p. 341; Bush's approval on the Gulf was down to 61% by late October from its early peak of 80%. Mueller, Policy and Opinion, p. 193
these rising doubts, public support for Bush’s handling of the crisis dipped through the early fall from giddy heights back to more mortal levels.507

Bush and his officials had feared from early on in the crisis that the public would not stand behind their Gulf policy if it dragged on far into the future. At a news conference Bush admitted: “If there is no open fighting and the deployment continues month after month with no end is sight, I’m not clear in my own mind on how long this kind of support holds up...How long is too long? I think about those questions but I can’t define it for you.”508 Thus, having first counseled patience to let the embargo against Iraq take effect, Bush and his officials began to increase the pressure on Iraq slowly, building on early hints about the use of military force if sanctions failed.509 After the administration had floated the idea of military force for over a month, Secretary of State Baker departed for a whirlwind mission to assess the level of international support for a UN resolution which would authorize the use of force against Iraq if sanctions did not produce prompt results. Days later Bush finally made explicit that the US would use military force if Iraq did not withdraw from Kuwait. And on November 8 Bush announced that he had ordered 200,000 more troops to the Gulf to give the coalition the option of taking offensive military action.510


510 Thomas L. Friedman, “Bush and Baker Explicit In Threat to Use Force,” *New York Times*, October 30, 1990. It is interesting to note that the Bush administration’s preparation of the public and the media for this
As a result of the administration's careful program of hints preparing the public for such a move, Bush's announcement produced at first only a muted response from the public, a majority of whom already believed war was the likely outcome of the crisis. Bush argued that the new deployment would send a strong signal to Saddam Hussein that the world, but especially the US, was serious about reversing Iraq's invasion.

Democrats in Congress, unlike the public at large, responded with sharp questions of Bush's decision. Congressional critics argued that Bush was rushing the nation toward war and that the public, though supportive of sanctions and the original deployment, did not understand why the current move, or war, was necessary. Senator Sam Nunn (D-Georgia), chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee, voiced a cautionary note:

The last thing we need is to have a war over there, a bloody war, and have American boys being sent and brought back in body bags and yet not have the American people behind them. . . . I think the president has a real obligation here. . . . to explain why liberating Kuwait is in our vital interests, that is, an interest so important we're willing to spend thousands of American lives if necessary.

Even Bush's own party in Congress wanted to make sure that Congress reviewed US options in the Gulf before consenting to support the additional build-up, and that Bush not move ahead with such a momentous decision without congressional approval. Senators Nunn and George Mitchell (D-Maine) announced that they would hold hearings in late November in an attempt to ascertain where the US stood and what its goals in the Gulf should be.

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admission was so thorough that when Bush finally revealed that he would use force if necessary the story did not even make the front page.


512 Washington Post, November 12, 1990


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As the administration struggled to explain its actions to the public, its efforts to get a UN resolution authorizing the use of force finally paid off on November 29. The resolution set a deadline of January 15, 1991 for Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait. If Iraq did not comply, the coalition arrayed against Iraq would be authorized to use "all necessary means" to eject Iraq from Kuwait. As the administration won support from the UN, congressional hearings raised the volume of domestic debate over Bush's Gulf policy. Many military and diplomatic experts argued for time to let sanctions take effect, including former Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger, and former Chiefs of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral William Crowe and General David C. Jones.514

As the level of debate and worry grew among members of Congress, so did public fears about the possibility of war. To quell rising fears and to stifle criticism that he was rushing to war, Bush announced that he would send James Baker to Baghdad to find a peaceful solution to the crisis. Bush offered Iraq the chance to pick a date between December 15 and January 15 to meet with Baker, and invited Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz to Washington for preliminary talks.515 While the move did give the President a respite from public criticism, by no means did it convince congressional critics that the administration was heading in the right direction. By the end of November Congress was divided along party lines, with Republicans supporting the President and Democrats arguing that Bush was not giving economic sanctions enough time to take effect.516 The bipartisan consensus Bush had enjoyed at the outset of Desert Shield had


evaporated. The public remained divided, too, with roughly equal proportions favoring war and continued sanctions should Iraq fail to retreat by the January 15 deadline.\textsuperscript{517}

Easing Bush’s political burdens somewhat, Saddam Hussein announced on December 6 that Iraq would release all of its Western “guests.” Within a week the 900-plus Americans and 1100 other hostages were safely home. With the hostage issue now settled, attention focused on the prospect of the talks with Iraq. After much haggling over acceptable dates, Iraq and the US agreed to have Baker and Aziz meet in Geneva on January 9.\textsuperscript{518}

The talks did not appear likely to change the course of the crisis. Iraq had shown no sign of willingness to retreat without compromise and had promised not to yield to American pressure. Bush had sent Baker to Geneva to meet Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz with an inflexible portfolio. A Bush press release announced that there would be “No negotiations, no compromises. No attempts at face-saving, and no rewards for aggression.”\textsuperscript{519} When the talks failed to produce a peaceful solution, Baker announced that Iraq was completely inflexible, and that he saw no willingness to comply with the UN resolutions of the past months. Bush called the Iraqi position a “total rebuff.”\textsuperscript{520}

Under the shadow of the fast-approaching deadline, Congress began to debate the use of force the day after Baker’s meeting in Geneva. Bush, confident that he now had support in Congress, had asked it on January 8 to authorize the use of force to deal with Iraq after January 15. Bush hoped that in so doing, Congress would amplify his message.


\textsuperscript{519} US News and World Report, \textit{Triumph Without Victory}, pp. 199-200

to Hussein that the coalition and the US would not let the invasion stand. Such approval
would also defend the administration from those who might claim the president had acted
rashly. After impassioned debate on both sides of the issue, both the House and Senate
voted to authorize Bush to use “all necessary means” to deal with Iraq should he
determine that other means of resolving the crisis would not work. Practically speaking,
as Speaker of the House Thomas Foley (D-Washington) noted, Congress had just voted a
declaration of war. Americans waited for the last days before the deadline elapsed. A
majority of the public believed that Bush had done all he could to avoid war, and now
expected a long and costly war. Iraqi troops meanwhile dug in yet deeper, and Iraq’s
political leaders vowed to resist.521

At 7 p.m. Washington time on January 16, US aircraft struck the first blow of Desert
Storm against Iraqi targets in and around Baghdad. After announcing that the “liberation
of Kuwait has begun,” Bush manned the helm of an overwhelming 38 day air war to
destroy Iraqi command and control sites, to eliminate its nuclear and chemical weapons
facilities, and to destroy Iraqi tanks and heavy weapons. After weighing carefully the
need to start the ground campaign, Bush gave Hussein another deadline. If Iraq did not
withdraw its forces by noon on February 23, the ground war would begin. Iraq did not
withdraw and the coalition launched a massive high-speed ground attack aimed at
ejecting Iraqi forces from Kuwait and destroying much of Iraq’s remaining military
might. Desert Storm was spectacularly successful from the Allied view, with few
American casualties, and Bush declared victory and ordered a cease-fire after only 100
hours.522

Opinion, pp. 237-241

522 On the war see US News and World Report, Triumph Without Victory; Michael Gordon and Bernard
Trainor, The Generals’ War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995);
and Rick Atkinson, Crusade: The Untold Story of the Persian Gulf War (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993)
The media who had flocked to Saudi Arabia to cover the war found themselves almost as much at the mercy of the US military as were Iraqi forces. Reporters were unable to move about on their own, accompanied at all times by public affairs escorts, and limited in their access to troops and the battlefield. After failing throughout the war to provide the public with a firsthand view of what was happening, the press lamented that it had been defeated again.

The Bush Administration and Desert Storm

The Gulf War revealed a presidential prerogative to control and manage wartime news coverage of his administration at full strength. The Bush Administration’s public relations tactics in Washington meshed perfectly with the restrictive public affairs policies in the Gulf whose drafting it oversaw. This allowed Bush and his officials to frame the crisis as a just war against an evil aggressor and to offer the military solution as the only reasonable course of action, despite strong doubts in Congress and among citizens about the wisdom and outcome of a war in the Gulf. While it appeared to many journalists on the ground in Saudi Arabia that it was the military that had created the environment of tight information control, in fact it was a result of the Bush Administration’s strategy for furthering its political interests in the media-dominated world of American politics. The military was primarily an instrument, not the initiator, of press control. Through a combination of public relations in Washington and restrictive press curbs in Saudi Arabia, the Bush Administration tried to control what the public saw and thought about the war.

Bush Administration Political Interests during Desert Storm
Bush had three critical political interests as the crisis evolved into war. First, of course, Bush had to build and maintain support for his strategy and eventually for war. To do this Bush needed to persuade a divided public and skeptical Congress a) that the US should take the lead in reversing Iraqi aggression, not just containing it, b) that sanctions alone would not prove effective and that the use of military force would be necessary and c) that by January 15 diplomatic means to resolve the crisis had been exhausted, sanctions proven ineffective, and that it was now time to begin offensive military operations.

Public opinion polls and commentary from critics in Congress shed light on the scope of the effort required to justify war. Though Bush won overwhelming support from the public and Congress for his decision to defend Saudi Arabia and for imposing economic sanctions on Iraq, support for launching offensive operations was far more limited. After Bush doubled the US deployment to Saudi Arabia, a New York Times/CBS News poll reported on November 20 that “The country is more confused and more divided than at any time since the crisis began.” Only 50% of the public approved of Bush’s handling of the crisis at that point, down from an earlier peak of 75%. Furthermore, the poll revealed that a majority of the public did not feel that restoring the Kuwaiti government or protecting the world’s oil supply were good enough reasons to start a war. The public’s reluctance to fight remained strong right up until the outbreak of

523 I focus here on domestic political interests. In so doing I ignore a truly critical interest—keeping US allies happy and the coalition together throughout the crisis while at the same time trying to coerce Iraq to withdraw. This task demanded constant administration attention to “media diplomacy,” and required the ability to send different messages to multiple international audiences all in one press conference or speech. The Bush Administration’s use of the media as a diplomatic channel is one of the most interesting aspects of the media’s impact on the crisis. On this topic see W. Lance Bennett and David L. Paletz, eds., Taken By Storm: The Media, Public Opinion, and US Foreign Policy in the Gulf War (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994)

524 See Mueller, Policy and Opinion, Chapters 2-3, for an excellent discussion of just how difficult the task of leading the American public into a Middle East war appeared at the outset, at least if one gives credence to opinion polls.

war. Another New York Times poll, carried out less than ten days before the war began, found that the public was almost evenly split over what the US should do after the January 15 deadline. Forty-six percent answered that the US should initiate military action, while 47% answered that the US should wait longer for the sanctions to work.526

Bush also found that his move to seek an offensive option led to the dissolution of the bipartisan congressional support he had enjoyed thus far, as Democrats began to speak out against war.527 The first group of critics were those who supported the “long siege” approach and did not believe that American interests in the Gulf merited waging war. The second group consisted of those who simply favored giving the sanctions more time to work before resorting to the military option.528 Both of these groups expressed their concerns at the hearings in late November and early December. Even the congressional vote to authorize the use of force did not signify that Bush had finished building support for war. As one observer noted of the House and Senate, “They gave Mr. Bush the benefit of the doubt, but they could express no profound national commitment.”529 Bush thus had to continue searching for support once the war began.

The second major political interest Bush had was calming public fears of war and quelling doubts about whether the prize was worth the cost in casualties. Fears of getting into another drawn out and costly war brought endless references in the media to Vietnam. Through the media, the public heard military experts expound on Iraq’s battle-tested troops, its chemical weapons, its rigorous efforts to dig in deeper defensively, and

on the costs and dangers of a ground war.530 Unsurprisingly then, when polled, a majority expected that the war would last months and that the US would suffer thousands of casualties. Worse for Bush, surveys revealed the predictable fact that those who expected a longer war were less likely to support using force.531 Among those who did not favor using force, the prospect of casualties was predictably even less appetizing.532 The fact that such a large proportion of the public before the war in fact did not favor war prompted observers to predict that anything more than a short and decisive military action would erode what support Bush did have.533 This could not have cheered Bush, particularly in light of the fact that Cheney and Powell had received a classified briefing from medical officers anticipating a worst-case of 20,000 casualties, including 7,000 dead.534 Bush thus faced the necessity of convincing the public that come what might during war, the US was right to persevere. At a meeting with Bush, Senator Cohen (D-Maine) voiced this problem, “Mr. President, there is a photograph in the New York Times this morning showing a Marine being helped by his comrades. I don’t have to quote Shakespeare for us to see that if this Marine had been felled by a bullet and not the sun, there would be a wholly different reaction in this country.”535

The third requirement for Bush was to reap a political victory from the military victory he and his advisers anticipated. Though the victory might come quickly enough,


534 Woodward, The Commanders, p. 33

535 Quoted in Woodward, The Commanders, p. 272

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making sure that the action was a political success demanded that the various audiences at home be satisfied with both how the war was waged and the outcome. Before January 15 and throughout the war, commentators discussed at length the potential pitfalls for Bush in launching Desert Storm. During congressional hearings several testified about their concern over the long term impact of a military victory over Iraq. If, for example, the US spawned anti-Americanism by killing too many Iraqis, especially civilians, its ability to play a role in the Middle East could be damaged for years to come. Further, some argued that destroying Iraq’s economic infrastructure and its military forces would cause instability in the region by encouraging other powers such as Syria and Iran to exert their influence in Iraq’s absence.

More important than Iraqi casualties for Bush, however, would be American casualties. With the public divided on war, Bush could not afford to have people arguing that Desert Storm had turned into another Vietnam war—long, indecisive, and with mounting casualties. Bush needed to portray the war as a bold stroke, carried out effectively and by a military given full rein to win the war quickly. Bush would face further difficulties in claiming victory as the war approached its finale. Though the UN resolution only dictated ejecting Iraq from Kuwait, the public expected more, as did scholars and other observers. Ridding Iraq of its nuclear potential, overthrowing Saddam Hussein, and preserving the stability of Middle East all became yardsticks to which Bush’s actions would be measured, fairly or not. This forced Bush to pay close attention to how to turn success on the battlefield into political victory.

Underlying all these concerns was the fact that Bush had staked his presidency and his future on the outcome of the crisis. Speculation on Bush’s fortunes began immediately after his dispatch of US forces to Saudi Arabia in August, and escalated in


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intensity throughout the war. Though a president might be able to weather a failed Grenada or Panama-size operation, by sending over 400,000 troops to the Gulf and by pushing hard for a decisive resolution to the crisis, most observers felt that Bush had to secure victory or face political oblivion. To make matters worse, Bush also faced difficult times on the domestic front, and had little to fall back on should he fail to make good in the Gulf. As one observer put it, "A bungled war, too long or too costly or both, could make him a one-term President." On the up side, if Bush managed to pull off a big success, his place in history would be assured and his near-term political future considerably enhanced.

The Bush Administration and the Press in Desert Shield/Desert Storm

As in Grenada and Panama, the five trends which have transformed the government/press relationship since Vietnam encouraged the Bush Administration to use the media to serve its political interests. The press played a larger role in politics and the policy making process during Desert Shield/Desert Storm than ever before in war, making it imperative for the Bush Administration to influence press coverage when possible to ensure support for its actions. The media's importance stemmed from several factors. The sheer number of journalists covering the crisis in both the US and the Gulf (not to mention other foreign capitals) meant that the press covered every aspect of crisis and picked up on every maneuver and decision, analyzing it and picking it apart. News

538 Bush had to deal with economic recession, his own lack of a domestic agenda, and with the consequences of breaking his "read my lips" pledge by agreeing with Congress to raise taxes in October. See, for example, Tom Wicker, "Bush's Double Gamble," New York Times, August 13, 1990; and Robin Toner, "Chill Factors," New York Times, December 23, 1990


flew instantly from one capital to another where its impact was felt immediately, demanding a quick response. With the whole world watching, every leader, especially Bush, had to choose his words carefully. Bush had to speak to both domestic and foreign audiences, attempting to reassure allies, dampen criticism from critics, intimidate Saddam Hussein into capitulating, and increase his popular support all at one press conference. Press coverage became even more critical in administration eyes because of the vast audiences tuning in to television to get news of the crisis and later the war’s progress. It is one thing to wage a policy debate in private, or when it only shows up on the inside pages of the newspaper. But polls revealed that most of America was glued to the television set for war news. Bush’s announcement of war to the nation on January 16 was watched by the largest American audience in history, over 120 million people tuned in.541 This intense scrutiny of every Bush word and deed raised the stakes for the administration to influence news coverage. For all these reasons, the Bush Administration found it imperative to think strategically about the media in an attempt to ensure positive responses from the large audiences both at home and abroad.

The adversarial nature of the government/press relationship also made managing both news from Washington and from the battlefield important to the administration. Administration officials had little confidence that the press would give Bush the benefit of the doubt in assessing his actions, as their decisions to restrict the press during Just Cause had already made clear. They knew that the press would jump on administration mistakes, point out its weaknesses, and challenge the rationales behind every action. Bush officials must have also feared that the relationship between the administration and the press had suffered during Just Cause as a result of press policy there.

The lack of consensus in Congress and the division in public over the wisdom of Bush’s Gulf policy further encouraged the administration to make strenuous efforts to

dominate the news agenda. Few would have challenged a strong US response had the Iraqi invasion been bankrolled and supported by the Soviet Union ten years earlier. But in the foreign policy climate of 1990-91, it was not clear to many that the situation demanded the loss of American lives. Without the Cold War or even the “Americans in Danger” theme to frame the crisis, the administration needed to work harder through the media to convince both public and Congress that the use of military force was necessary in January. And because the rationales the administration did use were less familiar to the public, and less persuasive, than containing communism or protecting American lives, the administration was forced to repeat them more frequently, and to defend their legitimacy in the face of criticism from other political leaders and foreign policy experts.

The explosion of media technologies represented the fourth trend influencing administration press relations during Desert Shield/Storm. Satellite phones and fly-away satellite dishes, cellular phones, e-mail, and fax machines brought frightening possibilities of live television coverage from Baghdad and near instantaneous print reports from the front. The potential lack of control over images and news emanating from the desert encouraged the Administration to make sure that correspondents never got the opportunity to deploy these technologies when they could endanger administration political interests. As it was, even the immediacy of restricted press coverage forced day-to-day responses from the administration to press coverage. An entire news cycle, for example, was taken up in analysis and administration response to the film footage of the US bombing of an air raid shelter in Baghdad which killed several hundred civilians. Critics of the war were given powerful ammunition to question military tactics—hadn’t the administration been boasting of a humane air campaign with precision targeting and without civilian casualties? Had television not been there and reported the vivid news so quickly, it is unlikely that such a frenzy would have occurred, and the Administration would not have faced such intense questioning of its aims and actions. It was this power that the administration thus sought to curb.
Finally, the White House’s reliance on public relations as a basic tool of governing during peacetime intensified during crisis and war. As presidential political incentives intensify, so do White House efforts to influence, and control when possible, the press and its coverage of administration actions. Thus, in the Gulf War, a president already steeped in the art of managing the news to steer a course through political seas turned again to his public relations tactics to gain advantage over his foes and critics, and to claim victory in the end. Moreover, the reliance on such a strategy also led the administration to the conclusion that their public relations efforts would be strengthened by tight control over the press in Saudi Arabia. With less information and less television coverage of the war, the media would not be able to disrupt the administration’s messages to the public. Tough talk in Washington was thus matched with tough press curbs in the Persian Gulf.

Administration Public Relations in Desert Shield/Desert Storm

The administration’s public relations efforts revolved around its political interests. Throughout the crisis phase before war broke out, the administration spent a great deal of time trying to justify first a strong response and then the use of force to eject Iraq from Kuwait. As war grew closer and public fears heightened, the administration attempted to simultaneously dispel thoughts about the costs of war, to illustrate dramatically that the benefits of war would be high, and that war was necessary if Iraq did not withdraw by January 15. Once the war had begun, these efforts continued, especially those aimed at ensuring the public did not find out what the war actually looked like up close. To buttress all of its wartime public relations maneuvers, the administration played the lead role in limiting the media’s access to the battlefield. Limiting the extent of news gathered from the front lines fed right into the Bush Administrations attempts to win a decisive political victory in the Gulf. By limiting and controlling media movement in the desert,
the administration was able to maintain its monopoly over newsworthy information, and to release it to suit Bush’s political interests.

Building Public Support and Justifying War

Bush’s strong response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait drew equally strong support from both the American public and political elites. Though committing US forces abroad usually demands overcoming at least moderate political and public resistance, going by invitation to the defense of a threatened nation proved an easy sell. In fact, in the opening weeks of the crisis Bush spent less time explaining of the rationale behind his decision to send troops to the Gulf than he did condemning Iraq’s actions and demonizing Saddam Hussein, comparing him repeatedly with Adolf Hitler.\footnote{\textit{\textsuperscript{542}}} Without providing many details, Bush and his officials relied on broad assertions that Saudi Arabia and the Gulf were a vital US interest:

- Our jobs, our way of life, our own freedom and the freedom of friendly countries around the world would all suffer if control of the world’s great oil reserves fell into the hands of Saddam Hussein.\footnote{\textit{\textsuperscript{543}}}

- What is at stake here is truly significant—the dependability of America’s commitments to its friends and allies, the shape of the post-postwar world, opposition to aggression, the potential domination of the energy resources that are crucial to the entire world.\footnote{\textit{\textsuperscript{544}}}

- If might is to make right, then the world will be plunged into a new dark age.\footnote{\textit{\textsuperscript{545}}}


Until he revealed in early November that he would send additional troops to the Gulf to seek an offensive military capability, Bush received fairly stable support for his handling of the crisis. Faced with few critics, there was no need to be more specific about why US troops were digging in the desert, especially because it seemed unlikely that the US would actually have to engage Iraq militarily after all. As a result the administration had little trouble dominating the news with its interpretation of events and securing approval for its actions. As Bush fashioned the international coalition which would confront Iraq and as his administration worked to get the UN Security Council to pass resolutions condemning the invasion and instituting economic sanctions against Iraq, the administration was able to portray each of its maneuvers as well-planned next steps in the crisis, with little complaint from domestic critics reaching the front pages.

It was not until after the November 8 announcement of the troop increase that Bush faced serious questioning of his policies. Administration officials until that point had gone to great lengths to counsel patience and to show their confidence that economic sanctions would eventually force Iraq to back down. The abrupt turnaround sparked serious debate. Both Congress and the public demanded more detailed justification of why a force of 500,000 should risk thousands of casualties to free Kuwait. Why did Bush seem to be rushing to war rather than giving sanctions the time he had argued they should


548 Andrew Rosenthal, “Baker Warns US To Have Patience On Iraq Embargo,” New York Times, September 6, 1990; The most detailed set of arguments made by the administration about why the embargo strategy would work eventually was recorded in Andrew Rosenthal, “Strategy: Embargo,” New York Times, August 9, 1990. It is worth noting that the administration never made explicit later why these arguments were no longer valid.
be allowed? The administration did not make plans to elaborate on the decision over the weekend after the announcement, and the media picked up instead on the voices of doubt and dissent, particularly from democrats in Congress. Colin Powell, for one, felt that the media was being alarmist about Bush’s move, but worried that journalists and not administration officials, were now defining the debate for the public.

As public fears and congressional doubts escalated, Bush Administration officials knew that they were facing a serious public relations challenge. White House pollster Robert Teeter had complained to Bush throughout October that there were too many arguments floating around about why the US was in the Gulf. And none of Bush’s inner circle—Scowcroft, Cheney, or Baker—felt that the administration had done enough to convince the American people that they were on the right track. As a result the administration began a two pronged effort to find a rationale for war that the public would approve and to quell fears that Bush was rushing towards a costly war.

The administration’s initial efforts met with criticism and failed to elicit much public support for switching from a “defend and contain” policy to a policy of war. A week after the November 8 announcement, a New York Times analysis could still argue that “More than three months after the Persian Gulf crisis began, the Bush Administration still seems to be seeking a rationale to convince the American public of the need to commit

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550 Woodward, The Commanders, p. 311

551 Woodward, The Commanders, pp. 300-315
hundreds of thousands of troops for a possible war to free Kuwait from Iraq.”552 A Times editorial added that “a growing number of Americans question the President’s haste.”553

Worse for the administration, observers likened its public relations efforts to campaign tactics, with officials looking for the hot issue which would trigger a favorable public response without worrying about principle.554 Secretary of State James Baker made the first attempt to drum up public support by invoking the troubled US economy. “It’s not about oil,” Baker said, “If you want to sum it up in one word, it’s jobs.”555 If Iraq controlled the world’s oil supply, he argued, Western economies would suffer drastically and the average American worker’s livelihood would be at risk. Baker’s plea, however, was widely interpreted as a cynical ploy to gain public support, rather than as an elucidation of the administration’s thinking about America’s vital interests.

By November 20, opinion polls had revealed both the problem with administration efforts to date and a partial solution. A New York Times/CBS News poll found that majorities of the public felt that neither the defense of Saudi Arabia, nor the restoration of the Kuwaiti government, nor defense of the world’s oil supply was a good enough reason to launch war against Iraq. These had, of course been the bulwarks of the administration’s rationale, though they had been given dressier slogans like “stopping aggression” and creating a “New World Order.” However, the polls also found, to the surprise of most observers including the administration, that a majority of the public did believe that making sure Saddam Hussein could not develop nuclear weapons was a good


553 New York Times, “What’s Wrong With the Siege?” November 18, 1990; See also another editorial, “A Weak Case for War in the Gulf,” December 2, 1990


enough reason to go to war. The Bush Administration, watching the polls like a hawk (and conducting its own as well), pounced on the nuclear rationale and immediately began to incorporate it into its public relations efforts.\textsuperscript{556}

Sticking with its initial and fairly vague reasons for action in the Gulf, the administration attempted to sway the public towards war by arguing that waiting for sanctions to take effect could give Iraq time to develop a crude nuclear device. President Bush put the new spin into a Thanksgiving Day speech to the troops in Saudi Arabia clearly designed for maximum public relations impact.\textsuperscript{557} Bush sounded a threatening tone towards Iraq and restated the administration’s reasons for reversing Iraqi aggression:

> And on this day, with all that America has to be thankful for, it is fair for Americans to say, Why are we here? It’s not all that complicated. There are three key reasons why we’re here with our UN allies making a stand in defense of freedom. We’re here to protect freedom (some aggression), we’re here to protect our future (oil), and we’re here to protect innocent life (atrocities against Kuwaitis, hostages). (my italics)

Then he played the nuclear card:

> And let me say this, those who would measure...the timetable for Saddam’s atomic program in years may be seriously underestimating the reality of that situation and the gravity of the threat. Every day that passes brings Saddam one step closer to realizing his goal of a nuclear arsenal. And that’s why, more and more, your mission is marked by a real sense of urgency...He has never possessed a weapon that he didn’t use.\textsuperscript{558}

To counter questions raised by the administration’s earlier predictions that Iraq was five to ten years away from building a nuclear weapon, both Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney and National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft followed Bush’s speech


\textsuperscript{558} \textit{New York Times}, “Excerpts From Speech By Bush at Marine Post,” November 26, 1990. I have added the italics to give the reader the more common phrases Bush used to label these reasons. I have not read anything into Bush’s statements, he makes them quite clear later in his speech.
with public appearances during which they referred to intelligence estimates suggesting that Iraq was much closer to acquiring nuclear weapons than was widely assumed. It was possible, they said, that Iraq might be able to develop a crude weapon within a year.\footnote{Michael R. Gordon, “US Aides Press Iraqi Nuclear Threat,” \emph{New York Times}, November 26, 1990; Malcolm W. Browne of the \emph{Times} had done a thorough job of reporting the Iraqi nuclear threat and Western experts’ best estimates of how far off an Iraqi bomb might be. The answer was five to ten years, just as the Bush Administration had earlier argued. See Browne, “Iraq Could Have Atomic Arsenal By 2000, Intelligence Experts Say,” \emph{New York Times}, November 18, 1990. The Bush Administration, it seems, was merely choosing to rely solely on the most dire predictions available, rather than on the bulk of available intelligence.}

After securing the UN deadline for Iraq’s withdrawal in late November, the Bush Administration focused on stepping up the sense of urgency first evoked by the nuclear threat. Vice President Quayle argued that delaying would only strengthen Iraq’s grip on Kuwait and cost greater numbers of American casualties once a war did begin.\footnote{Michael R. Gordon, “Quayle Says Delaying War Would Increase Risks,” \emph{New York Times}, November 30, 1990.} Bush argued that a long stalemate would weaken the economies of developing nations, would give Iraq a free hand to devastate Kuwaiti society, and prolong the suffering of those being held hostage in Iraq. Bush made particular efforts to stress reports of Iraqi atrocities against Kuwaitis.\footnote{\emph{New York Times}, “Excerpts From the President’s News Conference on Crisis in Gulf,” December 1, 1990; Judith Miller, “Atrocities by Iraqis in Kuwait: Numbers Are Hard to Verify,” \emph{New York Times}, December 16, 1990. Bush had plenty of help in publicizing reports of Iraq’s pillaging of Kuwait. A committee of influential Kuwaiti citizens living in the United States hired the top flight Washington DC public relations firm, Hill and Knowlton, to take their case to the American people. According to John MacArthur, Hill and Knowlton, together with the Kuwaitis, manufactured false reports to create American support for Kuwait’s plight. See MacArthur, \emph{Second Front}, pp. 37-77; also Jarol B. Manheim, “Strategic Public Diplomacy: Managing Kuwait’s Image During the Gulf Conflict,” in Bennett and Paletz, eds., \emph{Taken by Storm}, pp. 131-148} Administration officials also began to question publicly the efficacy of sanctions.\footnote{Clifford Kraus, “Can the Sanctions Work? Many Aides Are Doubtful,” \emph{New York Times}, November 25, 1990; US News and World Report, \emph{Triumph Without Victory}, pp. 150-151} At the Senate Armed Services Committee hearings on the Gulf crisis, Secretary of Defense Cheney made clear that the administration was not prepared to hold its breath for sanctions to work past the UN deadline, both because
sanctions did not seem likely to work and because the longer the crisis dragged on, the weaker would be the coalition facing Iraq.\textsuperscript{563}

Having restated its arguments \textit{for war} throughout November, the administration spent December and early January before the UN deadline trying to make clear that they had done everything they could to \textit{avoid war}.\textsuperscript{564} The desire to show that he had not simply rushed to war prompted Bush to send James Baker to Iraq to talk with Hussein. The administration announced widely that it was "going the extra mile for peace." But privately administration officials acknowledged that the mission was largely aimed at the American audience. It the mission somehow produced an Iraqi withdrawal, the administration could claim victory without bloodshed. But if the mission failed, as expected, it would show Americans that nothing short of war could have dislodged Saddam Hussein.\textsuperscript{565} As it turned out, the public did support the mission even though it proved fruitless, as Bush and Baker emphasized that the result proved Iraq's unwillingness to back down peacefully.\textsuperscript{566}

Armed with congressional approval and with what it believed to be firm, if somewhat divided public support, the Bush Administration launched the war against Iraq. From the Oval Office, Bush announced that the "liberation of Kuwait" had begun. With 120 million Americans watching, Bush took the unparalleled opportunity to spell out his reasoning and objectives one more time. He laid responsibility for the war firmly on

\textsuperscript{563} Michael R. Gordon, "Cheney Sees Need To Act Militarily Against The Iraqis," \textit{New York Times}, December 4, 1990


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Saddam Hussein's shoulders. He rebutted Vietnam analogies, pronounced the sanctions ineffective, and argued that waiting only increased the final price of the crisis. For the first time, Bush also made explicit the goal of knocking out Iraq's nuclear and chemical weapons facilities. As the war progressed, Bush would take every opportunity to further justify military action against Saddam Hussein, emphasizing, for example, Hussein's decision to light Kuwaiti oil fields on fire and his treatment of Allied POW's.

Quelling War Fears

Bush Administration officials tried to downplay the costs of war even as they outlined its benefits. As the polls reflected mounting fear of war after November 8, officials attempted to play down the Vietnam analogy, to de-emphasize the plight of the hostages, and to reassure the public that everything possible would be done to keep casualties to a minimum. While the administration could not eliminate these fears—it was a war after all—it was successful in gradually convincing the public before the war that it would not be a long one and that the US would certainly emerge victorious. Moreover, the administration took great pains to ensure that as little as possible appear in the media that could inflame concerns over casualties. This effort was quite successful; very little appeared in the media revealing the human cost of the war for America.

President Bush had taken the lead in damping Vietnam analogies since the early days of the crisis, stating again and again that there would not be a repeat of that war. Despite this, anxiety over parallels with Vietnam persisted and heightened as the administration stepped up the pressure against Iraq. A November 14 Los Angeles Times


poll found, for example, that 62% of the public felt that it was either “somewhat likely” or “very likely” that the US would end up in a Vietnam-type situation.\textsuperscript{569} At a press conference in December Bush tried once more to skewer the specter of Vietnam that had cropped up so often in the media:

In our country, I know that there are fears about another Vietnam. Let me assure you: should military action be required, this will not be another Vietnam; this will not be a protracted, drawn-out war... we will not permit our troops to have their hands tied behind their backs, and I pledge to you there will not be any murky ending.\textsuperscript{570}

Bush’s efforts seem to have paid off. By early January the percentage who felt that a Vietnam repeat was likely had dropped about fifteen points. But it was not until a week into the air war that an overwhelming majority finally believed that the Gulf War would be different.\textsuperscript{571}

Along with Vietnam, the Bush Administration had to deal with the problem of hostages. If the public became too obsessed with their safety, Iraq could gain a lever over US policy and make it difficult for Bush to manage the crisis effectively and achieve Iraq’s withdrawal from Kuwait.\textsuperscript{572} As a result Bush officials tried to keep the hostage issue on the backburner, seldom referring to them, even after they had been moved to Iraqi military installations as a deterrent to US attack. More importantly, Bush made clear from the start that he would not put the hostages ahead of larger US interests in the Gulf, arguing that “America will not be intimidated” by Iraqi threats to the hostages.\textsuperscript{573}

\textsuperscript{569} Mueller, \textit{Policy and Opinion}, p. 304

\textsuperscript{570} \textit{New York Times}, “Excerpts From President’s News Conference on Crisis in Gulf,” December 1, 1990

\textsuperscript{571} Mueller, \textit{Policy and Opinion}, p. 305


Instead of searching for a solution to the plight of the hostages, Bush used Iraq’s abuses as an opportunity to emphasize the reasons why the world was united against Iraq. When Hussein finally freed the hostages in December, media observers gave Bush credit for successfully defusing a potentially crippling issue.574

Finally, Americans worried that a war with Iraq would be a long and costly one. This was not surprising given the deluge of dire predictions heard from both American military experts and from Saddam Hussein himself. The “mother of all battles” was not expected to be cheap.575 Polls showed that on the eve of war, a majority believed that war with Iraq would last months, not weeks, and most believed that thousands of American casualties would result.576

There was little the Bush Administration could do to convince the public that the war would be short and relatively painless, especially because officials themselves believed that high numbers of casualties were quite possible. As a result, administration officials simply did not discuss the war much beforehand, and in fact the made a point throughout the air war to stress that they were not as yet contemplating a ground war, even after it had become obvious it would have to start soon.577 All Bush could do was promise repeatedly that the troops would have the full weight of US military technology and support behind them and that the military would go to every length to avoid US


576 48% thought that the US would suffer more than 5,000 casualties. See Andrew Rosenthal, “American’s Don’t Expect Short War,” New York Times, January 15, 1991; for complete poll data of public expectations, see Mueller, Policy and Opinion, pp. 306-307

And in case anyone was upset by the prospect of Iraqi civilian casualties caused by Allied bombing, Bush attempted to reassure them: "I would be remiss if I didn’t assure the American people that this war is being fought with high technology. There is no targeting of civilians."

The Bush Administration and Military Public Affairs in Desert Shield/Storm

Critical to the success of the administration’s public relations on the home front during the war was control of the media, information, and the news from the battlefield. Most observers, especially journalists, continue to argue that the military and its lingering unhappiness with the press from Vietnam led to the restrictive system for dealing with the press in the Gulf War. It should be clear from previous chapters, however, that Vietnam’s influence over military public affairs has been greatly exaggerated. The lessons of Grenada and Panama, in fact, weighed much more heavily on both military and media actions throughout Desert Storm. And though the military played a key role in implementing press restrictions in the Gulf, three sets of actions reveal that the Bush Administration, not the military, bears primary responsibility for press policies in the Persian Gulf. First, civilian officials were in fact the chief architects of the policies and maintained strict oversight of the military’s dealings with the press throughout the conflict. Second, Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney and Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs) Pete Williams provided the political cover which allowed the government to plot press curbs without letting news organizations know what was


580 The list of journalists and other commentators who have made this argument is too long to list because of the near-unanimity on this point. See Chapter One for a lengthy list.
coming. And third, the White House used the information monopoly which resulted from the press curbs to bolster its public relations efforts, incorporating the military into its attempts to build public support for the war and to claim a brilliant success when it was over.

1. Devising the System

After a discussion among senior Bush officials of past military operations in which the government had handled the press poorly, President Bush gave Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney primary responsibility for devising the military's public affairs system in the Gulf. According to Cheney, two broad principles guided the planning: First, military needs should outweigh the media's "rights" to cover the war. This meant that ensuring operational security and military convenience would be placed above ensuring press access to the battlefield and information. Second, the government must at all costs maintain its credibility with the public, which meant, in Cheney's words, "...don't get out there making claims you can't back up." 581 Cheney and other top officials also argued that the policies were necessary to preserve operational security in an environment where communications technology allowed information to spread worldwide almost instantly. As Colin Powell noted, "[If a commander] in Desert Shield sat around in his tent and mused with a few CNN guys and pool guys and other guys, it's in 105 capitals a minute later." 582


582  Jason DeParle, 'Long Series of Military Decisions Led to Gulf War News Censorship," New York Times, May 5, 1991. DeParle's two-part work on the Gulf press system is a critical document in tracing how that system came about. Interestingly, however, the title of this article does not match its contents. The most pertinent fact in the article is the fact that civilian officials had such influence on military public affairs policy. Also of note is the fact that DeParle bolsters the Vietnam hypothesis in several points, even while furnishing information which serves to minimize its importance. This is a result, I believe, of journalism's long reliance on the Vietnam hypothesis to explain military behavior and policy.
What Cheney has not revealed in postwar interviews, however, are the motives that lay behind the press system and what officials hoped to accomplish by instituting a restrictive public affairs system in the Gulf. Arguing that military needs took precedence in planning over journalists’ rights allows an official to cover his actions under the rubric of national security. Touchier to discuss is the more accurate observation that the Gulf public affairs system placed political needs above journalists' rights. A public affairs system that controlled access and information in the Gulf would help the administration sell its messages to the public more efficiently, unsullied by the media chatter that would be produced by hundreds of journalists running free in the desert. And more important, of course, a restrictive press system would mean that Bush would not be so likely to face televised pictures of “the down and dirty side of war,” as television critic Walter Goodman has called it. With the media bottled up, no one could challenge the administration or the military on how the war was going, and so forth. The public, with only the administration and military to give it the bulk of the news, would thus be more likely to accept administration views and public opinion would thus be more favorable to the war, allowing Bush to silence critics and claim credit for a resounding victory.

Public affairs planning began immediately after Bush dispatched troops to Saudi Arabia. It continued throughout Desert Shield, incrementally building to its final form. Cheney delegated most of the legwork to Pete Williams and gave Powell and Schwarzkopf the opportunity to offer their input on many of the critical decisions regarding press matters, though both he and the White House maintained oversight of press policies, intervening when they felt it necessary.583

The first military planning document to deal with the media in Desert Shield was drawn up on August 14 by Captain Ron Wildermuth, USN. This memo, entitled Annex Foxtrot to denote that it dealt with public affairs, was based on a series of missives from

583 DeParle, "Long Series,"

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Cheney and Williams. Remarkably, this memo, which provided much of the basic form for Desert Storm arrangements remained unaltered in its essentials throughout the crisis. At that early date, it was ordered that journalists would be escorted by military officers at all times and that their copy would undergo security review. Thus, only days into the crisis, plans for restricting press access to the battlefield and to negative information proceeded apace. The fact that Wildermuth’s early memo so closely matched eventual policy suggests that there was indeed already a high degree of civilian unity on its central tenets before it was drafted. And given the White House’s willingness to manage military public affairs during the crisis, it seems very unlikely that Wildermuth’s memo would have emerged so unscathed had it not reflected administration desires. Cheney’s two guiding principles, indeed, fit nicely with Wildermuth’s memo, for the press policy in the Gulf certainly placed the military’s needs above those of journalists,’ and allowed the government to control its public image and credibility because of the information monopoly the press policy guaranteed the White House.

Civilian officials continued to play a central role in shaping military public affairs policy throughout Desert Shield, and in particular in shaping the arrangements for the media should the crisis escalate into war. Adding to Annex Foxtrot’s restrictions, both Cheney and Williams made clear in interviews and in their own writing that the decision to limit battlefield coverage to pools was approved by civilian officials in the fall of 1990 as it became more clear that war was in the offing and that a media circus was going to be there to cover it. Administration officials defended the need for pools as the only

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585 Cheney noted in his interim report to Congress on the conduct of the war that a public affairs team visited Saudi Arabia on October 6 and determined that given the likely nature of a war, open coverage of combat by journalists would be impractical, at least initially. The report was reprinted in US Congress, Senate, Committee on Governmental Affairs, hearing, Pentagon Rules on Media Access to the Persian Gulf
practical way to deal with the huge volume of media people. As Cheney argued, "There’s a huge gaggle of reporters out there, and the press has absolutely no capacity to police itself. There was no way we were ever going to put 100 percent of the reporters who wanted to go cover the war out with the troops." 586 Williams echoed this tone in a postwar assessment of press policy: "The US and international press corps went from zero on 2 August, to 17 on the first pool, to 800 by December, and to nearly 1400 just before the ground war started. Most of the reporters, the good ones anyway, wanted to be out where the action is. But with hundreds of fiercely independent reporters seeking to join up with combat units, we concluded that when the combat started, we’d have no choice but to rely on pools." 587

2. Providing Cover

Both the administration and the military knew that escorts, security review, and press pools would not sit well with the media. Had the military simply announced its public affairs policy in the form it ultimately took, the press might well have protested long and loud enough to force changes. It was thus necessary to craft the policy in secret, to let the details out slowly, and to act obliging when news organizations complained about the restrictions so that their protests would never reach the critical pitch that might force an embarrassing about face of policy. The job of providing this cover for the press policy fell to Pete Williams.

Williams’ first task was to reassure media chiefs in Washington that they would be able to get enough reporters into Saudi Arabia to cover fighting if it broke out, and that they would not have to operate under onerous Saudi-driven restrictions. Saudi Arabia is

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586 DeParle, "Long Series;"

an extremely closed society, and before the crisis did not even allow journalists to station themselves there. The Saudis were concerned at the outbreak of the crisis that they would be flooded with journalists from the US and other Western countries who would stir up trouble in their conservative, religious nation. Pentagon officials at first used this discomfort to explain both why the press pool had not been immediately activated to accompany the deployment and the restrictions placed on the pool once it finally did arrive on August 13. Cheney claimed at a press conference, "Saudi Arabia's a sovereign nation. They have their own rules and regulations and requirements and they establish the ground rules under which people have access to cover activities inside the kingdom. That's not something that we have control over." Later, Cheney noted that "what you [a journalist] mean by free and unrestricted reporting might be different than what the Saudis think is free and unrestricted. . . . I think we have to respect their culture, just as they respect ours. . . . In the final analysis, they'll make the decision, but obviously we will be advocates for the concept that there should be significant coverage of US forces in Saudi Arabia available to the American people."  

On August 22, several news organizations, upset with the restrictions on the pool, and with the fact that the Saudis would not issue more visas for additional journalists to enter Saudi Arabia to report the American build-up, faxed Bush at his vacation home in Kennebunkport to demand help in getting the Saudis to loosen up. On October 9, Michael Getler, an editor at the Washington Post, wrote to tell Pete Williams that if fighting broke out, that American news organizations would need to send many more


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journalists and other personnel to the Gulf to be able to cover the war effectively. Getler and others worried that the Saudis would close their commercial airspace once the war started and they would have no way to get their reporters in to cover the story.\textsuperscript{591}

Williams moved quickly to stem the rising media fears. Of course, the restrictions on the pool had already been articulated secretly in Wildermuth's Annex Foxrot, but Pentagon officials found it more convenient not to mention this. Instead, Williams met with thirteen bureau chiefs from the major news organizations on October 25 to offer them enough concessions to convince them that the Pentagon and the administration were on their side. Williams acceded without hesitation to Getler's request that a military transport plane be provided to take additional media personnel to the Gulf in the event of war. He also assured them that the appropriate visas would be made available to their people at that time.\textsuperscript{592} Williams also used the meeting to let the news chiefs know how press policy was shaping up. He made only vague references to pool coverage, and reassured his audience that pools in no way precluded independent coverage. He also noted that the Pentagon was not considering censorship. Williams made no mention, of course, of Annex Foxrot. By providing access to Saudi Arabia, clearly the news organizations number one concern, Williams had forestalled debate over exactly how journalists would do their jobs once they got there. By all accounts, the news chiefs left the meeting believing that Williams' intentions were benign, and without any clue of how press policy would ultimately restrict their operations. And, as John MacArthur argued, "In any event, Pete Williams had more candy in his suitcase; there would be more come-ons, more enticements, more rewards, more obfuscation, and, of course, more meetings and memoranda."\textsuperscript{593}

\textsuperscript{591} MacArthur, \textit{Second Front}, pp. 13-14

\textsuperscript{592} MacArthur, \textit{Second Front}, pp. 16-20

\textsuperscript{593} MacArthur, \textit{Second Front}, p. 24
Then on December 14 Williams dropped the first bomb on the media, issuing a memorandum to news organizations which spelled out the press ground rules in the event of hostilities:

All interviews with service members will be on the record. Security at the source is the policy. In the event of hostilities, media products will be subject to security review prior to release. . . You must remain with your military escort at all times, until released, and follow instructions regarding your activities. These instructions are intended only to facilitate troop movement, ensure safety, and maintain operational security.  

Williams elaborated on the ground rules, noting that the Pentagon's press plan would be a three-phased affair and that pool would be the primary method used to cover the war. First, two eighteen-member pools would be formed and would practice deploying with the troops while covering the crisis. Second, once war looked imminent, the pools would either be deployed forward with the troops or positioned such that they could move forward as soon as possible. Only in phase three would the pools disband and open coverage begin. And even in phase three, the memo stated, reporters would continue to operate under a public affairs escort.

In their two previous meetings, Williams had not revealed that pools would play the unprecedented role of prime vehicle for press access to the battlefield. Nor had he ever mentioned the concept of "security review." Williams had in fact given the press the opposite impression: that he was working to ensure journalists' freedom of movement and that there would be no censorship of media reports. To reassure any who might have been upset by the memo, Williams reiterated the Pentagon's offer of a C-141 transport aircraft to take journalists to Saudi Arabia and also made sure to call for media comments and questions about the draft, suggesting that revision was possible. Williams gave the

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594 Williams' December 14, 1990 Memorandum to bureau chiefs, reprinted in *Pentagon Rules on Media Access*, p. 559

595 *Pentagon Rules on Media Access*, p. 558
press the impression that the Pentagon and the media organizations were negotiating, when in fact they were not. Cheney’s original edicts and the secret Annex Foxtrot continued to guide public affairs planning. Williams was simply staving off media outrage until it was too late to produce results. With some help from the fact that the media cared more about getting a spot in a pool than what the pool would see and report, Williams succeeded.\footnote{MacArthur, Second Front, pp. 26-29}

A final meeting between Williams and roughly fifty media executives took place on January 4, as the UN deadline loomed and war seemed inevitable. Though the executives were unhappy with the current ground rules and guidelines, Williams was not there to negotiate. Despite his assurances that he welcomed comments, he did not offer to amend the offending restrictions. It was only in the wake of this meeting that news executives finally realized they were not part of the public affairs planning process, despite their numerous meetings with Williams. The January 4 meeting produced another Williams memorandum which made clear that escorts, pools, and security review were there to stay.\footnote{Williams January 7 Memorandum to Bureau Chiefs, Pentagon Rules on Media Access, pp. 577-581; Neil A. Lewis, “Pentagon Adopts Gulf News Rules,” New York Times, January 10, 1991; MacArthur, Second Front, pp. 29-36} In a final memo a week later Williams thanked the press corps for its comments, said he understood their concerns, and announced that the public affairs plan had been put into effect without major changes from the January 4 meeting.\footnote{Williams’ January 15 Memorandum to Bureau Chiefs, Pentagon Rules on Media Access, pp. 636-638} A day later the air war started; it was too late for the press to undo the Pentagon’s planning. In their rush to get their people to the Gulf and into pools, the only way they could count on being able to report at least some of the action—their number one goal after all—they had been forced to comply with the Pentagon’s rules and guidelines before fully realizing the impact they would have. And once the war was underway, complaining about the arrangements had
to take a second place to the difficult task of simply covering breaking events in a complex environment. Williams' thorough job of stringing the media along throughout the fall was thus critical in paving the way for strict government control of the press in the desert.

3. From Press Controls to Public Relations Coups

The Bush Administration did not simply restrict the press to make journalists unhappy (though that may have been a pleasant bonus), but rather took advantage of the fact that the press was hobbled by the restrictions to aid its public relations efforts. As the Washington Post's Ann Devroy reported:

The day after the United States went to war against Iraq, the White House press secretary Marlin Fitzwater put in place a communications system aimed at presenting the administration's view of the day's developments in a series of daily briefings, coordinated beforehand by phone, that would progress from the battlefield, to the Pentagon, to the White House and State Department.599

Under normal peacetime conditions, White Houses now consider the creation of a "line of the day" and the system to propagate it a routine necessity. The reasoning behind such a system is clear. Discrepancies in statements or policy disagreements among departments could divert the media's focus from administration successes and official messages and fuel negative coverage. But during Desert Storm, with the press firmly restricted and relying heavily on official pronouncements for its news source, the potential impact of a single, focused message coming from the administration would increase manyfold. The administration could shape the news simply be deciding what subject to focus on (Patriot Missile a Big Success, Air War Devastating but Accurate, Saddam Is Evil, etc.) and by having spokesmen throughout the administration reiterate its central themes.600

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The structured daily briefing system afforded the White House a great deal of control over what the military told the press and public, which aided the administration’s public relations effort considerably. Not only did the White House coordinate daily themes to be emphasized, the administration also maintained control over what Central Command officers told the press by maintaining “information release authority” on key political and military issues. This meant that the Williams’ office in the Pentagon would tell Central Command when they had the authority to discuss certain topics with the press. In addition, much of the Pentagon’s public affairs guidance told Desert Shield/Storm commanders exactly what to say to the press on subjects like the use of nuclear weapons, casualties, reserve forces, and presidential intentions. In many cases Williams’ office told commanders what to say in response to particular questions journalists might ask, such as whether the US would use nuclear weapons in retaliation to a chemical attack by Iraq.\footnote{All of the public affairs guidance of this nature is reprinted in \textit{Pentagon Rules on Media Access}, pp. 339-548} Each order served to strengthen the administration’s voice and reduce the flow of information to the press that had not been approved by civilian leaders.

Scooping the media and trumpeting successes to the public without competition or analysis from skeptical journalists proved to be a major benefit of the government’s
system. By providing critical war news directly to the public, the administration and military enhanced their own credibility, made the most of their successes, downplayed their mistakes, and lessened the impact of the press on its policies. In one such instance, Malcolm Browne, a veteran war correspondent for the *New York Times*, discovered from F-117 pilots the fact that they had just destroyed Iraqi plants and laboratories thought to be part of nuclear weapons production. But before Browne could dispatch what would clearly be a front-page story, given concern over Iraq's nuclear capabilities, he was asked to withhold the news for reasons of military security. He agreed, only to be scooped that evening as General Schwarzkopf himself made the announcement that the facilities had been destroyed.\(^{603}\)

A second way in which the administration's oversight of the daily briefings paid off resulted from the decision to have only the most senior officers meet the press.\(^{604}\) The public responded much better to their expertise and confident professionalism than to lower ranking officers who often looked uncertain or harassed by journalists. In particular, General Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, proved to be a huge asset to the administration. His briefings from the Pentagon went a long way to establishing administration and military credibility during the war. He was aided, as one commentator points out, by his command of endless amounts of data and technical information about the war effort to which no one in the press was privy. There was little opening to challenge Powell on his pronouncements. Delivered in his confident and forthright manner, Powell's briefings helped the administration argue that it was sharing all the information with the public that it could.\(^{605}\)

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604 DeParle, "Long Series of Military Decisions..."

The fact that so many military briefings were televised further weakened the media’s stance with respect to the government and military. The public became disenchanted with reporters rude and pointed questioning of high-ranking and highly credible military officers like General Powell or Lt. General Thomas Kelly. Worse for the press, journalists repeatedly revealed themselves to be woefully ignorant of military affairs, often asking questions which would clearly endanger operational security if answered. A survey by the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press discovered that nearly 80% of the public approved of the restrictions on the press.\textsuperscript{606} Perhaps the low point for the press came when Saturday Night Live, normally a sure bet to needle the government in its skits, did a number scoring journalists instead for their ignorance and apathy towards the war. ("General, can you tell me when we’re going to attack?") The Saturday Night Live skit, it turned out, helped convince a nervous White House that its restrictions were in fact popular and could be safely continued.\textsuperscript{607}

Finally, the White House’s close control over administration statements paid off in crisis situations, such as when the US bombed what Iraq claimed was a civilian air raid shelter. CNN, led to the scene by Iraqi officials, was on hand with its cameras to record the aftermath of the US bombing of a building in which roughly 400 Iraqi civilians were killed. Iraq claimed the building was an air raid shelter and the television footage of burnt bodies sent chills through the White House. Those were exactly the sort of images that could cost the president support for policies, administration officials believed, and it was important that they respond quickly to the incident. Fitzwater immediately wrote a statement for Bush lamenting civilian deaths but asserting that the building was a military command center and placing ultimate blame for the attack on Saddam Hussein. Fitzwater then quickly coordinated the administration response among officials at the State


\textsuperscript{607} Jason DeParle, "Long Series of Military Decisions..."
Department and the Pentagon before reading Bush's statement. And at the Pentagon, officials revealed classified intelligence to prove the Iraqis were lying. Though the Pentagon normally refuses to reveal information about its intelligence gathering, the need to defuse a budding crisis sparked greater openness. By promptly moving to rebut Iraqi claims with a single, coordinated response, the White House managed to head off any groundswell of sympathy for the Iraqis and defuse a potential crisis for Bush. The administration's credibility also paid off. Eighty-one percent of the American public believed the government's claim that the building had a military purpose and seven-nine percent felt the air war should continue despite civilian casualties.

Reaping a Political Victory

George Bush had short run success but long run difficulty translating military victory into political gain. Ironically, the very rhetoric that helped him lead the nation to war added to the widespread dissatisfaction over the war's eventual outcome. Additionally, the administration's control over the media and near monopoly on information during the conflict led to overconfidence. Without anyone to challenge its assessments of the war's progress, the administration felt free to claim successes that later turned out to be less than complete, such as the destruction of Iraq's nuclear weapons program. The public's high expectations, which appeared initially to have been met by

608 Devroy, "Many Spokesmen..."


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the quick ground war, collided with a messier reality once the media began to report the
ture state of affairs in the war’s aftermath. The initial euphoria gave way to a more
measured assessment of Bush’s achievements.

By the end of the war, the list of administration promises, explicit and implicit, had
grown long. Before the war and throughout the air campaign, Bush had promised
Americans a short and decisive military victory over Iraq. He promised to destroy much
of the Iraqi military machine. He promised to destroy Iraq’s nuclear and chemical
weapons potential. He promised that victory would lend stability to the Middle East and
help to establish a New World Order. The administration further hinted, though never
said for the record, that the war would remove Saddam Hussein from power. At any rate,
the administration had so demonized Hussein that the public became convinced that he
must be deposed. And finally, of course, the war would assure the free flow of oil,
reclaim Kuwait’s territory, and ensure that all of the UN resolutions would finally be
met. Many of these goals were met, but several were not. The Bush Administration
tried in any case to claim credit for achieving most, if not all, of them.

In the short run, claiming a political victory seemed effortless. Throughout the war
Bush and the military had pronounced that everything was running according to plan. No one could challenge these assessments—the media was shut out of those areas which
could have generated news to the contrary. Pentagon footage of precision-guided
munitions cleanly destroying enemy installations symbolized the competence with which

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613 For example, see Andrew Rosenthal, “Pentagon Is Confident On War; But Say Iraqi’s Remain Potent; Sees No Imminent Land Attack,” New York Times, January 24, 1991
the administration and military were conducting the war. Allied air strikes were grinding down Iraq’s military machine, and had put Iraq’s nuclear program out of commission. Bush had proclaimed success on the nuclear issue only two weeks into the air war, “Our pinpoint attacks have put Saddam out of the nuclear-bomb-building business for a long time to come.”

As Iraq’s broken military fled from Kuwait, Bush’s promises seemed fulfilled. The decisive, high-tech military victory had lasted a mere one hundred hours and had ejected Iraq from Kuwait. Kuwaitis were overjoyed at getting their nation back, and Americans were liberators once again. Thanks to a beautifully choreographed air campaign and the lightning-fast ground attack, the Allies left Saddam Hussein with a severely weakened military machine. He would not be threatening his neighbors again soon. Moreover, all this had been accomplished with the lowest American casualties ever recorded for so vast a campaign.

In the wake of military victory the public rallied to the president. Bush enjoyed an unprecedented 90% approval rating, and 75% of the public felt that the ground war was the right move, despite pervasive doubts beforehand. Political observers said that Bush had shown a new side of himself, and almost unanimously predicted that he had locked up the 1992 presidential election with his Gulf War performance. Many even agreed with Bush’s claim that “The specter of Vietnam has been buried forever in the desert sands of the Arabian Peninsula.”


From the Oval Office Bush kicked off the attempts to claim victory by reeling off the war's accomplishments:

Kuwait is liberated. Iraq's army is defeated. Our military objectives are met. Kuwait is once more in the hands of Kuwaitis in control of their own destiny... Seven months ago, America and the world drew a line in the sand. We declared that the aggression against Kuwait would not stand, and tonight America and the world have kept their word... This is a victory for the United Nations, for all mankind, for the rule of law, and for what is right.618

Bush followed this with several more speeches and meetings with world leaders to brief them on the war, including an address to Congress on March 6. Speaking to a supportive congressional audience, Bush hit the high points of his victory one more time:

As Commander-in-Chief, I can report to you: Our armed forces fought with honor and valor. As President, I can report to the nation: Aggression is defeated, the war is over... His war machine is crushed. His ability to threaten mass destruction is itself destroyed... And this I promise you: For all that Saddam has done to his own people, to the Kuwaitis, and to the entire world, Saddam and those around him are accountable.619

The primary goal of Bush's appearances throughout the summer of 1991 was to keep the administration's Gulf War accomplishments firmly in the public mind and to build Bush's stature as a successful wartime president. A senior Bush official argued, "We have the capacity to solidify the president's capital so we can succeed on both the domestic and foreign policy agendas."620 And as commentator Fred Barnes pointed out, "Events, including ceremonies and parades, will tend to point up his [Bush's] central

618 "Transcript of President's Address on the Gulf War," February 28, 1991


role.621 Bush spent much of the summer, in fact, attending homecoming parades for the troops and Fourth of July celebrations.622

But as the dust settled the press, now finally free to report from the Middle East without so many restrictions, began to relay news which raised serious doubts that the military victory had achieved all Bush had promised and claimed. Most obvious to all, of course, was the fact that Saddam Hussein was still in power and causing trouble. Directly after the war, a poll found that 40% of the public believed that the US could not claim victory as long as Hussein remained in power. And by July, 76% answered that they believed the war should have continued until Saddam Hussein had been removed, despite the fact that the UN resolutions made no mention of his fate.623

Worse, Bush did not seem to have a clear-cut set of goals in dealing with Iraq or Hussein after the war. Criticism of Bush’s handling of Iraq policy after the war rose sharply over time.624 Hussein’s violent repression of the Kurdish uprising in Iraq after the war made it very clear to the public that he would continue to be an evil presence in the Middle East. Desert Storm had “stopped aggression” in Kuwait, but not in Iraq. Hussein’s ability to deal with the Kurds also made clear another fact on which the administration and military would have preferred not to focus: Most of Iraq’s elite Republican Guard units had in fact escaped from US forces unscathed, contrary to what

621 Barnes, “War Dividend,” p. 13


the administration had reported initially. Commentators did not hesitate to argue that Bush’s waffling over whether to aid the Kurds was diluting the clear-cut victory of Desert Storm with the blood of thousands of Kurdish rebels dead at the hands of the Republican Guard.

In contrast to Bush’s simple announcement that Iraq’s nuclear program had been grounded during the air war, Iraq revealed after the war that the bulk of its program and materials had in fact survived. The relatively dramatic UN attempts to defang Iraq’s nuclear efforts after the war provided months of proof that either the administration’s intelligence was very poor, or that Bush had been overzealous in claiming to have destroyed Iraq’s nuclear potential. The eventual success of the UN team in halting Iraqi progress toward a nuclear weapon served to muddy Bush’s claim.

In addition, the public was less than thrilled to find out that the high-tech smart bomb war where every bomb hits its target and no civilians died was in fact a mirage. The extent of the devastation dealt to Iraq by Allied bombing only became clear as the press and human rights groups flooded into Iraq in the weeks and months after the war. The military finally revealed its estimate of Iraqi military casualties in June, but only after a Freedom of Information Act request from the Natural Resources Defense Council. The Defense Intelligence Agency tentatively estimated that 100,000 Iraqi soldiers had been


627 US News and World Report, Triumph Without Victory, pp. 410-412

killed and 300,000 wounded. Perhaps those who supported the war could shrug off the damage done to Iraq as simply the price to be paid for thwarting the international community and the United States' military. But all along the administration and military had stressed that they were waging a humane war, and had deterred any press coverage which would have suggested the human toll of the war. Thus, news after the war on this topic tended to make it look like the government had simply been covering up what they knew would upset people. Some critics, particularly liberal ones, began to question whether the war had been worth the extreme toll exacted on the Iraqi nation.

And finally, as Secretary of State James Baker shuttled back and forth between Washington and the Middle East after the war, it became clear that Desert Storm had not created a New World Order or established stability in the Middle East. Not only did the Bush Administration have trouble parlaying its victory into peace negotiations between Israel and the Arab nations, it also found itself at the mercy of critics who argued that the administration had lacked any well conceived plans for what to do after the war.

As a consequence of having oversold victory's fruits, Bush suffered a slow deterioration of approval for his handling of the war. Despite the fact that Desert Storm had fulfilled the UN Security Council resolutions to the letter, which was of course the official goal of the war, Bush was judged by his own standards and found wanting. Thus, though he had at first appeared invincible politically, the messy and prolonged

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endgame in Iraq allowed Democrats in Congress to refocus attention on the poor health of the economy and Bush’s poor record of domestic accomplishments. Bush advisers admitted that winning the peace was more difficult because they were no longer able to focus the public attention on the positive aspects of policy. “There is a certain clarity to battle...When you control the field, like we did, you call the shots. Obviously, we don’t control events now the way we did in the war.” In the end, the administration thus found it much more difficult to secure political victory than military victory.

Military Public Affairs in Desert Shield/Desert Storm

As civilians developed public affairs policy, the military was left to work out the details and to implement the policy handed down from the Pentagon. As noted above, that policy was designed to be more restrictive than any in recent history. The military, not surprisingly, was in harmony with the White House on how to deal with the press. Despite paying polite respect to the right of the press to cover war in public, most senior military officers felt much more comfortable having the press under tighter rein than the JCS planning guidance written after Just Cause would have entailed. The military’s professional interests with regard to media coverage of war would have skewed any policy towards greater restrictions on the press anyway. But with the White House and military in such agreement over how to deal with the press, the effect was doubled. In tandem with a White House interested in curbing press access to the battlefield and limiting press impact on public opinion, the military’s implementation of public affairs helped to make sure that the media would have a harder time than ever covering an American conflict.

An examination of military public affairs in the Gulf reveals four themes. First, the military’s performance in the realm of public affairs during Desert Shield/Storm

illustrates once again that official military public affairs policy is not what the military implements on the battlefield. Preexisting public affairs guidance was almost completely supplanted in the Gulf by the administration’s political interests. Public affairs policy for Desert Storm was what the Bush Administration wanted it to be. Second, the military’s inability to handle effectively the large press corps that showed up to report the Gulf War revealed that public affairs remained a neglected mission, far from the military’s main war fighting interests. Aside from paying lip service to the importance of the press during war, the military had done almost nothing since Panama or during Desert Shield to improve its handling of public affairs. Third, the services’ professional interests shaped their implementation of public affairs. The military’s tendency to control and conceal information, its distrust of the media, and its desire to boost its own image in the public eye influenced its treatment of the press, which as a result was often in conflict with declared policy. The power of these professional interests was particularly evident in the friendly treatment of the press by the Marine Corps, which knew that the press was its key to good public relations. A final conclusion emerges from these three themes: The public affairs policy implemented in Desert Storm was not a product of Vietnam, but was born of politics, professional interests, and the military’s disinterest in public affairs.

**Planning for Public Affairs**

On the eve of Desert Storm in January, Williams finally made public the ground rules and guidelines that would comprise public affairs policy for the war. The ground rules covering what information could not be reported for reasons of operational security remained almost unchanged since Vietnam and more recent conflicts. A new category of “guidelines,” however, broke almost completely from existing JCS policy guidance on public affairs and from the Sible Panel’s recommendations, which until then had been widely considered by military and press alike as the philosophical and practical basis for wartime public affairs policy. As in previous conflicts, journalists had to agree in
advance to the Pentagon’s ground rules and guidelines in order to receive the accreditation from the military which would allow them to join the press pools and cover the war.\textsuperscript{634}

In a departure from Pentagon assurances and from existing policy, the press would cover Desert Storm exclusively from pools. As of January 12, plans called for two eighteen-member pools, consisting of reporters from television, newspapers, newsmagazines, and the wire services. One would cover the Army, one the Marines. No “unilateral” or independent coverage would be permitted. The military would detain and take back to Dhahran any journalist found within one hundred miles of the war zone. The Saudis later strengthened this rule by making the punishment for unilateral reporting arrest and deportation.

In addition, the Pentagon required that journalists remain with their public affairs escorts at all times and “follow their instructions regarding your activities.” According to Williams, the job of the escort was to help get journalists to the action, help them navigate the military, but not to hinder their reporting in any way. While pools had always been led by a military escort, escorts in the Gulf were to accompany journalists on a much closer basis than had ever been the case in the past. As Williams told public affairs officers in Saudi Arabia, “Then each little component of that pool, each little gaggle of two or three or four reporters is gonna have an escort.”\textsuperscript{635} Williams noted that escorts should not try to accompany reporters continuously around the clock, but should try to be present when things were happening: “...if a television guy is doing a standup, and I were an escort officer I would want to hear what he’s saying, I would want to stand behind the camera...somewhere out of the shot where I can hear what he’s saying.”\textsuperscript{636}

\textsuperscript{634} See Appendices for a copy of Desert Storm Ground Rules and Guidelines

\textsuperscript{635} Williams telephone conference of January 12 with public affairs people at the Pentagon and in Saudi Arabia, p. 386 in \textit{Pentagon Rules on Media Access}

\textsuperscript{636} Ibid., p. 386

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The purpose of this proximity, according to Williams, was to allow escorts to tell reporters immediately if they felt something in their story violated the reporting ground rules. But escorts were to have other duties as well, not made public to the press. As Williams told his charges, “...you’re the one that keeps them out of areas where they shouldn’t be.” In other words, escorts would be expected to keep journalists away from those things the Pentagon and military services did not want to be splashed across television screens. This might include highly classified special operations equipment, as Williams pointed out, but as journalists feared, it could also include areas which for political reasons it would be easier for the military not to reveal to reporters, such as the battlefield itself.637

Finally, all pool reports would be subject to what the Pentagon called “security review.” A public affairs escort would review all pool reports to make sure that they complied with the reporting ground rules outlined by Williams. The ground rules dictated that there be no reporting of troop locations, movements, future war plans, intelligence gathering operations, and so forth. If the military escort found that a news story did not violate any of the ground rules, he would send it on its way to the JIB in Dhahran, where it would be copied and made available to the press corps. If the escort determined, on the other hand, that a report did violate one of the ground rules, he was to discuss the matter with the journalist, pointing out his concerns. If the journalist agreed with the escort and modified the report to comply with the ground rules, the report could then make its way to Dhahran. If the journalist did not agree to change his or her copy, the escort would then flag the report for review by officers at the JIB and representatives of the press pools. If they could still not get a journalist to agree on the need for changes, the story would finally go to Williams in the Pentagon, who would discuss the matter with a bureau chief in Washington. If they still did not come to agreement, the decision

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637 See, for example, Sydney Schanberg, “Censoring for Political Security,” Washington Journalism Review, March 1991
to print in the end remained with the press. The security review process thus did not represent censorship in the traditional sense. The policy did not give the military the power to censor news stories, or to change reports in any way. It did, however, give the military the ability to review press reports before publication or broadcast for the first time since the Korean War.

Though the press learned for the first time in January what the public affairs policy would be, the military and its public affairs people in Saudi Arabia had known its outlines since August. Despite this foreknowledge, neither the Pentagon nor the military did much to ensure that the implementation of that policy would run smoothly. Those involved in every aspect of public affairs reached the same conclusion. Navy Captain Ron Wildermuth, General Schwarzkopf's public affairs aide and the highest ranking PAO in the Gulf, noted, "Something which became immediately obvious was that wartime public affairs training had not been emphasized adequately by any of the services or DoD for some time."638 John J. Fialka, a reporter for the Wall Street Journal, rendered a more blunt assessment, "In theory, there had been plenty of time for the policy governing the details of combat coverage to be worked out. In fact, there was no coherent policy."639

The military's lack of attention to public affairs made itself immediately evident to Navy Captain Mike Sherman and his team of public affairs officers who accompanied the DoD National Media Pool to Dhahran on August 13. Sherman's mission was to set up the Joint Information Bureau (JIB), which would keep track of journalists covering the crisis and help them cover the units in the field. Finding himself without many basic items he would need to do his job, Sherman had to commandeer a computer from the hotel which was the JIB's headquarters, and had to scrounge fax and copier machines

639 John J. Fialka, Hotel Warriors, p. 4
from other units in Saudi Arabia. Another JIB in Riyadh was also set up to provide the
daily press briefings on the crisis and information for the press about Desert Shield and
later Desert Storm.640

The Pentagon disbanded the seventeen-member pool after two weeks of activity
which garnered mixed results. Many in the media felt that the pool had failed to produce
any truly worthy reporting, while others felt that the pool had done an admirable job.641
By August 26 when the pool was disbanded, roughly 300 journalists had descended on
Dhahran and were looking to cover the US build-up.

The Pentagon moved to unilateral coverage, but the new system nonetheless
restricted press access to the troops. Though not strictly a pool system because their
reports were not shared, journalists could not visit military units by themselves or on their
own initiative. Instead, they had to request visits to particular units and areas, which
were then subject to military approval. Many requests were never fulfilled, and far more
often journalists would end up traveling to spots that the military deemed newsworthy.
Reporters had to sign up at the JIB for the very limited number of seats on the buses that
would take them to cover the troops under military escort. A group of ten to twenty
journalists would then visit a military installation, unit, or event, after which their escorts
would bring them back to Dhahran. Rarely did journalists spend a night with the troops
in the field, and in fact very few visits to ground forces were permitted. And no trips
were allowed to the airbases from which the F-117 fighters or B-52 bombers operated.642

640  Sharkey, Under Fire, pp. 110-112

641  Two favorable reports on the early pool are Frank Aukofer's notes in "First Person: The Persian Gulf
1990. It should be noted that at least part of the reason Aukofer and Rochelle praised the initial pool was
probably because they were in it.

August 28, 1990; Major Mark Hughes, USMC, "Words at War: Reflections of a Marine Public Affairs
Officer in the Persian Gulf," Government Information Quarterly, Vol. 9, No. 4, 1992, p. 440, 449; Sharkey,
Under Fire, pp.110-112; MacArthur, Second Front, pp. 164-172

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Making the entire process more difficult for everyone was the fact that the JIB was overwhelmed with having to deal with so many journalists. There were only 16 public affairs staffers working 24 hours a day trying to handle press requests, escort press junkets into the field, and keep track more generally of what was going on in the Gulf. The JIB had only four twenty-two seat buses to transport media personnel and equipment. Colonel Bill Mulvey, commander of the JIB in Dhahran from January onwards, argued that the maximum number of reporters the JIB could really handle with its equipment and personnel was about 200.\(^{643}\) That number had already been surpassed by mid-August and the number of reporters in Dhahran just kept growing. Unfortunately for public affairs officers things did not improve for at least two reasons. First, the JIB simply never had enough trained public affairs officers to handle the influx of reporters, in large part because many were reserves who had to return home in December. Second, although Captain Sherman began immediately requesting more equipment (phones, faxes, etc.) and extra vehicles to ferry journalists out to the field, he received little response from Central Command. As time went by the JIB was thus forced to do more with relatively less.\(^{644}\)

In October Central Command considered and rejected a plan to deploy two press pools to the front to live and work with the troops in anticipation of how things would work during war.\(^{645}\) Doing so would have allowed both journalists and the military to accustom themselves to working together in crisis conditions, and would have allowed plenty of time to practice getting pool reports back to the JIB in a timely fashion. The decision not to deploy the pools in October thus wasted several months of valuable on-the-job training for both the military and the press. The opportunity to salvage a month


\(^{644}\) Sharkey, *Under Fire*, pp. 110-112

\(^{645}\) Captain Ron E. Wildermuth, “They Can Both Win,” p. 410
of such training was lost later, in December, when the pools were finally created but were not allowed to spend extended periods of time out in the field.

To appreciate what this lack of preparation meant, however, one must first understand the context in which the Pentagon expected public affairs officers to carry out their tasks. Previous conflicts had seen only limited use of pools and escorts, and no use at all of security review. As noted above, current public affairs policy had departed radically from the existing JCS guidance published only months before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Thus, none of the public affairs people had any real experience with these concepts, especially with respect to how they would function in a large-scale war in Saudi Arabia, an environment very different from Grenada or Panama. With respect to security review, one must recall that the military’s long-moribund reserve censorship units had been disbanded in the 1987, when it seemed clear that censorship was no longer likely to be employed. This meant that the military had neither a system nor the trained personnel to handle the enormous task of reviewing hundreds of news reports for security risks. Moreover, public affairs officers have never had censorship in their portfolios. The mission had always been considered a job for military intelligence, the branch most familiar with those things which should not become public knowledge. Despite these glaring deficiencies, and despite the fact that they had been apparent since early August, nothing was done to alleviate them.

A January 12 teleconference held by Williams with public affairs officers in the Gulf highlighted the near-total lack of serious planning and practice of the new public affairs policy during Desert Shield. Four days before Desert Storm was to begin, Williams was just beginning to elucidate the role of the escorts and to describe how the ground rules should be applied during security review. Comments and questions from public affairs officers in Saudi Arabia make it clear that they did not fully understand how to act in their new roles. As Steven Katz, who helped collate and analyze Desert Shield/Desert
Storm public affairs documents for the Senate Governmental Affairs committee hearings, recounts,

By the conclusion of the 2-1/2 hour teleconference, no reference was ever made to any supporting Public Affairs Guidance, or instructions for implementation or interpretation by the military. When a high-ranking public affairs officer was later asked if the teleconference provided as little concrete direction as it appeared by listening to it later on tape, he responded curtly, ‘Yes, and I had to sit there and listen to the whole thing.’

Katz goes on to note that,

A review of the Public Affairs Guidance issued by the Department of Defense, Central Command, and other authorities during Operation Desert Shield and Desert Storm reveals that there was more official guidance for planning the homecoming events and parades than instructions for implementing the ground rules for ‘security review’ or ‘escorting’ the media.

The lack of attention paid to the details of escorting and security review suggests that no one anticipated the problems which arose, or at least their magnitude. It is also possible that worries did exist, but that no one was ready to admit them to Williams at such a late date. The result was that the military’s public affairs team headed into Desert Storm with minimal preparation, minimal guidance, and minimal support from either Central Command or the Pentagon.

Desert Storm Public Affairs

Predictably, Desert Storm public affairs operations reflected the neglected status of public affairs within the military generally and during Desert Shield in particular. No part of the process worked as smoothly as officials had envisioned. Many public affairs officers were horrified by how poorly the system functioned during the ground war. At


the same time, many of the military’s professional judgments about the press influenced its interactions with reporters. Where the Army as a whole tended to push the press away, the Marines welcomed journalists, reflecting their contrasting professional interests in using the press. At the level of the individual commander and certainly with public affairs escorts a similar dynamic operated. In some cases officers hopeful of good publicity invited reporters to stay with their units. In other cases officers wary of the press refused to allow pools to cover their units. Likewise, many escorts aided reporters considerably, but many inhibited open reporting and tried to manage journalists’ activities to prevent negative reporting of the military.

As the air war heated up, the public affairs system began to feel the strain. On January 17, as promised, the Pentagon delivered 126 more journalists and media personnel to Dhahran, ballooning the press corps there to over 700. Under the current pool system, only the two eighteen-member pools existed to cover the hundreds of thousands of Army and Marine ground troops in the field. This left roughly 700 journalists in Dhahran frustrated and desperate to find some action. After repeated protests by the press, Central Command relented and expanded the pool system, adding eleven seven-member “quick reaction” pools to cover breaking events and another two of the larger pools to cover ground forces. Later five of the smaller pools were converted to coverage of the forces in the field, reflecting the press’ abiding interest in covering those troops closest to where the action would be.

With press access to the battlefield limited by the pools, public affairs escorts had to deal with those lucky reporters who had gotten a slot. The escorts’ job entailed making sure the pool found its appropriate destinations in the desert, keeping reporters company to make sure they did not get in the way or go places they should not go, reviewing pool


reports for security violations, and making sure that those reports got back to the JIB. Public affairs escorts, by most accounts, turned in a spotty performance on the whole, though there were occasional bright spots.

Officially, the Pentagon’s public affairs policy dictated that escorts were not to interfere in any way with reporting. It became apparent quickly, however, that many escorts operated under a different interpretation of the rules. Many journalists complained that their escorts glared at the troops they were interviewing so much that enlisted personnel were scared to give honest answers to questions. On several occasions escorts were reported to have jumped in front of television cameras during interviews and demanded a halt to the filming when a subject came up they felt was inappropriate. Despite Pete Williams assurances that such behavior was not condoned by Pentagon policy, and despite attempts by JIB leaders to put an end to the more hostile practices, escort officers in the field simply had too much autonomy for effective oversight from Dhahran.650 Even Williams admitted after the war:

We could have done a better job of helping reporters in the field. Judging from what I’ve heard from the reporters who went out on the pools, we had some outstanding escorts. But we must improve that process. Escort officers shouldn’t throw themselves in front of the camera when one of the troops utters a forbidden word....We need to teach public affairs personnel how to do their jobs so that reporters won’t feel their interview subjects are intimidated.651

Worse, however, and more subtle because it less obviously ran counter to stated policy, was the fact that public affairs escorts determined where reporters could and could not go, often for reasons having nothing to do with operational security. It seems, in fact, that some escorts enjoyed simply being able to deny journalists’ requests to witness certain events or talk to particular people. This, more than anything, made it difficult for journalists to do their jobs. If they could not get to the front where the fighting was


651 Pete Williams, “The Press and the Persian Gulf War,” p. 8
taking place, or to some unit to interview troops fresh from combat, then journalists could not even begin the reporting process. 652

Security review also proved problematic, though not for the reason the press had feared at the outset. Despite widespread media distaste for letting the military review their copy, security review never emerged as a system of true censorship. Aside from several instances in which commanders or public affairs escorts took it upon themselves to edit or censor press copy, most press reports made it to the US unscathed. 653 Of 1,351 pool reports filed during Desert Storm, only five ended up at the Pentagon for a final review. Four of these were published unchanged and one editor agreed to make suggested changes to a story about military intelligence operations and strategy. 654

The unforeseen problem with security review was instead one of speed, caused by a lack of training and sufficient resources for dealing with such a volume of material. As Katz notes, "...the lack of training and guidance resulted in numerous conflicts between reporters and escorts, subjective decisions and judgments, delays in transmission, and some interference with news gathering. Few Public Affairs Officers had any idea what their colleagues might have decided in a similar situation, elsewhere in the theater." 655

By flagging a report for review, escort officers in fact dealt many stories a death blow. Chances were good that the story would be worthless by the time it had been transmitted back to the JIB, reviewed by the overworked staff, and approved for release, especially during the ground war. Journalists decried any extra delays in getting their copy to their


653 For a discussion of the most widely discussed incident involving Frank Bruni, a reporter for the Detroit Free Press, see Malcolm Browne's section in "First Person: The Persian Gulf War," pp. 422-423

654 Williams, "The Press and the Persian Gulf War," p. 6

655 Katz, "Ground Zero," p. 399
news desks, but by this point there was nothing the military could do. It had only so many public affairs officers to do the job.

But by far the weakest link in the military’s public affairs set up was its inability to get reports back speedily to the JIB during the ground war. Even Richard Cheney’s glowing report to Congress on the conduct of the war admitted that much work needed to be done to ensure that reports made it to the public on time. Trying to put the best face on the numbers did not help much: 69% of pool reports made it back to the JIB in less than two days, while 10% took over three days.\(^{656}\) As John J. Fialka noted,

Worst of all we faced a jury-rigged system to get our copy, film, audio, and videotapes back. Civil War reporters, using the new high technology of the telegraph, were able to send reports of the Battle of Bull Run to New York in 24 hours.

In this lightning war, more often than not, technology stopped at the edge of the battlefield. Accounts of major battles took three or four days to reach New York because of a haphazard military courier system aptly dubbed the “pony express.” One reporter’s copy took as long as two weeks to make the eight-hour drive from the battlefield to Dhahran. A news photographer’s film took 36 days. A television correspondent’s videotape of two stories never got back at all.\(^{657}\)

Desert Storm undoubtedly provided a difficult environment for maintaining a steady flow of reports from the battlefield to the rear. The distances involved were massive, hundreds of miles in most cases, and the speed of the of the military’s advance kept outstripping the accommodations public affairs had made to take pool reports from one station to the next on the way to Dhahran.

The biggest obstacle to getting reports back to the JIB, however, was not the rigorous conditions but simply the lack of planning and the corresponding lack of critical


\(^{657}\) Fialka, *Hotel Warriors*, p. 5
equipment and transportation, just as had been the case in Just Cause. As Schwarzkopf’s chief public affairs officer, Captain Ron Wildermuth later admitted, “much of the equipment requested for public affairs support was diverted to fill priority combat and combat support shortages. This left public affairs in the position of trying to lease vehicles and borrow critical office equipment.” Officers in Dhahran tried their best to improvise, but by their own account could not counter the effects of poor planning.

Army vs. Marines: A Study in the Power of Professional Interests

Though in general the public affairs system of the military gave a poor performance and exuded anti-media sentiment, there was an important exception. During Desert Storm, the Marine Corps proved that it had developed a very different appreciation of public affairs from the Army’s. The Army, starting at the top with General Schwarzkopf, showed its reluctance to deal with the press and had the least efficient system for getting press reports back to the JIB. The Marines, on the contrary, despite a similar lack of public affairs preparedness before the war, did everything they could during Desert Storm to help journalists cover the Marines. As Fialka noted, “We saw an Army public affairs system fashioned as a dead-end career for officers and staffed with a sprinkling of incompetents put there by media-wary generals. . . We saw the Marines and wrote too much about them because they had a flair for public relations that made some of us wonder whether they came from the same country that produced the Army.”


659 Wildermuth, “They Can Both Win,” p. 414

660 Sharkey, Under Fire, pp. 132-133; Fialka, Hotel Warriors, p. 17

661 Fialka, Hotel Warriors, p. 2
The Marines Corps's very different attitude towards the press evolved from its special situation. As the military's smallest armed service, it has long had to fight to maintain its share of the defense budget and important missions. To protect its livelihood, the Marine Corps realizes it must depend on public and congressional goodwill. To promote such sentiment, especially in the television age, requires that the Marines use the media to polish their image. The Army, on the other hand, is not imbued with such an appreciation for the media. Many Army commanders seem to have believed that the press could do them little good but possibly great harm.

The Marines attitude towards the press emanated from their Desert Storm commander, General Walter E. Boomer. Boomer had spent two years as the Marine Corps's Director of Public Affairs, the top public affairs position in the Marine Corps, and appreciated the role the media would play in showing the public how his troops were performing. Throughout Desert Shield, Boomer made repeated pronouncements to his commanders about the importance of working well with the media. Boomer set the tone in August:

Operation Desert Shield and related current events have captured worldwide attention and are the subject of intense news media scrutiny. CMC desires maximum media coverage of USMC participation within the bounds of opsec. This operation can demonstrate to Americans the flexibility, deployability, sustainability, and combat power of the Marine Corps...The long term success of Desert Shield depends in great measure on support of the American people. The news media are the tools through which we can tell Americans about the dedication, motivation, and sacrifices of their Marines. Commanders should include public affairs requirements in their operational planning to ensure that the accomplishments of our Marines are reported to the public. 662

The Army, on the other hand, seemed to take its cue from Schwarzkopf's less agreeable attitude towards reporters. Unlike General Boomer, neither Schwarzkopf nor any of his senior commanders had ever occupied a public affairs job in the Army. In contrast to Boomer's vision of openness stood Schwarzkopf's personal guide for dealing

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with the media. Dismissing the various difficulties for the press in gaining access to Saudi Arabia—the delayed callup of the pool and the restrictions placed on it, the Saudi’s tight visa policy, etc.—Schwarzkopf recounted his thoughts before his first Desert Shield press conference in August:

I wasn’t expecting a particularly friendly reception—though the media had had unprecedented access to Saudi Arabia and reasonable access to our forces since the beginning of the crisis. . . . Sipping a Coke, I steeled myself for their questions. “Don’t let them intimidate you,” I told myself. “You know a hell of a lot more about what’s going on than they do.” I decided I’d make that rule number one for dealing with the press. Rule number two became, “There’s no law that says you have to answer all their questions.” Rule number three was its corollary, “Don’t answer any question that in your judgment would help the enemy.” . . . I added rule number four, the most important of all: “Don’t ever lie to the American people.”

Marine commanders were not happy with the pool system on the eve of Desert Storm. The original plan called for only one pool of eighteen reporters to cover two divisions of Marines on the ground and a floating assault force at sea. This was not enough for commanders looking for “maximum exposure.” By the time the ground war started, the Marines had placed 53 journalists, thirty of them with ground units. This number included both those working in pools and those accompanying individual commanders, such as Boomer himself (in violation, of course, of DoD public affairs policy). The Marines did not stop there, however, and worked until the end of the ground war to accommodate greater numbers of the press. Once the Marines made it to Kuwait City, Chief Warrant Officer Eric Carlson, point man for public affairs for the Marines’ 1st Division, began accepting the unilateral reporters who had made their way to the freed capital city, even though this too violated stated public affairs policy.

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664 Shotwell, “Fourth Estate,” p. 77; Fialka, Hotel Warriors, p. 27-28
The Army, on the other hand, found few takers for the pools. Though thirty-two reporters accompanied the Army when the ground war began, no Army division hosted as much as a full seven-member combat pool, and several were not accompanied by the press at all. Army units, it seems, were also far more likely to turn away reporters who had managed to find their way through the desert without the pools. The result was that many Army units, though they played the most critical roles of the ground campaign, wound up virtual no-shows in the media.665

The difference between the Army and Marine Corps approaches to the media during Desert Storm shone brightest in their varying efforts and success in transporting news reports back from the battlefield. Neither service was prepared for full-scale war in the media age. As Colonel John Shotwell, Poomer’s public affairs aide, noted, “...the Marine Corps’ apparatus for accommodating reporters in combat or in any situation in which hostilities were imminent was archaic to nonexistent.”666 Or as John Fialka more colorfully put it, “When CWO Carlson looked in the Marine Corps’s table of organization, he found that division public affairs officers are entitled to a desk. That was it. His had been shipped in from Hawaii, and it was the wrong kind.”667 But despite the Marine Corps’s lack of equipment, it made an all-out effort to get pool reports back to the JIB quickly throughout the war, often with great success.

The Marines’ initial plan was to collect news reports at the Mobile Combat Service Support Detachment which would follow and resupply regiments during the war. A reporter or escort had only to get the report to the detachment, from which a courier would deliver it to another checkpoint, where the report would finally board the first aircraft headed for Dhahran. This system in theory would allow journalists to continue

665 Sharkey, Under Fire, p. 128
666 Shotwell, “Fourth Estate,” p. 78
667 Fialka, Hotel Warriors, p. 28
filing even as the troops moved rapidly forward. Unfortunately, though this system worked briefly during the ground war, the Marines' rapid advance quickly outstripped their couriers' ability to deliver reports back to Dhahran. Not to be stopped, however, Marine PAO's worked around the problem and found an even better way to file news stories.

Their secret was e-mail. Reporters would type their stories on a laptop computer and hand their disk to a public affairs officer. The officer in turn used the Marine Corps's tactical computers, linked by satellite with the rear, to e-mail it to Marine headquarters in Jubail, Saudi Arabia, where it was immediately faxed to Dhahran. Where the courier system took a day, the e-mail/fax system at times took less than thirty minutes.668 This system obviously did not work for television reports, but the networks had only themselves to blame. In January, the Marine Corps had offered the television pool an opportunity to establish a mini-satellite among the front lines. The networks refused because they deemed it too expensive.669

Throughout the ground war, the Marines continued to find ways to get the news out, from dialing news organizations in the US direct by satellite phone to let reporters dictate a story, to taking dictation from reporters and retyping stories themselves, to walking all night through the battlefield to get a report to Dhahran.670 And when the Marines entered Kuwait City, they made heroic efforts to make sure television reporters captured the scene on film and to get that film out fast. Says ABC's Linda Patillo of one Marine, "Our PAO was so anxious to get our footage out he ran out and flagged down a medevac chopper."671 General Boomer personally escorted journalists through the city, and CWO


669 Hughes, Words at War," p. 455

670 Fialka, Hotel Warriors, pp. 25-31

671 Fialka, Hotel Warriors, p. 29

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Carlson, as noted, even began supporting unilaterals. The 1st Division had determined that public affairs was now its number one mission, and gave CWO Carlson all the support he needed to help the press.672

The Army's performance on this score was another matter entirely. The Army's plan for transporting pool products during the war looked similar on the surface, but in fact the Army lacked the motivation and trained personnel to make it work, especially in the face of many who did not want it to work. Each division in the Army's VII Corps, which comprised the four divisions that would carry out the 'Hail Mary,' had only two couriers and two jeeps to ferry news material from the battlefield to the rear. These couriers would pick up pool reports from the brigades, and drive back to their divisional headquarters, where other couriers would then drive the reports to King Khalid Military City, where they finally would board the one available C-130 cargo plane, which would make one flight a day to Dhahran at 7 p.m. At its best, Fialka reports, the system took three days to get a story to the JIB. At its worst, the courier system simply could not handle its workload. Fialka complains, "The story was the impending collision between the VII Corps and the Republican Guard. And most of us moving into battle formations with VII Corps may as well have been on the dark side of the moon. We never saw a courier during the entire five days of the ground war (or afterward)."673

The Army's ability to overcome the weakness of its courier system was limited both by its previous apathy towards getting its public affairs people the equipment they needed and by the attitude of many of the PAOs themselves. An officer who suggested using the tactical fax machines to send press copy at night when military communications tapered off was rebuffed by his superior, Major David Cook, the assistant public affairs officer of VII Corps. Cook furthered slowed the system by inserting himself against pool

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672 Fialka, Hotel Warriors, pp. 29-30
673 Fialka, Hotel Warriors, p. 14
guidelines into the security review process. Unlike their Marine counterparts, Cook and many of his subordinates made life more difficult for reporters trying to cover the Army. When senior Army officers in Washington finally realized that a major victory was going unreported in the media, they dispatched helicopters to retrieve pool reports from the field. To their chagrin, the helicopters could never find the public affairs officers because the officers had never been issued radios and thus could not communicate their changing locations.\footnote{674}

The Marines' attitude toward the media paid off. According to a study by John Fialka, the 80,000-strong Marine Corps garnered greater and more favorable press coverage than the 295,000-strong Army that did the heavy lifting of Desert Storm. The four major television networks and four largest national newspapers mentioned the Marines 293 times to 271 times for the Army. Marine battles were also reported in greater detail, with identification of particular Marine units, whereas Army coverage was more vague, and units rarely identified specifically. The result was that the Marines won a huge public relations victory in the Gulf and the Army fumbled an historic opportunity to show itself off to the public. Fialka notes, "If the PR rivalry between the two services involved in the ground war had been a basketball game, the score would have been Marines 149, Army 10."\footnote{675}

Other Military Public Affairs Activities

While journalists struggled with the pool system, the military, like the White House, took advantage of the opportunity to advance its interests through briefings in Riyadh. The JIB in Riyadh held 98 briefings, 53 on the record, 45 on background. Over one hundred briefings were given at the Pentagon. In each case, the military was able to

\footnote{674}{Fialka,} \textit{Hotel Warriors,} pp. 11-24

\footnote{675}{Fialka,} \textit{Hotel Warriors,} pp. 6-8

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provide or withhold information as it desired, always able to argue that something could not be discussed for security reasons, certain that reporters had little way of checking on the accuracy or context of the military’s claims. Nor was the military anxious to have reporters checking the accuracy of its briefings. Barry Zorthian, chief of information in Vietnam from 1964 to 1968, used to tell reporters, “Don’t take my word for it, go and see for yourselves.” In contrast, at a news conference on January 23 General Colin Powell revealed little information in response to questions but instead offered this suggestion to the media: “Trust me.” Powell’s brief but revealing remark illustrates the role the military wanted the press to play during the war.676

Though reporters were not particularly happy with the amount of newsworthy information provided, the military certainly found the briefings an invaluable opportunity to polish its image with the public and put the most flattering gloss on the war’s progress. One way in which the military did this with exceptional success was by providing television networks with its gun camera footage of smart bombs hitting their targets crisply and without causing collateral damage. Despite occasional grousing that they were never shown any footage in which a bomb missed its target, the networks never failed to use the dramatic film in their reports. The constant repetition of these shots seems to have made an indelible impression on the public. Michael Deaver, Reagan’s chief television specialist, gave the military high marks for its efforts: “The Department of Defense has done an excellent job of managing the news in an almost classic way. . .There’s plenty of access to some things, and at least one visual a day. If you were going to hire a public relations firm to do the media relations for an international event, it couldn’t be done any better than this is being done.”677


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Another way to take advantage of its control over access to the battlefield was the Pentagon’s Hometown News Media Project. During Desert Shield this program paid for journalists to fly to Saudi Arabia to link up with their hometown units in the desert for 96 hours and then fly back home. Publicly the Pentagon argued that the rationale for the program was that it would keep the public in closer touch with units that might otherwise not receive media attention, and that small town papers could not afford to fly over to Saudi Arabia in the first place. Privately, however, officials admitted that the remarkable access given to these homeowners was a result of the realization that they stories they wrote would be highly supportive of the troops and of the operation. They would not have enough time to really dig for any news deeper than human interest pieces on how the troops were doing, and the fact that many of the reporters were from towns heavily intertwined with and dependent on the military for their livelihood ensured that no one was likely to bite the hand that fed them. The Hometown News Media Project offended other journalists in Saudi Arabia who had been unable to get out into the field at all. Many criticized the government’s transparent attempt to trade access for public relations gains.678

Despite the military’s poor planning, public affairs policy did what the White House and the military wanted it to do: It restricted press access to the battlefield, ensured that no troublesome television coverage beamed into American living rooms from the battlefield, and maintained operational security through review of press reports. Most important of all, it also secured the government’s domination of information and allowed the administration to shape the news reaching the public about the war to an unprecedented in modern times. As it turned out, in fact, the military’s incompetence at

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public affairs enhanced government control over the media. Administration officials often knew what would be news before journalists as a result of the press restrictions and delays they caused. This turned out to be especially true during the ground war, when the delay in getting press reports to Dhahran during allowed Schwarzkopf to scoop the press and give the public all the details of victory personally.

The Press and Desert Storm

The story was so big they could not resist. It cried out "Pulitzer" to the ambitious and the enterprising. Hoards of journalists, most of whom had never covered military issues much less a war, descended on the Gulf. They went armed with laptop computers, satellite telephones, fax machines, and even fly-away satellite dishes. Despite their unprecedented numbers and unparalleled technology, however, the hopes of most journalists were dashed at the bottom of Central Command's press pools. According to most reporters, the Gulf War was the most difficult war to cover in American history, and thus the most poorly and underreported war as well. The media's failure to combat the government's restrictions effectively—both legally and less formally—belied the limitations inherent to the competitive and fragmented nature of their industry. Their submission to the military left a smoldering determination in many journalists not to be had again.

Newsgathering

There were essentially two options open to journalists wishing to cover Desert Storm. Given the circumstances, the restrictions, and the geography of Saudi Arabia, neither option thrilled reporters much. First, a journalist could accept the pool system and work out of Dhahran, watching televised briefings and culling pool reports until a slot in the pool opened. This route assured journalists material for a daily story, and a chance for better once they got a pool slot. On the downside, covering a war from a hotel
is not most journalists' idea of a good time—the real story was out in the desert. And worse, being in a pool was no guarantee of a good story since it meant letting the military dictate where to go and what to see.

The other option was to reject the pool system and "go unilateral," venturing out into the desert, evading media-hostile military types and looking for a unit which would agree to let a journalist do a story. Of the 1400 or so journalists occupying Saudi Arabia by the ground war, only a handful chose to attempt unilateral reporting and for good reason. It was dangerous. Several journalists wound up hostages of the Iraqis, and many lost themselves repeatedly, often in less desirable areas like minefields. Even if a journalist did manage to locate a US military unit, there was a good chance of being detained and sent back to Dhahran with the threat of deportation by the Saudis. Nonetheless, the attraction of traveling and reporting freely, without an escort or having to submit copy to security review, pulled strong enough to tempt more and more journalists into the desert as time went on. Once the US victory seemed imminent, scores of journalists broke ranks and jumped in their jeeps heading for Kuwait City to report its liberation.

The Pools

The pool system made it impossible for journalists to balance the access/autonomy equation to their satisfaction. A journalist could remain independent, free from escorts and security review, simply by reporting the war from the hotel and rejecting the pool. To do so, of course, meant that a journalist had zero access to the military, to its high-tech weaponry, or to the battlefield where the biggest story in the world was taking place. For most news organizations and most journalists, this was an unthinkable situation. Gaining access to the battlefield was a duty, not an option. The obvious (and safest) answer was to join the pool, thereby ensuring that a journalist would catch at least a small slice of the story firsthand. In a journalist's eyes, however, joining the pool meant sacrificing almost all independence. A journalist could not determine where to go, what to see, or how long
to stay somewhere. In essence, according to reporters, the military became their assignment editor. Nor, quite often, could he interview people or film a report without an escort officer staring over his shoulder and intimidating his subjects. And once he handed his report over for the final indignity of security review, he had to worry that if the story was negative his escort might make the war that much more difficult to cover in the future. Under these circumstances, though being part of the pool was clearly preferable to sitting in Dhahran, no journalist could feel proud at having to submit so thoroughly to the military's rules.

The decision to work through the pools and surrender one's autonomy did not, however, guarantee access. In fact, the military's system made access so difficult for individual journalists to achieve that many declared it "censorship by access." At the outset of Desert Storm there were only 36 pool slots for between 700-1000 journalists. By the beginning of the ground war there were 192 pool slots for over 1400 journalists. 192 was indeed, as civilian and military officials hastened to point out, a far greater number than had ever covered a battle at one time before. But the pools did not always find themselves on the battlefield covering the troops. Only two were permanently assigned to cover Army and Marine units in the field. R. W. Apple, the New York Times' bureau chief in Dhahran, found that on any given day most pools were elsewhere. On February 12, he noted, only three of fifteen pools were in the field. This amounted to a grievous lack of access for today's media, whose expectations far exceed those of journalists in earlier eras. And from the perspective of the individual journalist, in

679 John Balzar of the Los Angeles Times encountered this problem, for example. After viewing gun camera footage from an Apache helicopter attack which left many Iraqi soldiers dead from its 30mm cannons, Balzar wrote an article describing the attack. Afterwards, Balzar recounts, the military was far less cooperative. See MacArthur, Second Front, p. 163

680 For example, Fialka, Hotel Warriors, p. 6

particular, the system looked very restrictive. The odds of a journalist being in one of the pools during the ground war were roughly one in seven at best, and not all of the pools were attached to ground units.

Getting into a pool, moreover, did not mean one got to stay in the pool. There were permanent slots for the larger news organizations, but the rest of the slots rotated among the remaining scores of organizations. Before the war, pool membership would rotate after a pool had carried out its mission, if it was a quick reaction pool, or after two weeks, if it was one of the larger combat pools. Journalists had their names on the very long list for pool slots and as slots opened would work their way up to the top. Once a journalist had had a turn in the pool, it could be weeks before he or she could get back in another pool, if at all. Access for the individual journalist was thus spotty at best. Many correspondents, especially from smaller or specialty media outlets, never managed to get into the pool.682

Adding considerably to the media’s woes, journalists for the first time became their own jailers in the Gulf. At their own insistence, representatives of the press ran the pool system, laying down the rules for deciding which news organizations and journalists would get pool slots. Each medium had its own system for determining which reporters would go with the pools and how the pool product would be shared. The television pool, which included the three major networks and CNN, was run by a single representative named by the networks to assign reporters to the pools. The photography pool was run by five editors, one from each of the wire services and the three major newsmagazines. These five men not only determined how the pool slots would be allocated but also which twenty photos (out of around 6,000) would make up the daily set of pool photos to be transmitted back to the United States. The print pool was both the largest and the least well coordinated of the pools. According to John Fialka, the Wall Street Journal

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682 Sharkey, Under Fire, pp. 125-126
correspondent who had the dubious honor of running the print pool for a time, the print pool wavered from democracy to dictatorship depending on who was in charge. Together, the decisions made by each of the media groups would coalesce into the pools covering the action.\textsuperscript{683} Few were pleased by the results, as John J. Fialka relates:

And we had a good, hard look at each other. Preparing the news is like making sausage: it is not necessarily a handsome process in the best conditions. But we found we had helped make a pool system that was gear 1 for multiple failures. We had created rules that impeded coverage, and some of us were more intent on begging our competition than on participating in the creation of a large mosaic of reportage that was needed to make sense of this war as it swiftly unfolded. We were pack journalism forced into a girdle. When it came undone, so did we.\textsuperscript{684}

Two facts ensured the infighting and frustration caused by this system. First, there were always far more correspondents waiting for spots than there were spots in the pool. Second, the more powerful news organizations cooperated to keep reporters from smaller organizations out of the pools. The press had argued that it had to control pool membership in order to make sure that neither the Pentagon nor Saudi Arabia was allowed to keep certain reporters out of pools for political reasons. Though most members of the press corps agreed with this reasoning in theory, in practice things did not work so smoothly. The print press, for example, was dominated at the outset of the crisis by a group which came to be called the “Sacred 10,” national news organizations which had arrived in force early in the Gulf. These organizations worked with the Pentagon during Desert Shield to ensure that they would have permanent pool slots, leaving all others to fight over the remaining openings. Nevertheless, the group was continually unhappy with the pool rules because their organizations were still only allowed one combat pool slot, leaving them unable to deploy all of their journalistic talent to the field. As a result, they


\textsuperscript{684} Fialka, \textit{Hotel Warriors}, p. 2

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shamelessly used their position of power to ensure that their reporters would get choice pool slots in the field, relegating smaller publications to tours of Navy ships floating far away from the action.\textsuperscript{685} The Sacred 10's early arrival also meant that it set many of the rules under which journalists could get pool slots, a fact that they used to their competitive advantage. One widely discussed example of this was the failure of David Fulgham, a reporter for \textit{Aviation Week and Space Technology}, to secure a print pool slot. Fulgham was shut out because \textit{Time}, \textit{Newsweek}, and \textit{U.S. News and World Report} had declared early on that their correspondents would be the only ones from newsmagazines to get slots in the print pool.\textsuperscript{686}

The media's bickering over who would cover the war added to the government's control. As Williams peddled version after version of the ground rules and guidelines, all most newsmagazine executives could think about was whether or not they would be able to secure a pool slot.\textsuperscript{687} They were not happy about the pool rules, but on the eve of war worrying about the rules took a back seat to making sure they would not lose out to their competition by getting shut out of the pool all together. The infighting over the pools prevented the media from acting collectively to pressure the government for greater access to the battlefield. Instead, as Fialka laments, a "beggar thy neighbor" system had emerged. The national news organizations with permanent spots in the pool did not want to endanger their access at the last moment just in the name of solidarity with their smaller colleagues. The organizations which came later to the Gulf decried the pool, but were happy enough as long as they could wangle elite pool status, as several large

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\textsuperscript{686} Fialka, \textit{Hotel Warriors}, p. 42

\textsuperscript{687} This becomes very clear upon reading the correspondence between Pete Williams and various news executives in the months before the war. See \textit{Pentagon Rules on Media Access}, pp. 550-650
\end{footnotesize}
regional newspapers managed to do. Only the small and specialty media organizations continued to complain about the system’s fundamental challenge to the media as a whole—the unprecedented fact that it did not allow all those who wanted to do so to cover the war. As a result, efforts to pressure the government into loosening the reporting curbs were hamstrung from the beginning.

Further, the media unintentionally created a stake for themselves in the running of the pool system during the war. Reporters were no longer as appreciative of their brothers’ and sisters’ efforts to evade the pool. Those working inside the system were in fact often loathe to permit others to profit by working outside it. This was especially true if unilaterals tried to report in an area in which a pool was already operating. Those in the pool felt that they were working at an unfair disadvantage compared to the unilaterals, who did not have to worry about escorts or security review. The tension came to a head during the battle of Khafji. Several reporters, having gotten word of a ground battle, set out on their own to find the action. Robert Fisk, a reporter for the Independent, a major London daily, was one of those unilaterals covering Khafji. When he bumped into the pool which had belatedly made it to the battle, Fisk reports that one of the pool reporters “responded with an obscenity and shouted: ‘You’ll prevent us from working. You’re not allowed here. Get out. Go back to Dhahran.’”

Thus, an ironic form of peer pressure emerged. The press corps, which under different circumstances would have applauded and encouraged unilateral efforts, in fact discouraged reporters from going outside the system.

Once journalists had managed to secure a pool slot, they were often unhappy to find that the access they had gained was only somewhat better than nothing. During Desert


689 Even John Fialka, whose book best illustrates the dilemmas of the pool system, seems to have been upset at unilaterals for their “unfair” advantages in not having escorts and in being able to file their copy quickly and directly home. MacArthur also found this sentiment, see Second Front, pp. 180-184
Shield, the military had reduced the interest and news value of pool visits to troops by rehearsing what the journalists were to see and report as news. Lucy Spiegel, a producer for CBS, described the typical sense of frustration:

They wouldn’t have already called ahead and everything was set up. You never really surprised anybody... Like everything in the military, you had a mission to accomplish and that was to see, let’s say, an air force base. You’d watch them take off and you’d watch them come down. You’d interview the crew and you’d go and watch them eat a meal and you’d talk to the CO, and you’d come home... There will never be any journalist award given for that stretch. There were no great investigative stories. There couldn’t be. You were too controlled. If you did go off the road and they found out about it, or you ran into somebody who reported you, you were brought in and your hands were slapped... They’d yell at you: “You had no business being up there without an escort. You know better than that.”

During Desert Storm, things got little better. The travails of correspondents working under the baleful glare of escorts, the fickle and time-consuming security review process, and the outdated “pony express” courier system have been duly noted. But worst of all, reporters discovered that being in a combat pool did not mean that one would witness combat. On any given day during the air war, as noted, a majority of the pools was grounded in Dhahran. And during the ground war being in the pool often meant simply that one would get to ride well behind the front lines with an escort uninterested in taking a drive into the dangerous traffic near the front.

No precise numbers are available on this issue, but it appears from anecdotal evidence that a majority of the reporters who accompanied US Army and Marine units during the ground war phase of Desert Storm did not see actual combat. Instead, they had to write war stories based solely on interviews with troops and commanders who had come back from the front lines to where the pools were located. Though there is nothing wrong with interviews, they are of course one of the journalist’s primary tools, any

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690 MacArthur, Second Front, pp. 166-167; Also critical of Desert Shield coverage opportunities was James LeMoyne, “Pentagon’s Strategy for the Press: Good News or No News,” New York Times, February 17, 1991
journalist who failed to witness the battles he or she reported would have been devastated.

Christopher Hanson reports a typical example of the problem faced in trying to cover the war as it happened. Hanson was a member of a combat pool attached to the Army's VII Corps and accompanied its Second Armored Cavalry regiment, which would lead one of the critical attacks into Iraq. In return for being allowed to ride with the unit, Hanson had to agree to ride with a public affairs officer at all times. Hanson consented, but found himself riding well behind the action with the regimental headquarters detachment. When he asked his public affairs escort if they could break away and join an M-1 or Bradley Fighting Vehicle squadron, he was put off. From behind the lines Hanson lamented, "The regiment's heavy armor is battling the Republican Guards along a twenty-mile front, but from this distance I can make no sense of the action. What could have been my biggest story ever is playing itself out, and I'm missing it." Hanson never did manage to witness combat during the brief offensive, but notes that even so his pool experience turned out to be more rewarding than most, and that many correspondents had wound up even further from combat than he.

Unilaterals

As a result of the pool system's restrictions on access to battlefield, most reporters wound up covering the war from their hotel, heavily dependent on the military for information. As Kim Murphy of the Los Angeles Times remarked, "A friend took a picture of me the other day taking notes [from a military briefing] in front of a television

692 Boot, "The Pool," p. 27 Other works back this conclusion. MacArthur, pp. 190-194

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set. That’s what being a war correspondent has come to.”693 A few hardy souls, however, refused to bow to military restrictions or the dangers of the desert.

These hardy souls numbered in the dozens, cumulatively, but it appears that far fewer were actually active at any given time, with the peak coming as reporters rushed to cover the liberation of Kuwait City near the end of the war. The reasons for this were fairly simple. First, of course, it was dangerous. Wandering through the desert without cities or obvious landmarks to guide oneself would be difficult enough, but the real trick was to find a friendly military unit while not detouring through a minefield or into enemy territory. The sad fate of CBS correspondent Bob Simon and his crew stands testimony to the dangers. Simon and his crew were taken hostage by the Iraqis after getting lost near the Kuwaiti border and held until after the war. They were beaten and otherwise mistreated while American bombs fell all around, on one occasion nearly killing them. Several other journalists were also taken hostage during the war, while many more managed to escape similar fates only through blind luck.694

A second reason for not going unilateral for many organizations was the expense and the lack of available manpower. Not all news organizations could afford the extra equipment a reporter venturing outside the pool system would need. Nor did every organization have enough people in Dhahran to spare one or more people trekking around in the desert, only sporadically sending stories home. Third, the prospect of covering a military on the battlefield must have loomed as a daunting task for the vast majority of reporters in the Gulf who had no military experience themselves, and no experience covering war. Knowing who and what to look for, not to mention what to say about them once having found them, would simply have exceeded most reporters’ limits of competence. Finally, of course, there was the threat of being detained, poorly treated (a


694 Bob Simon chronicles his ordeal in Forty Days (data)
few journalists were even beaten by US military personnel), and possibly deported during the biggest story of the decade. The correspondents who did go unilateral came overwhelmingly from the national newspapers, wire services, the television networks, and the newsmagazines. These organizations had reporters available who had covered the military and covered wars around the world, and they had the sophisticated technologies which would allow their reporters to operate in the desert without aid from the military. But for most, the uncertain benefits of traveling alone simply did not outweigh the many risks.695

To report from outside the pool system and without access to communications facilities in Dhahran required both ingenuity and good old-fashioned high technology. The technology, though advanced in terms of war coverage, were already standard fare for peacetime media operations. Several reporters rented jeeps equipped with cellular telephones, which allowed them to phone reports straight into their editors without having to suffer the delays of the military's courier system. Several correspondents also faxed their reports in from a hotel in Hafar al Batin, a Saudi town sixty miles from the Iraqi border and far from where they were allowed to go under public affairs guidelines. The biggest consumer of advanced technology, unsurprisingly, was television. Television, because it depends so heavily on equipment which is both bulky and obvious, had a much harder time undertaking unilateral coverage. Getting cameras past roadblocks was a much more difficult endeavor than just getting oneself past as print reporters could do. And to transmit television footage from the desert required an enormous logistical support system. David Green of CBS noted of his three vehicle caravan, "We had state-of-the-art equipment, seven boxes weighing about a ton. We had three generators, two satellite phones, two LORANs [navigation devices]. We had enough gas and enough water for from ten days to two weeks."696 Due to television's outsized needs, its big

695 Fialka, Hotel Warriors, pp. 56-57; Taylor, War and the Media, pp. 59-63

696 Fialka, Hotel Warriors, pp. 49-50
unilateral adventure came only near the end of the war, when the networks raced each other to Kuwait City to be the first to beam back pictures of its celebrating citizens and the victorious Marines.

Once equipped with the necessary technological gadgetry, a reporter had to make sure he stayed free of the military's long reach. Most unilaterals, it seems, were caught at least once by the military. By mid-February, according to one count, over two dozen had been detained while attempting to cover the war from outside the pool system. Nevertheless, many managed to evade the military for long stretches of time. Chris Hedges of the New York Times, for example, though detained briefly twice, reported independently for two months from the field. Hedges, who speaks Arabic, took refuge with Saudi families, dressed in military garb and painted his jeep to bluff his way through roadblocks, and bugged out whenever the military police showed up. For his efforts, he managed to spend much more time with troops preparing for war than most reporters in the pools. In general, however, despite their creativity, the military's rigid press policy made it difficult for unilaterals to spend as much time as they wanted with units in the field, or to piece together a coherent picture of the conflict.

The high points of the unilaterals' contribution to the press corps's overall news gathering efforts were beating the pool to the battle of Khafji and later entering Kuwait City before the Marines. At Khafji, firsthand unilateral reporting clashed with official statements about the fighting, and eventually forced US officials to recant. US military officials claimed initially that Saudi and Qatari forces had done all of the fighting to eject Iraqi forces from the Saudi town. In fact, as unilaterals had discovered, the Marines had provided the critical tactical air strikes and heavy artillery support, without which Saudi forces would have had a much more difficult time. When reports, including footage from

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unilateral television crews, reached the United States, the military had to admit the Marines’ role, which it had downplayed for the political purpose of praising the Saudis’ efforts.\textsuperscript{699} Later, in beating the pools and the Marines to Kuwait City, unilateralists mainly enjoyed being first, as there was little to report immediately except that the Iraqis had fled.\textsuperscript{700}

Apart from these journalistic coups the gains from going unilateral came more from salvaging one’s pride than from producing meaningful coverage of the war. Even Chris Hedges’ praise for the unilateralists reveals their limited gains:

The fine stories on the Egyptian forces filed by Forest Sawyer of ABC News and Tony Horwitz of The Wall Street Journal, for example, could only have been done by going outside the system. Managed information always has an unreal, stale quality. And while none of us broke scandals or uncovered gross abuses, we were able to present an uncensored picture of life at the front.\textsuperscript{701}

What Hedges fails to mention, of course, is that no one cared about the Egyptian forces. And conspicuously absent from his notes is any discussion of the contribution of unilateralists to true combat coverage. This is not surprising, since unilateralists played almost no role in covering combat after Khafji. The “flavor of life at the front” stories were important, no doubt, to a complete picture of the conflict. But unilateralists were not able to seize victory where the rest of the press corps had failed. John Fialka realistically summarizes the unilateralists’ contribution:

But a study of the coverage of the war shows that, despite the life-risking chances that many of the unilateralists took, they could operate only at the fringes of this war. For the most part they could not answer the question that kept Americans glued to their television sets and devouring newspapers: What was going on in the battlefield? With few exceptions,


\textsuperscript{700} Taylor, \textit{War and the Media}, pp. 241-246

\textsuperscript{701} Hedges, “The Unilateralists,”, p. 28
the lead stories were drawn from pool reports or official briefings and not from unilaterals' accounts.702

Covering the War from Baghdad

There was one other way to cover the war—from Baghdad. This remained primarily the province of television and in particular of CNN and Peter Arnett throughout the war. Several major American newspapers with correspondents in Baghdad pulled them out as the UN deadline approached, fearing the risks were too great. After the war started, the Iraqis expelled all foreign correspondents except Arnett, leaving him alone with a large slice of the world’s biggest story. Eventually the Iraqis allowed other television crews back in the country, but no one was as widely monitored, praised, or criticized for their war reporting as Arnett and CNN.

Reporting from Baghdad after it had suffered allied bombing was a technical challenge. CNN, for example, was only able to continue live reporting during the opening stages of the air war because it had secured months before from the Iraqi government a “four-wire” telephone link for $15,000 a month. The four-wire line allowed CNN to send a steady signal back to the US even when local power lines in Baghdad had been cut by the bombing. This gave CNN its first big prize on the first night of the air war, when its competitors’ broadcasts went up in smoke with the power lines, leaving Arnett and two colleagues with the only live (audio-only) reports from that dramatic scene. Arnett also made regular use throughout the war of an INMARSAT phone. The satellite phone was the size of a suitcase and was powered by a portable generator, and allowed CNN anchors in Atlanta to interview Arnett live.703

702 Fialka, Hotel Warriors, p. 46
703 Taylor, War and the Media, pp. 91-103
In addition to the technical hurdles, correspondents in Baghdad faced severe obstacles to. Reporting at the pleasure of the Iraqi government meant that they had neither autonomy nor access. They could go only where the Iraqis took them, report only on what the Iraqis let them, had to submit their copy to censorship, and were not allowed (for the most part) to broadcast live. The reporters had no access to Iraqi officials, or even in general to Iraqi citizens. They had no way to shed light on either crucial domestic political issues or on how the war was progressing on the Iraqi side. In short, the potential in Baghdad was quite limited.\(^{704}\)

These limitations fueled debate among journalists over the usefulness of coverage from Iraq. As Richard Beeston of *The Times* (London), who covered the war from Iraq, noted, "It became harder for journalists to justify their work, when it consisted exclusively of one topic (civilian casualties), which served the interests of the Iraqi war effort but failed to address the central questions of the war, namely, Saddam’s survivability, the morale of the Iraqi people and military and the country’s fighting capability."\(^{705}\) Reporters in the United States find it distasteful enough to allow the American government to take advantage of the press in this way and are always on guard against such situations. It is thus understandable that reporters would have had doubts.

Supporters of the media presence in Baghdad, on the other hand, pointed out that television reports from Iraq had revealed what otherwise would have been invisible to the public: the results of the ferocious allied bombing campaign. The graphic footage of the death of hundreds of Iraqi women and children at the Amiriya bunker/shelter, for example, revealed to the American public for the first time the other side of the air war—the fact that innocent people were dying. These pictures, argued some, were even more important given the US government’s efforts to portray the air war as a humane, high-

\(^{704}\) Taylor, *War and the Media*, pp. 87-133

\(^{705}\) Taylor, *War and the Media*, p. 123
tech way to wage war. Though the use of precision-guided munitions certainly made the bombing of Baghdad less destructive than past city bombing campaigns, CNN’s presence reminded people that even so, war has a terrible human cost.\textsuperscript{706}

CNN’s war reporting helped cement its international reputation. But many Americans were outraged that an American news organization should be serving up enemy-approved reports from Baghdad. It was obvious to everyone that the Iraqis would not have let Arnett or other journalists stay if they had not believed doing so would aid the Iraqi cause. Also clear to CNN watchers was the Iraqi strategy: Show the American public enough Iraqi civilian casualties to turn it against the war.\textsuperscript{707} CNN’s participation in this strategy offended many politicians in Washington. Twenty-one members of the House wrote a letter to CNN saying as much. And Senator Alan K. Simpson (R-Wyoming) complained bitterly in public about CNN’s presence in Baghdad and argued that Arnett “is what we used to call in my day a sympathizer.”\textsuperscript{708} Nor did CNN win many friends in the military. Colonel Harry G. Summers, the well-known author of \textit{On Strategy}, noted in congressional testimony that reporting from the enemy capital during World War II would have been treason, and argued that CNN’s reports were elements in Iraq’s psychological warfare strategy. CNN’s reports of captured allied pilots being forced by the Iraqis to criticize the war on evoked a similar conclusion from General Schwarzkopf:

\begin{quote}
And I didn’t like the idea that I was seeing them [the pilots] on CNN. I will have to state that openly. I did resent, you know, CNN aiding and abetting an enemy who was violating the Geneva Convention by putting,
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\end{footnotes}
you know, that's a clear violation of the Geneva Convention. Yet CNN was broadcasting them to the world; that bothers me.\textsuperscript{709}

In hindsight it may be of some comfort to those upset with CNN to realize that Iraq's propaganda attempts backfired almost completely. Instead of turning the American public against the war, if anything they stiffened American's resolve to deal harshly with Hussein. A poll taken in the wake of the Amiriya bombing incident found that 79\% of the public blamed Saddam Hussein and Iraq, not the US military, for the civilian deaths.\textsuperscript{710} And any sympathy Hussein might have generated by revealing the toll on his people was erased by his parading of captured pilots, obviously shaken and frightened, across American television screens.\textsuperscript{711} Perhaps even more reassuring to some, CNN's reports managed not to turn the public against the war but rather against CNN itself. CNN's military analyst, retired Air Force Major General Perry Smith, recounts that CNN's coverage from Baghdad spurred thousands of angry letters from viewers who simply could not understand what Arnett was doing there.\textsuperscript{712}

Regardless of its ultimate effect, CNN's reports from Baghdad reverberated in Washington with a potent resonance not generated by reports from the press pools in Saudi Arabia. Of the many reports which prompted administration concern, one instance deserves particular mention-- the bombing of the bunker/shelter in Amiriya. Images of the hundreds of civilians killed who had been inside provided the first graphic evidence of the air war's human toll, precisely the sort of thing presidents and militaries hate to see on television. The media immediately seized on the incident to illustrate that the

\textsuperscript{709} Taylor, \textit{War and the Media}, p. 107

\textsuperscript{710} Only 3\% blamed the US military in the poll. See Mueller, \textit{Policy and Opinion}, p. 319

\textsuperscript{711} On Iraq's mismanagement of the media, see Taylor, \textit{Propaganda and Persuasion}, pp. 87-133

\textsuperscript{712} Major General Perry M. Smith, \textit{How CNN Fought the War} (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1991) p. 32

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government's claims of precision bombing were exaggerated, and columnists began opining that too much more of such coverage could sap public support for the air war.\textsuperscript{713} The administration agreed, and as a result stopped bombing urban command centers to prevent antiwar sentiment from growing in response to the deaths of any more Iraqi civilians. Given the importance attached by the military to destroying military buildings in and around Baghdad, this response was a remarkable example of the power of the press during wartime to affect the prosecution of a war.\textsuperscript{714}

\textit{Press Coverage}\textsuperscript{715}

The massive outpouring of news from the Persian Gulf during Desert Storm provides compelling evidence of the ways in which government restrictions can influence wartime reporting. By limiting access to the battlefield, and thereby to military officers and their troops, the government forced the press to rely even more heavily than usual on senior government sources for news. This in turn limited the range of views and opinion found in news stories. By limiting and controlling access to the battlefield, the


\textsuperscript{714} Harry F. Noyes III, "Like It or Not, The Armed Forces Need the Media," \textit{Army}, June 1992, p. 32

government also ensured that once again there would be almost no press coverage of combat, particularly by television crews. The press was left to write combat stories based solely on interviews with those involved, without adding any detail or context gained from firsthand experience of the battles. Many journalists, unable to get near the real story, made do by writing fluff pieces about homesick troops or troops playing volleyball. In the hard news vacuum left by the media, the administration and military filled the airwaves and newspapers with their own optimistic versions of events, and with their own carefully chosen television pictures of combat. They, and not the press, had the upper hand in determining what would be front page news. Further, the restrictions left the press unable to verify rosy official statements, a fact that became clear after the war as journalists began to poke holes in the very statements they had reported as fact weeks or months before. Press coverage of the Gulf War never became an obstacle to the Bush Administration, and may well have helped it to bolster public support throughout the war.

Those who worry about the impact of combat coverage on public opinion could not have been happier about the coverage of Desert Storm. The air war, as air wars usually are, was very difficult to cover except from air bases. Nothing of interest happens at air bases, of course, except that planes take off and land there. This was in fact the bulk of television’s contribution to air war coverage, planes in the night taking off on bombing missions. Reporters, with one exception, never managed to accompany a bombing mission, and had no practical way to venture into Iraqi territory to find out what impact the bombing campaign was having. Except for CNN coverage from Baghdad during this time, press coverage was limited to recitations of military-provided statistics: how many sorties had flown that day, during the war to date, what the presumed success rate was of those missions, what targets had been struck, and the like. As a result, press coverage of the air war was bland, and quickly took a back seat to the military’s other offering: gun-camera footage of precision guided bombs closing in on their targets, flying down air
shafts and destroying them neatly. These images, not independent work by journalists, became the most memorable air war press coverage.

As limited as press coverage of the air war was, the clearest example of the effect of the reporting restrictions was coverage of the ground war. The lack of eyewitness newspaper accounts of combat and the complete absence of television evidence that a ground war was taking place made it clear that the government’s press restrictions had succeeded for the third time in a decade in preventing the American public from seeing, hearing, or reading about the horrors of war while it was underway.716 As Guy Gugliotta, a reporter for the Washington Post, complained:

To hear the military officials tell it, yesterday was the biggest day of the war: the Iraqi Army was in full retreat; Marines were on the outskirts of Kuwait; U.S. Army tanks were fighting Iraq’s Republican Guard; thousands of enemy soldiers were dropping their rifles, raising their hands and marching into allied custody.

There are 142 combat pool reporters accompanying U.S. ground forces in Kuwait, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. Yesterday, hardly any of them filed a dispatch that arrived in the United States in time for yesterday’s evening news or today’s morning newspaper. And none provided a firsthand account of ground combat. By design or by default, the biggest day of the war was one of the most unreported days.717 (my italics)

Instead of vivid and moving press coverage of the first hours of the long awaited ground war, the American public got General Norman Schwarzkopf’s famous briefings. Instead of independent assessments of how the ground war had gone, there was Schwarzkopf’s personal assessment. Instead of graphic footage of tanks in the desert, viewers were greeted by Schwarzkopf’s jowly face, flushed with excitement and success. Schwarzkopf, who had begged Cheney to relax his news blackout after it became clear


that the war was a rout, went on television and told the nation and the world that the allies were cruising to victory, while journalists sat at his feet and took notes.\textsuperscript{718}

The press' inability to offer compelling coverage of the war allowed the military to step in and take over as both news source and news provider. The military's ability to provide the public with information without sifting it through the usual filter of the adversarial press was for some the most important aspect of the government's success. As veteran press-watcher David Gergen notes,

\begin{quote}
The argument over pools, as important as it is, unfortunately misses the larger significance of what the military achieved in press management during the war: an unprecedented dominance over the pictures and words conveyed by the media. . . In the Persian Gulf the military came ready to provide its own home videos, better than anything the press could concoct, and the pictures that burned their way into the public psyche were of precision-guided bombs moving in on their targets—perfect bull's-eyes, no blood, thank you. . . The press simply could not compete.\textsuperscript{719}
\end{quote}

With the military scooping the press at its daily briefings and providing the most exciting television footage of the war, correspondents were left to write what were often called "hi-mom stories." CBS producer Lucy Spiegel listed some of the stories that journalists found themselves doing for lack of access to hard news:

Arrival of troops; not enough mail; the weather: it's too hot, it's too cold; fill in the blank: the helicopter doesn't work, the gun won't work, too much sand, too much dirt, too much whatever; women are going to war; husbands and wives are going to war; should women be going to war?; making a reunion between the husbands and the wives or the wives and the husbands. . .\textsuperscript{720}


\textsuperscript{719} Though Gergen misses the pool's direct impact on the media's ability to find news to compete with in the first place, his statement is otherwise accurate. See David Gergen, "The Unfettered Presidency," in Joseph S. Nye, Jr., and Roger K. Smith, eds., \textit{After the Storm: Lessons from the Gulf War} (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1992) p. 188

\textsuperscript{720} Cited in MacArthur, \textit{Second Front}, p. 167
These stories certainly are worth reading, but do nothing to add to a reader or viewer’s knowledge of the real factors behind impending war and its outcome once underway. Nor, due to the military’s escorts, were these stories even as revealing as they might otherwise have been. With troops so worried about the consequences should they say anything negative in front of an escort officer, most reporters believed that they were not often told how things really were among Desert Storm units.

Not even the media’s most dreaded weapon—live television coverage—could operate effectively under the government’s restrictions. Despite much discussion about CNN and the Gulf War being the first real-time war, the Gulf War was in fact a far cry from what people have predicted and feared from live television war coverage. The only thing remotely resembling live war coverage seen on television were a few Patriot-Scud engagements over Israel and Saudi Arabia. They made dramatic television, but hardly could be said to mark new heights in war reporting. The most exciting live coverage was essentially a live telephone conversation played over television as Peter Arnett and company crouched in their Baghdad hotel room on the first night of the air war. This too had been done before, over the radio, by Edward R. Murrow during the bombing of London in World War Two. To the dismay of the networks, few television crews came anywhere near the battlefield when it counted, and even fewer sent back material in time to be useful for the evening news.

Some press critics argued that even without the restrictions the press would have done a poor job in covering the war. Michael Massing argues that the press worked under the delusion that they could and should report the Gulf War as they had Vietnam. But Desert Storm, a large-scale high-intensity conventional war, demanded a different approach. Reporters, he argues, should have tried harder to gain perspective on the war by stepping away from the battlefield and analyzing the government’s statements and actions.\footnote{Scott Armstrong argues that this weakness became evident during Desert Storm, \textit{Another Front}, \textit{Columbia Journalism Review}, May/June 1991, pp. 23-24}
Shield, "...American journalism, focused mostly on the parochial issues of invasion, hostages, and occupation, has by and large missed a chance to provide a meaningful context for the dramatic events."\textsuperscript{722}

Peter Braestrup and several military commentators complain that today's media fared poorly in Desert Storm because they were largely unprepared for their task—coherently reporting a massive and complex political and military operation. Very few journalists have served in the military, only a small handful cover the Pentagon or military issues on a regular basis, and even fewer have spent any time in the field covering war. The result, say critics, was that the press could not make independent judgments of the military situation in the Gulf. Adding insult to injury, their ignorance of military affairs made journalists look foolish during briefings as they asked uninformed questions.\textsuperscript{723} Jon Katz notes that television in particular suffered from an institutional lack of resources to comprehend and intelligently report the war: "Yet for years now the networks have been busily tossing onto the streets the very researchers, producers, commentators, and staff that could have helped carry out such a role. Instead we saw the sorry spectacle of network news hiring a squadron of generals to cover the war."\textsuperscript{724} A more compassionate statement of this argument might be that, as Philip Knightley has argued, some wars simply transcend the ability of journalism to understand and explain on a day-by-day basis.\textsuperscript{725} Either way, press coverage suffered, in the view of many, because journalists did not have the necessary tools to make sense of the war.


\textsuperscript{724} Jon Katz, "Collateral Damage to Network News," \textit{Columbia Journalism Review}, March/April 1991, p. 29


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A final test of how the government's restrictions affected reporting is to compare official statements reported by the press during the war with the facts as they came to be known after the war. In the case of the Gulf War, as in Grenada and Panama, revelations after the war indicate that the press' lack of independence and access allowed and encouraged the government to mislead the press by exaggerating its successes and omitting mention of its failures and embarrassments. Even a reporter with the maximum possible access to the military found that truth could be scarce. Washington Post reporter Molly Moore, despite having accompanied Lt. General Walter Boomer throughout the war, argues that, "I learned more in the two weeks after the war than I learned during the entire war. . . I think we're going to keep finding out things . . . nobody knew about at the time, in the ongoing reporting process. . . The American public got only the military view of this war for the most part. There was not access to get independent information."\textsuperscript{726}

The most common military half-truths of the war were its reports of the effectiveness of its various weapons. In the opening days of the air war, Lt. General Kelly asserted that 80% of allied sorties were successful. Later, when pressed, he admitted that it was difficult to assess the damage done by those missions, and the 80% figure meant only that 80% of the aircraft flew over their intended targets and dropped their payloads. It was only after the war, however, that the top officer of the Air Force, General Merrill McPeak, revealed that during the first ten days of the air war the weather had been so bad that on 40% of the missions pilots could not even see their primary targets.\textsuperscript{727}

Other examples of exaggerated success were the Tomahawk cruise missile and the Patriot missile system. Though the Navy claimed a 98% effectiveness rating for the Tomahawk, it turned out that this meant only that 98% of the missiles were successfully

\textsuperscript{726} MacArthur, Second Front, p. 159

\textsuperscript{727} Sharkey, Under Fire, pp. 150-152
launched. In fact the Navy did not know how many missiles actually hit their intended targets when they were claiming this success rate, and only much later was it admitted that only 50% had struck their targets. The Patriot missile’s performance turned out to be a tangled web of misperceptions. The military initially claimed a near-perfect record of intercepting Scuds, and the administration touted the system widely. Later investigation by both independent scientists and the US General Accounting Office, however, revealed that the method of rating the Patriot’s success was simply to verify that a Patriot had been launched at an incoming Scud, without assessing whether the Patriot actually intercepted it. These investigations found that the Patriot’s success was suspect, and eventually forced the military to back down further and further from their claims of success for the Patriot. Government investigators now argue that it is possible that the Patriot intercepted only one Scud throughout the war, hardly living up to its invincible image of Desert Storm.

Journalists were also upset to discover that contrary to the Pentagon’s carefully crafted impressions, the air war had not been nearly as “surgical” as they had been led to believe. While all of the strike camera footage showed precision-guided bombs flying unerringly to their targets, only 9% of all the bombs dropped on Iraq and Iraqi forces were “smart bombs.” The bulk of those dropped were unguided, many of them having been dropped on Iraqi troops from the B-52s that reporters were never allowed to go near during the war.


730 Sharkey, Under Fire, pp. 150-152
The list of half-truths and deceptions from Desert Storm is a long as the list of journalists who covered it; each has a story purporting to prove the government's lack of respect for the truth. In most cases, however, journalists have indicted the military and the administration for engaging in the perpetual game of public relations. The military had much to gain from making sure that the public heard the best possible interpretation of the performance of its weapon systems. And if the press did not figure out that the military was sugarcoating its assessments for public consumption, it had only itself to blame in many cases. The number of smart bombs in the entire US arsenal, for example, would not have represented much more than 9% of the total number dropped on Iraq. The Pentagon provided the latter number every day, and the first number was readily available to any curious journalist. There was no great conspiracy to fool the press into believing every bomb dropped was a smart bomb. Reporters never figured it out and the military simply saw no reason to mention such an obvious fact, especially since to mention it would do it no good. The media's failure to challenge Pentagon statistics with careful research thus reflects as much on their lack of preparation to cover war as it does the government's desire to paint a pretty picture of its accomplishments.

There is one story, however, which illustrates the very real potential for much more important issues to be hidden from the press during wartime. Patrick Sloyan of Newsday reported in September of 1991 on the use of US tanks fitted with plows to bury Iraqi troops alive as US forces breached Iraqi lines during the ground war. According to Sloyan's sources in the 1st Infantry Division (Mechanized), perhaps as many as a thousand Iraqis were buried alive by attacking US units. Although there had been a press pool attached to the 1st, no pool journalists accompanied the units carrying out the operation, nor did the military volunteer the information to them. It was not until Sloyan got wind of the incident and investigated that it became public knowledge.731

731 Patrick Sloyan, "Buried alive-US tanks used plows to kill thousands in Gulf War trenches," Newsday, September 12, 1991
such grim stories are not what either the military or the administration would have wanted to see in newspapers or on television news shows during the war. Sloyan’s story would have been automatic front-page news. But the military delayed its publication for months by not mentioning the incident, by which point the story only made the inside pages even in Newsday. Sloyan’s story may be the first to appear only on the inside pages and yet win a Pulitzer Prize, as it did in April 1992. The fact that it took so long for such a remarkable incident to come to light suggests that the press simply does not even know where to begin asking questions about what happened during Desert Storm. There was so much journalists did not see or hear during the war that it is impossible to be sure whether or not there is more the public does not know about the war and how it was fought. Sloyan’s story should serve not as an example of how the truth will eventually be revealed, but as an example of how well the government’s restrictions worked in keeping the press from reporting any similar disturbing instances during the war when such revelations might have had some political impact on Bush or the military.

Taken in its entirety, press coverage emerged as a huge plus for the administration. Not only did the press fail to produce war-ending or even stomach-turning photographs, film, or reporting, the press in fact seemed to play the role of administration booster at key moments during the crisis. As Arthur Rowse notes of August 1990 television coverage, “One constant that could be observed in early coverage by all networks, however, was that the tone was favorable, if not downright solicitous, to the Bush Administration.”

Newspaper editorials around the country also supported Bush and despite raising the occasional nigglng issue, never seriously challenged Bush’s decision

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732 Arthur E. Rowse, “The Guns of August,” Columbia Journalism Review, March/April 1991, p. 27. Rowse points out that even the conservative media watchdog group the Center for Media and Public Affairs found that 76% of all references to Bush during the first two weeks of the crisis were favorable. For a group that specializes in complaining about the opposite this finding seems all the more remarkable. Also finding an extremely uncritical press during the early months of Desert Shield are William A. Dorman and Steven Livingston, “News and Historical Content: The Establishing Phase of the Persian Gulf Policy Debate,” in W. Lance Bennett and David L. Paletz, eds., Taken by Storm: The Media, Public Opinion, and US Foreign Policy in the Gulf War (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994)
to make war, his rationale for doing so, or his methods of making it. In fact, say many, the press jumped on the war bandwagon so completely it helped Bush build support for war. Marvin Kalb, former CBS correspondent and current head of the Joan Shorenstein Barone Center for The Press, Politics, and Public Policy at Harvard University, argued that: “Even a sympathetic look at television coverage suggests that there is a certain whiff of jingoism on the airwaves and in print, that there is not enough detached, critical skepticism. When the boys go off to war, the press goes with them.”

Importantly, there is reason to believe that the administration credits a good deal of their success to the restrictive public affairs policy and their public relations efforts. Secretary of Defense Cheney argued that Gulf War coverage was “better coverage” than “any other war in history” and noted of the Pentagon’s press policy “I look at it as a model of how the Department ought to function.” One of the Pentagon’s star briefers, Lt. General Thomas Kelly, agreed in a remark that almost everyone on both sides of the government/press divide would agree with:

For the first time ever, the administration—the Department of Defense—was talking directly to the American people, using the vehicle of a press briefing, whereas in Vietnam, everything was filtered through the press. I think that was a major advantage for the government. The press, wittingly or unwittingly, between Riyadh and Washington, was giving us an hour-and-a-half a day to tell our story to the American people... the American people were getting their information from the government—not from the press... .

In addition, the postwar admission by administration officials of the difficulty in shaping the news in the absence of wartime conditions reveals how the government did in

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733 Everette E. Dennis, et al., The Media at War: The Press and the Persian Gulf Conflict (New York: Gannett Foundation Media Center, Columbia University) pp. 51-64


736 Cited in Sharkey, Under Fire, p. 129
fact rely on press restrictions to help officials sell their message without interference from journalists.

Finally, postwar coverage of the Persian Gulf supports the view that government restrictions played a key role in subduing the influence of the press. The Bush Administration, eager to withdraw American troops from the Gulf quickly, was not inclined to aid the Kurds in their uprising against Saddam Hussein, despite having urged them to throw off Saddam’s yoke. In the face of rising protests from media commentators about the inhumanity of leaving the Kurds to be killed and starved as they fled Iraq, the administration stood behind its policy of noninvolvement. In part this was because the administration believed that the public was happy with the military victory and did not want its troops stuck in the Middle East any longer than necessary. Armed with this public support, one White House aide argued, “A hundred Safire columns will not change the public’s mind. There is no political downside to our policy.”

But as television cameras began to seek out the Kurdish refugee camps on the Iraq-Turkey border and showed horrible pictures of starving children and the victims of Hussein’s brutal repression, the Bush Administration started singing another tune. In less than two weeks from the first television reports of the Kurds—reports that would have been prohibited during Desert Storm—the Bush Administration had announced Operation Provide Comfort, during which the US military helped set up encampments for the Kurds while deterring attacks on them by Iraqi forces. Postwar television coverage had forced the Bush Administration to reverse its policy 180 degrees, a feat previously unmatched by the media during Desert Shield and Desert Storm. Whether the media would have wielded such power during the war if allowed to report more freely cannot be known. But it is clear that under the prevailing restrictions their chances of doing so were small.


738 Schorr, “Ten Days,” pp. 21-23
Press Reaction to Desert Storm

In the wake of its defeat in the Gulf, the press once again accused the government of breaching the public's trust by imposing tight controls on journalists. And once again, news executives fired off letters of protest to Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney. The press' party line, as enunciated in a letter to Cheney from the editors of fifteen major news organizations, ran as follows: "Virtually all news organizations agree that the flow of information to the public was blocked, impeded, or diminished by the policies and practices of the Department of Defense." Many critics of the government's policy were more passionate and less polite, such as John R. MacArthur:

If the Bush Administration's censorship by delay; censorship by direct intimidation of soldiers and interference with pool reporters doing interviews; censorship by outright arrest of unilateral reporters; censorship by preventing reporters from seeing anything interesting; and censorship of pool dispatches such as Bruni's is accepted as standard press relations, we are in great danger indeed.

But unlike in the earlier instances, many in the press began to blame their own for at least some of the press' failings. Journalists, critics complained, were too unwilling to try to get around Pentagon restrictions, and accepted too readily the government's information monopoly in the Gulf. Worse, some claimed, many news organizations in effect helped the military to curb the press by shutting their smaller competitors out of the pools. As Anthony Lewis of the New York Times wrote, "the control and the censorship, outrageous as they were, cannot excuse the compliant, unquestioning attitude

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740 MacArthur, Second Front, p. 192

of the American press. We glorified war and accepted its political premise, forsaking the independence and skepticism that justify freedom of the press."  

These harsh self appraisals, however, remained confined to professional journals and op-ed columns. Even before the war it was apparent that the vast majority of news organizations were less interested in vigorously challenging the government’s press policy than they were in vigorously ensuring that they would have the most access possible given the situation in which they found themselves. When *The Nation* initiated a court challenge on January 10, 1991, suing the Pentagon for restricting access to the battlefield, no major American news organization joined the lawsuit, even to the extent of filing an *amicus curiae* brief. Just as in the wake of Grenada, most news organizations did not find it in their best interest to take on the government so directly. Once again, some feared that losing in court to the government could pave the way for tighter restrictions in the future. But in this case, it also seems that the major newspapers and television networks were unwilling to offend the government, and thereby risk losing their privileged seat at the war, for an uncertain legal victory which would come long after the war was over.  

After the war, the press, fragmented and competitive, moving on to other stories, proved again unable to improve its lot. Unable and perhaps unwilling to find a way to present a more united front to the Pentagon, a small group of news executives met to hammer out what they felt should be the guiding principles of wartime public affairs. They then sent a letter to Cheney arguing that the government must work with them to incorporate these principles into future policy. Cheney met with the group in September 1991, but waved off their central complaint that press coverage of the Gulf War had been

742 Anthony Lewis, "To See Ourselves. . ." *New York Times*, May 6, 1991; This is also a major theme running throughout MacArthur’s book.

743 MacArthur, *Second Front*, pp. 34-35; The court documents can be found in the *Pentagon Rules on Media Access*, pp. 1255-1545

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poor as a result of the restrictions. Cheney could afford to be confident dealing bluntly with the press; polls showed that the public had overwhelmingly approved the military's restrictions on the press and had found press coverage quite satisfactory. Mirroring the manner in which he had dealt with the press during Desert Shield, Cheney directed Pete Williams to meet with press representatives to work out improvements to the system and to agree on the principles which should guide its creation and implementation. By January of 1992, a working committee of Pentagon and press representatives had agreed on all issues except the need for security review. But anyone who believed by this point that such discussions were a good indicator of how things would turn out during war would have had to have been asleep during the entire Gulf crisis. As we shall see in Chapter Six, future conflicts will certainly reveal subsequent rounds of the government/press struggle over the news.744

Conclusions

Even more directly than it had in Panama, the Bush Administration took the lead in imposing onerous restrictions on the press in the Gulf. Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney laid down the principles and drafted the broad outlines of military public affairs policy, and oversaw the military's implementation of his efforts. The administration's decisions both to restrict and to rely heavily on the press to sell its policies to the public stem from the same source: the transformation of the media's role in politics and the government/press relationship since Vietnam. With a press more adversarial, more pervasive, more technologically capable, and more central to American politics and public opinion formation than ever before, the administration believed that press coverage of the war would play a critical part in Bush's success or failure during the crisis. In the view of White House officials, it was imperative that they, and not the media, set the tone

of that coverage. To allow journalists to have a free hand in reporting the war would have led to dilution of the president’s message, would have forced the administration to answer more difficult questions and to respond to television coverage of bloody combat scenes and human suffering, all of which would weaken Bush’s support and his chances for winning a big political victory.

Fortunately for the administration, the restrictions on the press in the Gulf War marked a modern peak in government control. Press access to the battlefield, to the machinery of war, and to the men and women who fought the war, was extremely constrained. Military officers kept a watchful eye on journalists to make sure they did not go anywhere they might find surprising or unwelcome news. The government’s press policies kept most correspondents cooped up in Dhahran and Riyadh, covering the war from their hotel and from military briefings. The result of these restrictions was that the government enjoyed significant “information superiority” and considerable power to manage the news. Journalists, who could not challenge official statements or offer the public alternative information, were forced to report primarily whatever it was the government chose to reveal on a given day.

The administration took great advantage of its discovery that it controlled the public stage and that no one else was talking. Bush Administration officials fanned out across Washington and the world during the crisis to convince the public that their approach to confronting Iraq was the best course of action. Once the war was underway, they used the daily briefings to highlight, and often exaggerate, their successes, while omitting mention of those issues less favorable to their policies which might threaten their public support. The administration’s task of building and maintaining congressional and public support for the war were undoubtedly made easier as a result of its ability to manage the news so well. Without an independent press in the desert to challenge administration arguments, administration critics had little ammunition with which to attack its policies.
The military, which received an undeserved lion’s share of the blame for press restrictions, in fact showed again how little preparation for public affairs it had ever managed to carry out. The dominant characteristic of its public affairs performance was incompetence. The military once again let its policies be swept aside by events and White House interests, it did not devise Gulf War restrictions as revenge for Vietnam. None of the services were prepared to deal with the press in such a situation. The Gulf War should thus drive the final nail in the coffin of the argument that the military had long been plotting to avenge its Vietnam loss to the media. Those journalists who experienced the military’s distaste for the press up close can, however, be forgiven that they over generalized from their own observations. It may indeed be true that many officers made life miserable for the press based on their Vietnam experiences with the press. But these ground level snapshots do not add up to a whole. Overall, the military’s public affairs policy in the Gulf was driven by civilian actions, not by military. The JCS guidance written after Panama was never consulted. And again, the military improvised its methods for implementing public affairs policies. That they erred in almost every instance against freedom of the press and in favor of their own parochial interests speaks less of a Vietnam hangover than simple professional interest. The military’s preoccupation with operational security is real, as is its desire to garner public sympathy and support for its actions. Dealing with journalists eager to find problems and report failures does not encourage the military toward openness once war has begun, although the Marine Corps’s more friendly treatment of the press shows the power of professional interests can sometimes outweigh the military’s institutional dislike of reporters.

The government’s efforts to restrict the press succeeded in making an enormous impact on the character of press coverage. For the third time since Vietnam, the press failed to provide firsthand combat coverage, furnished few hard news pieces on tactics or strategy, broadcast almost no live coverage of any substance, and in general failed to convince viewers and readers that journalists had actually been witness to the events
purported to take place. Journalists decried this coverage, arguing that it constrained the public's ability to judge the war for itself. Administration officials, on the other hand, continued to argue that Gulf War coverage was excellent, and that the public had heard and seen the full story of the conflict. They could do so knowing that the public, flush with the excitement of war, supported the government controls on the press and felt satisfied with the press coverage it received.

The press discovered to its dismay that things could get worse than they had been in either Grenada or Panama. It finally became clear to journalists during Desert Storm that the press faced two towering obstacles to getting the kind of access cum independence it wanted. First, the government obviously controlled those things to which access was desired: the troops, the bases, the tanks, and thus the battlefield itself. Why journalists did not fully understand this before it not clear, but during Desert Storm it dawned on the press that if the military did not want journalists to speak with its troops, there was in fact very little the press could do about it. Second, the fundamental nature of the press—fragmented, competitive, unwilling to act collectively due to vastly differing interests—made it impossible for the press to oppose the government's restrictions effectively. Had the press been able to speak with one voice to the Pentagon, it undoubtedly would have been able to improve its lot, especially had news organizations been willing to play hardball and threaten the government with damning front-page stories if access were not forthcoming. Of course, no such act was possible for such a diverse group of independent and self-interested organizations. Instead, each organization tried to better its own position, often at the expense of others, under the system as it was already set up. Thus, for all practical purposes the government's tight control over the press went uncontested.
America now wages war in the Media Age. Journalists in foreign capitals interviewing enemy leaders, presidential diplomacy via CNN, Pentagon films of guided missiles, and live television newscasts from the war zone have become as much a part of war as death and destruction. Even more important, they are all most people will ever know of war personally. News-hungry publics rely on the media to tell them how wars are going, how their troops are fighting, and how their political leaders are leading. News coverage of conflict shapes what the public thinks and feels about its military and its presidents in times of war. What makes the evening news, therefore, matters more to officials than ever before.

In the wake of this thesis' findings, several tasks remain. First, we must summarize the evidence which has shown that the conventional wisdom surrounding the modern growth of wartime press restrictions is misguided. Relatedly, we must ask why the conventional wisdom has dominated our thinking about wartime government/press affairs for so long. Second, we must answer questions raised by the success of Reagan and Bush in using the media to their advantage during conflict about the factors involved with such success. When and why will presidents be successful in restricting the press and plying their public relations tactics? When might they fail? Third, we must assess the implications of recent presidential success in controlling the press and of White
House reliance on media strategy in time of war. Finally, we must consider the future of
government media strategy, press responses to it, and the likely outcomes of the
government/press struggle in future conflicts.

Deflating the Conventional Wisdom

The evidence presented in this thesis prompts a quick and thorough rejection of the
conventional wisdom which has dominated thinking about wartime government/press
relations since Vietnam. Almost every academic, journalistic, and military account to
date cites Vietnam as the driving force and the military as the primary culprit behind
press control from Grenada to the Gulf. But as each case here has illustrated, history does
not support any of the conventional wisdom's central tenets. The evidence comes in two
forms: First, this thesis had identified numerous direct historical contradictions to the
conventional wisdom's version of the evolution of military public affairs after Vietnam
and the creation of press policies in post-Vietnam conflicts. Second, complementary
indirect evidence comes from an analysis of the Reagan and Bush Administration
responses to the rise of the Media Age and their public relations efforts during the
conflicts studied here.

The first stake in the heart of the conventional wisdom comes from an analysis of
the military's public affairs development after Vietnam. Three central points emerge.
First, Vietnam did not prompt innovation or change in military public affairs policies.
Vietnam did wreak havoc on the military as an institution. And it did convince military
officers, rightly or wrongly, that the press could play an enormous independent and
negative role during war. Despite this, public affairs remained a stepchild mission within
the military, which prefers to focus on the tasks associated with fighting wars than
reporting them, and no major reforms were initiated in the wake of the war.

Second, current public affairs policies owe more at any rate to post-Grenada reforms than to post-Vietnam reforms. The mechanics of public affairs in fact did not
change at all until the Sidle Panel recommended changes in the wake of Urgent Fury. The panel's recommendations, furthermore, flowed from the peculiar and particular circumstances of the Grenada operation and borrowed from the public affairs guidelines in Vietnam. They were not a rejection of the Vietnam system, but of the Urgent Fury procedures. Thus, contrary to the conventional wisdom, Vietnam did not lead the military to public affairs innovations; critical changes in public affairs came not after 1973, but after 1983.

Third, the fact that the military came almost without any public affairs plans to both Grenada and Panama, and managed to fail to develop a sustainable press plan for the Gulf War despite the long lead time, reveals that the military, despite some modest reform efforts, has never developed a coherent plan to deal with the press at all, much less to do so in an aggressive and restrictive manner. If the military had responded to Vietnam by making plans to restrict the press in future conflicts as the conventional wisdom suggests, one would expect to have seen far more coordinated efforts to do so. Instead we have seen the opposite. This are hardly the actions of an institution actively seeking to avoid the press problems of Vietnam.

The second major blow to the conventional wisdom is struck by evidence from the cases that the White House, not the military, bears primary responsibility for creating and imposing press restrictions. White House management of press policy and specifically over military public affairs policy has become more overt over time. In Grenada, while many details of press policy making remain murky, it is certain that a high ranking Reagan official, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, gave the go ahead for the press lock-out from the island. Most observers also believe that it was Reagan's Chief of Staff James Baker who later gave the order to the military to lift the ban. Moreover, Admiral James Metcalf, the commander of the Urgent Fury task force who publicly took responsibility for instituting the press blackout, recanted in a speech a decade later, admitting that the order had "come from above."
In Panama civilian micromanagement of public affairs became more obvious as Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney made two decisions knowing that they would seriously hamper the media’s ability to cover the fast-moving conflict. First, Cheney decided to call up the Washington, D. C. based press pool despite the fact that military public affairs policy would have dictated that a pool be created in Panama. This decision not only made it difficult for the military to plan for the press, it made covering the conflict almost impossible for those journalists already in Panama at the time by ensuring that the military would not help them. The second decision Cheney made was to call up and send the press pool to Panama too late to witness the critical opening battles.

Finally, in the Gulf War civilian control reached its modern zenith. President Bush gave Cheney the lead in crafting the restrictive press policies that the military would later implement. That Cheney indeed represented the major force shaping press policy is revealed by the central document drafted by Navy Captain Ron Wildermuth outlining the military’s public affairs policy, Annex Foxtrot, which was based in large measure on Cheney’s guidance. And while the military made plans to implement the policy, Cheney and Williams provided cover by obscuring the aggressive nature of the restrictions in discussions with news organizations. Once the war had begun, Cheney and even Bush himself continued to make the major decisions dealing with press relations, from what military officials should tell the press about breaking events to which officers should do the Pentagon’s daily briefing.

Though this evidence alone is enough to discredit the conventional wisdom, it takes on even greater persuasive power when combined with an explanation for the motives behind White House attempts to restrict the press. The White House has taken the lead in promoting aggressive press restrictions because the rise of the Media Age has made presidents both more scared of the press’ impact on opinion during war and more dependent on public relations to secure political victories than ever before.
The Media Age has taken shape as the press has become an ever more critical element of the American social and political system since Vietnam. The press today plays a central role in every political action taken, from running for office and announcing policy proposals, to passing judgment on elected leaders' performance. In doing so the press has superseded more traditional institutions in political life, such as political parties, community leaders, and the church. Not only has the press come to play a more central role in politics, journalists and officials now face each other more as adversaries than friendly rivals. What the press reports is more likely than ever to be critical of government actions, thereby making it considerably more difficult for officials to pursue their policy and political goals. Presidents thus believe with good reason that they must work harder to get their messages to the public and to ensure that they will not be buried in criticism from their opponents. The press now also wields technologies which enable it to gather more information and disseminate it almost instantaneously from the far reaches of the globe to American living rooms, forcing faster responses from government to breaking events and holding presidents responsible for happenings around the world. In the realm of foreign policy, the press plays a key role in aggravating the splits in elite opinion which have widened since Vietnam and the end of the Cold War, making it more difficult for presidents to build support for foreign adventures. Finally, the pressures of the Media Age have pushed White Houses to adopt increasingly sophisticated mechanisms for selling its messages to the public. Media strategy has taken a seat next to political strategy in the day-to-day business of governing America.

Presidents have responded to the rise of the Media Age with a new strategy for waging war. The new strategy features overwhelming military force aimed at a quick and decisive victory on the battlefield, coupled with press restrictions and public relations for a decisive victory on the homefront. The Media Age has heightened presidential fears about the already dangerous connection between casualties and public opinion. Afraid that press coverage of the negative aspects of war, especially American suffering or
death, could turn the public against even a conflict whose purpose people believed in, presidents have adopted a strategy aimed at minimizing both American casualties and the media's access to the battlefield. This strategy, they hope, will obscure the human costs and the horrors of war while allowing White House public relations efforts to justify the war, to convince the public that it was worthwhile, to forestall criticism of the president's handling of the conflict, and to ensure that the president receives a political victory and popular support in the wake of a military victory.

The accuracy of this explanation for White House actions is clear from the case studies: the new strategy starred in each of the three most recent American conflicts. In Grenada the press did not even make it near the battlefield until long after the fighting was over. No American casualties, dead or wounded, made the newspapers or television. Nor was the press able to investigate whether or not the invasion was truly necessary, despite the doubts many had at the time. The Reagan Administration and the military supplied all of the information about how the fighting went and used their information monopoly to keep criticism of the invasion to a minimum. It was not until much later, therefore, that the many military miscues committed during the operation came to light. Meanwhile, Reagan appeared on prime time television to announce a great victory over communism, thereby earning a boost in public support, putting the disaster of the Lebanon bombing behind him, and improving his reelection prospects.

In Panama, Bush Administration officials worked to make sure that the press did not witness the crucial openings scenes of the invasion, despite the institutional arrangements designed to guarantee its presence on the battlefield. And while the press was bottled up by the military in the press pool, the administration spoke in glowing terms of how well the operation was going, stressing how evil Manuel Noriega was and the need to capture him, and glossed over any real details of how the fighting was really going, especially those actions which left Americans dead or wounded. The result, as
with Grenada, was that the president enjoyed a political boost in the wake of a quick military victory.

The new strategy reached its peak during the Gulf War. The Bush Administration applied both the military and the media side of the strategy on an unprecedented scale. Not only did the administration wield the largest military force since Vietnam with speed and great effectiveness, it also restricted the largest number of journalists from getting to the battlefield in history. The administration did both of these while providing a constant flow of upbeat information about the conflict, avoiding the gritty and painful aspects of war, emphasizing the positive. Again, the result of the military victory was a huge political boost for the president.

In each case, the White House felt that achieving a military victory was not enough. Even a decisive military victory could be tarnished if the press were to show the public too much of the horror and confusion of war. In trying to keep the public focused on the larger goals of the operations, the White House hoped to avoid the sort of press coverage which would lead the public to judge a conflict by a single event. What might have happened if a television crew had accompanied the Rangers in Grenada when they discovered that they had only rescued half of the medical students, and that the other half were vulnerable on another campus miles away? How would the public have viewed the Panama invasion if television crews had shown the public the various friendly fire incidents that claimed eighteen American lives in Panama? Would support for the Gulf War have vanished if greater casualties had been sustained during the ground war with the press there to witness them? Some might argue that the public would have supported these conflicts anyway, but from their actions it is clear that presidents and their officials refuse to take such a gamble. Press restrictions and public relations have therefore become as much a part of the new strategy as military operations.

*Explaining the Continuing Popularity of the Conventional Wisdom*
In the face of contradictory evidence the conventional wisdom has retained its popularity for several related reasons. First, it is an obvious and convenient explanation of the government/press struggle since Vietnam. It is obvious because no one involved with the military or the media can believe that Vietnam did not have a huge impact on military/press relations and military public affairs. Understandably, most people assumed that the answer to Vietnam for the military would be to seek revenge on the press. And because this assumption seemed clearly vindicated by military/media squabbles from Grenada to the Gulf, the conventional wisdom has become a convenient shorthand to explain all such military/media tensions and government efforts to control the press.

Further, the conventional wisdom fits neatly into the media's preferred professional self-image. Journalists accept the Vietnam hypothesis with almost religious faith. They no longer question its truth and require nothing but the occasional anecdote to prove their case. Journalists love the conventional wisdom because it bolsters their cherished myths about press conduct and impact during the Vietnam war. Journalists like to believe that the press fulfilled its democratic obligation to challenge government statements and provide independent assessments of the war for the public. The press, they believe, uncovered the ugly truth about the war and revealed government deception, helping to end a war the public did not support. Journalists knew that many in the military blamed the press for the American defeat in Vietnam, and thus have since perceived government efforts to restrict the press as the military's revenge. That the military should want revenge reinforces the media's Vietnam dogma because it speaks to the powerful role that journalists believe themselves to have played in that war.

The conventional wisdom also escapes the normally critical judgment of the press because journalists have the misfortune of being too close to the action to understand the larger forces at work during war. Reporters in the press pool see the military up close and impute too much to its actions. Thus, it seems quite obvious to them that the military which tells them they cannot go here or there must be ultimately responsible for decisions.
regarding access to the battlefield and treatment of the press. Moreover, most journalists who cover war share similar personal experiences, and when they swap stories they reinforce their limited perspective, which goes unchallenged by other journalists who want to believe the conventional wisdom anyway. Thus the conventional wisdom emerges refreshed with each conflict, though no closer to the truth.

In view of the trends shaping the world of politics since Vietnam, however, it should not be surprising that the White House believes that the press is too important to be left to the generals. Presidents and their advisers know that if they are to shape press coverage to best advantage they, and not military leaders less knowledgeable and sophisticated in the ways of the media, must craft press policies and control what the public is told during war. Even if the military successfully curbs the press and follows the White House line in its public statements, presidents and their advisers must still be personally involved in public communications if they are to build public support, rebut their critics, and claim credit for successes. This belief has been repeatedly illustrated by the coordinated White House public relations efforts during the conflicts in Grenada, Panama, and the Persian Gulf described in preceding chapters. It should be clear to all that when it comes to media matters, presidents and their advisers are calling the shots, not military leaders.

The Elements of Presidential Power and the Limits of Control

The emergence of the media age has made life more difficult for presidents as greater numbers of media outlets and growing audiences spur more voices, ideas, and opinions to compete with official claims and announcements. Just as the trends of the media age have driven presidents to seek increasingly stiff press controls during war, it has also made imposing control more difficult. Why, then, have presidents been so successful recently in doing so? What are the limits of their power to exert influence over wartime press coverage?
The Elements of Power

Presidents seek to keep journalists from producing coverage threatening to White House political interests while at the same time encouraging them to give administration actions positive coverage. The president's power to manage this feat depends on controlling press access to the battlefield and on influencing wartime press coverage by exploiting the inherent advantages of the presidency. Some of the variables which contribute to the president's success in managing the news are subject to his control, some are not. His power emerges from the unique role presidents play in media routines and in foreign policy, from their command over the military and the physical resources necessary for press control, from the strength of public opinion on national security issues, and from less tractable factors such as the geography and lethality of the modern battlefield.

Controlling the Battlefield

In keeping the press away from the battlefield, presidents are aided by three key factors. First, presidents benefit from the very nature of the battlefield. The modern battlefield is so lethal for the ignorant and unprotected, not to mention for those carrying weapons and presumably knowing what to do, that journalists have few options but to cooperate with the government if they want to see military units in action. Even if they were all free to do so, very few journalists would venture too close to the front lines when the battle was joined, as both the invasion of Panama and the Gulf war illustrate. A large contingent of journalists already in Panama when the invasion began took refuge in the Marriott Hotel even though they could have ventured out into the thick of things. Things were too thick, evidently, and reporters wound up filing telephone reports from their hotel rooms instead of eyewitness reports from the field. In the Gulf, journalists did not break
from the pool system in large numbers until it was clear that the ground war had turned into a rout and it was relatively safe to venture out into the desert without military escorts.

Another factor which often aids the official cause is the attitude towards the press of the country in which a conflict takes place. During the Gulf crisis Saudi Arabia's poisonous attitude toward freedom of the press made it very difficult for the press to get the same kind of access that they would have enjoyed somewhere else. Saudi Arabia's leaders did not allow the Western press to base themselves in their country even before the war, and were extremely reluctant to allow waves of journalists to cover the crisis. This attitude proved a great boon to the Bush Administration, helping to minimize the number of journalists covering the first weeks of the American buildup, during which time US forces were quite vulnerable to Iraqi attack. Had the crisis erupted somewhere more accessible to journalists, it would have been much more difficult to keep the enemy from knowing just how little American firepower was on the ground in those first weeks.

The final and most important factor giving the president the ability to control the press is the zealous cooperation of the military. Even though the White House bears primary responsibility for restricting the press in recent conflicts, the military's eager help has been a necessary ingredient of government success. The military's professional interests have prompted military officials to believe that they too have much to gain by maintaining control over the press on and near the battlefield. Thus, the military has gladly implemented the restrictive policies sent down from the White House and civilian officials. The military has done a superb job of ensuring that journalists do not wander unescorted into areas the government would rather they not go. In addition, the military has kept close track of the names and locations of correspondents covering the war, enforced reporting guidelines and administered the press pool, apprehending and scolding those who broke the rules. Without such help, a president would have been forced to accept far less effective control over war correspondents.
**Dominating Press Coverage**

With control over press access to the battlefield, the president has taken the first big step towards his ultimate goal of dominating press coverage. With fewer journalists scouring the battlefield to report things which might contradict official statements or twist public opinion, the White House immediately gains in its efforts to be a dominant and credible voice in the public's eye. But beyond control of the battlefield itself, the power to influence press coverage of war flows from several sources.

The first and most important source of presidential influence over press coverage is the president's unique position not only in American government and the conduct of foreign policy, but also in the newsgathering routines of the media. What Teddy Roosevelt first called the "bully pulpit" now occupies a brighter spotlight than ever. Presidents in the media age accrue the lion's share of both media scrutiny and coverage, with other key government figures such as members of Congress almost invisible at times by comparison. Presidents thus enjoy unmatched opportunities to use the media to advance their political interests. Moreover, what is merely a great advantage in peacetime becomes a potential source of dominance during war. Thanks to his role as Commander-in-Chief and top foreign policy maker, every presidential action and utterance during a crisis is even bigger news than usual. All eyes follow him as he charts the nation's dangerous course through wartime. The media redouble their efforts to cover the president and in turn, to cover any military forces he has deployed. Other concerns fall from the news, and those who would criticize the president find it much more difficult to make themselves heard in major media outlets. A wise president exploits this

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dynamic to build public support for war, to intimidate the enemy, to mollify doubters, and afterwards to claim victory.

The second source of presidential influence over press coverage is public opinion. When the president orders troops into battle, the public rallies to his side, his approval soars, and people focus not on the justifications for war but on the well-being of their men and women in uniform. This rally-to-the-flag phenomenon causes the acceptable range of stories in mainstream media outlets to narrow. When the president's actions are popular, journalists tend to frame their stories accordingly. Whether consciously or not, rather than adopt a critical or objective tone towards government, reporters are more likely to imply that our officials are wise, our military is strong, and our enemy is pure evil. The president's rise in popularity also adds to his credibility as a news source, and makes it more difficult for journalists to challenge his arguments or to include critical points of view in their stories.

Moreover, the public's preoccupation with a military victory and with the welfare of its troops makes it unpleasant for the press to complain about government restrictions on reporting. Official arguments that operational security and the lives of troops are on the line ring loud and clear during war. Media objections about freedom of information and the First Amendment, on the other hand, sound hollow and self-serving. Many in the press worry about complaining so loudly that the public's already dim view of journalists will worsen. As we saw in the Gulf war, the military's national security role is far more popular than the media's information role; journalists have still not recovered from their wartime comparison to the generals. This mismatch clearly daunts some, if not many, in the press who would otherwise challenge official pronouncements, and it has given presidents the courage to continue restricting information and press access to the battlefield.

The final source of the president's impact on press coverage is the military's cooperation in administration public relations efforts. During Vietnam Lyndon Johnson
successfully used General William Westmoreland to lend credibility to his administration's "progress campaign" in 1967. Unfortunately for Johnson, however, he never enjoyed similar support from the military public affairs system in Vietnam. In fact, the military's handling of press matters in Vietnam poisoned military/media relations and helped destroy the government's credibility and degrade public confidence in the war effort. In the Gulf war, by contrast, Bush commanded a military both willing and capable of playing a highly visible public relations role. Impressive and professional general officers gave polished television performances which reinforced the White House line. In fact, the daily briefings rekindled the credibility that the military had lost in Vietnam. And with the White House and military speaking with one powerful and authoritative voice, the Bush Administration's public relations strategy became dazzlingly effective.

*The Limits of Control*

Before conceding total victory to the president we must clarify that the government’s efforts to control the press during war do not necessarily ensure that control will be forthcoming. The government’s tremendous success in curbing the press during recent conflicts has been due to circumstance as well as to government strategy. Though presidents will always seek to control the press and dominate press coverage, they will not always succeed. In fact, every presidential power noted above has its limits, and other obstacles also await the president looking to have his way with the press during war.

*Losing Control of the Battlefield*

Future presidents will undoubtedly face situations in which they cannot, despite their best efforts, achieve the same level of control over the battlefield that Reagan enjoyed in Grenada or that Bush managed in Panama and the Gulf. Presidential control over media access to the battlefield will deteriorate when war breaks out in an area more
easily accessible to journalists, when a war lasts long enough for journalists to weasel their way into military units despite press restrictions, when a war is waged at a low enough level of intensity that greater numbers of journalists are willing to risk covering the war up close, or when the enemy decides to allow the media to cover the war from his side of the battlefield.

George Bush faced a dream scenario in the Gulf war because Saudi Arabia proved a hostile and lethal environment for the free press. In other situations the government will not be so lucky, as the Clinton Administration recently discovered. As the administration openly telegraphed the invasion of Haiti in an attempt to coerce its military rulers to submit, the press swarmed into Haiti and set up camp atop the tallest buildings in Port-au-Prince with their television cameras to film the American military landing. The Haitian military government allowed the press in, and even granted interviews to Dan Rather, among others. The prospects for control had Clinton gone through with the invasion were dismal, and the press would have once more offered combat footage to the public uncensored by government. Clinton, in turn, would have found influencing press coverage of the invasion to his advantage very difficult, especially if the press was able to focus on actual fighting or portrayed American casualties.

**Threats to Presidential Dominance of Press Coverage**

The most debilitating loss of influence would come if the president led the nation into a war opposed by a majority of the public or by a substantial coalition in the Congress, or if he persisted in prosecuting a war which had become widely unpopular. The negative effects on a president's ability to wield influence from the bully pulpit would be multiplied if the president was, in addition, personally unpopular at the time. An unpopular president, waging an unpopular war opposed by political elites, would find it very difficult to garner favorable press coverage. Journalists would downplay his victories and play up his mistakes and defeats. Congressional critics would make the
from pages, and statements from administration officials would be harshly challenged at every press conference. If the war went poorly, the same public opinion which has served presidents so powerfully in other crises would instead become the source of a president’s worst nightmares.

A milder scenario in which a president could lose some of his media dominance would be one in which the White House and the military were at odds during war. This might occur when the White House sent a military force somewhere military leaders had been reluctant to get involved. Tensions could also arise if the White House tried to micromanage the war from Washington, ignoring military pleas for control over how to employ its troops and equipment. Examples of these scenarios are readily available from US experiences with Bosnia and Somalia. In 1992, in the midst of debate over whether the US should use military force in Bosnia, General Colin Powell, then the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, became so upset at the prospect of US military involvement that he published an op-ed denouncing the idea. In Somalia, the military’s outrage at Secretary of Defense Les Aspin’s denial of its request for heavy armor, which had come only a short time before the clash which left seventeen US troops dead, led to serious public complaints about Clinton Administration foreign policy and its top officials. The military, until then a stout ally of administration intervention in Somalia, suddenly began feeding the press material harmful to the president and his goals. Such public outbursts from the military challenging administration actions and thinking are rare, but these examples reveal that when the military feels it necessary, it will not hesitate to use the media to advance and protect its interests, even if it means clashing with the White House. And although recent history suggests that presidents and the military tend to be in synch on these issues, it also illustrates that inevitably there will be times when the White House and military are at odds. When they are, the president will face greater obstacles to creating a positive image of his activities in the news.
Finally, perhaps the most serious threat to presidential control over the press and press coverage will come if an American enemy grants enough access and autonomy to Western journalists to reveal what war is like for those on the other side. From Harrison Salisbury’s trip to Hanoi during Vietnam to Peter Arnett’s presence in Baghdad during Desert Storm, government officials have feared the impact that reports from the other side might have on public opinion. To date, these fears have gone largely unrealized, even during the Gulf war. Saddam Hussein, despite ample opportunity to test the impact of war coverage from Iraq on American public opinion, never figured out just how to wield the media to maximum effect. Hussein’s poor understanding of American psychology and politics, as well as of the routines of Western media betrayed him. Indeed, Iraq’s experience shows that the risk of a backlash from using an enemy’s media against him is great. Nonetheless, advances in media technology combined with the increasing sophistication of most governments in understanding and using the media make it certain that future presidents will face at least some of the fallout from enemy media management.

Several possibilities, in particular, stand out as threats to presidential dominance of the news. First, and most obvious, if an enemy were to grant the Western press free access to the battlefield from his side, the amount of graphic coverage of war could increase dramatically, laying waste to White House efforts to restrict such coverage through press controls on the American side. This access could prove troublesome if the media were to focus on the consequences of US firepower and showed bombed out towns or villages or interviewed enemy troops who had been routed by an American unit. As many observers have noted, the camera does not explain the larger principles of war to the viewer; rather, it tends to promote empathy for its subjects. It might be difficult for a president to inflame war lust in a public who had to witness what war does to those caught in it, even if its victims were technically the enemy. What could be worse, however, would be if television were present to record the toll of war on American
troops. In recent conflicts the US has been fortunate not to suffer many casualties. A war in which the US suffered thousands of dead and wounded and which was heavily covered by television crews could prove, as many fear, impossible to prosecute. Though it would undoubtedly infuriate American officials, it would not matter to the viewing public that the television crews were there only because the enemy had allowed their presence on the battlefield. The consequences would be the same as long as the newscasts were credible.

Second, press coverage from the enemy side could produce pressures on the president to act in ways that threatened the larger interest of winning the war. The Iran hostage crisis supplies an example of how the press can cover an event and thereby put almost intolerable pressures on the president to take an action which does not serve broader American foreign policy goals. If during a future war an equivalent situation arose, perhaps one in which the enemy invited journalists to film the execution of American hostages, the intense media coverage and public torment over the plight of the POWs would make it difficult for the president to focus public attention on other issues. Not only could such enemy media tactics hurt the president politically, but they would take the public relations initiative away from the White House and force it to concentrate on damage control rather than on its preferred strategy of building support and putting a favorable spin on events. It would obviously be very difficult for the president to claim that the war was going well when several hundred POWs were being abused and their pain transmitted via television to American living rooms. Further, every enemy “counter-public relations” success would steal potentially valuable press coverage away from the White House; every story on the plight of the hostages would be a story the media did not do on Administration successes.

Finally, if the American media, by enemy consent, were allowed to roam free on the battlefield and behind enemy lines, the chances that a correspondent would uncover instances of US government exaggeration and deception would rise. Just as Harrison Salisbury discovered in Hanoi that US bombs had indeed struck civilian structures
despite official denials, future news seekers could reveal that high-tech wars waged with smart bombs are not as clean as their masters would have the public believe. With an unrestricted and uncensored press in the war zone, American presidents and military officers would have to be much more careful than they have recently been when they discuss the war’s progress and the performance of US troops and equipment. In Grenada, the government insisted for over a week that there had not been any civilian casualties. The press later discovered that this was not true. In Panama, a journalist discovered that the military had lied about the accuracy of the Stealth fighters’ bombing run. And in the Baghdad, CNN revealed what Bush and the military did not want to talk about—the fact that civilians were in grave danger from the Allied air campaign despite the use of precision guided bombs. In each case, the lies and obfuscations were made possible by tight government control over press access to the battlefield and thus to information. Presidents enjoyed better press coverage than they deserved as a result.

In the future, however, a clever enemy might challenge this advantage by allowing American journalists free rein to check up on presidential and military claims about the war’s progress. In the extreme, press coverage from the enemy side could force the government to abandon its preferred tactics for waging war. If television routinely revealed the human consequences of the use of carpet bombing, napalm, or fuel-air explosives, for example, their continued use could quickly become political suicide. And even if the public did not demand a halt to their use, no president or military leader wishes to be linked to war’s horrible toll. In the future a president faced with coverage of such events might well, as George Bush did after the Amiriyah incident, decide to halt the use of such weapons before the public started believing that he personally endorsed such actions. In such cases not only would the president find it hard to create positive coverage of carpet bombing, for instance, but he would also likely spend a good deal of time trying to distance himself from war’s uglier realities.
Summing Up Presidential Control and Its Limits

In the conflicts examined here, presidents have clearly succeeded in controlling press access to the battlefield and in heavily influencing press coverage to their advantage through use of the various powers under their control. The president and the military have worked in harmony, with the military keeping the press away from the action and providing its own spin on events. White House public relations strategies have been well thought out and executed, taking full advantage of the media’s obsessive focus on the president and his actions. In each case, the location of the conflict and the nature of the battle have made it extremely difficult for journalists to cover the action on their own without either military assistance or interference. The press, meanwhile, proved both incapable of organizing itself to challenge government restrictions, and so unpopular with the public that the White House never felt any pressure to ease them.

Nonetheless, the prospects for a loss of presidential control are real. The White House cannot expect to be so fortunate on every occasion; there are simply too many ways in which events could work against presidents and for the press. The question then, is what would a loss of control really mean? For the president, being unable to manage the news could mean simply that the press had access to more information than he would prefer, perhaps frustrating his attempts to focus attention on pet issues and to create favorable coverage of his actions. It could, however, result in far more serious scenarios if an enemy were successful in using the media to derail presidential war plans or if the press were to uncover official deception about events on the battlefield, thereby turning public opinion against the president and the military.

On the other hand, if the president loses control over journalists and press coverage, the public will receive more independent news of a conflict, and with it a greater confidence that all the relevant details of war have been made known. Presidents would not escape press scrutiny as they have in recent conflicts. The public would learn
far more about its military and how it functions, and about the nature and consequences of war. The official line, moreover, would not dominate debates over war issues to the extent it has in the last decade.

The Implications of the New Media Strategy

The findings that presidents, not the military, are primarily responsible for recent press restrictions and that they have done so in response to incentives heightened by the rise of the Media Age should warn observers that increasing government restriction of the press during war is a far more serious and far more political issue than previously believed. The new presidential media strategy for wartime may threaten the working relationship between the president and the press, causing problems for politics and policy making that last long after the guns fall silent. The conventional wisdom argues that press restrictions are fundamentally the result of a long-running feud between the military and the media. Though annoying to those who wish to see freer press coverage of combat, a feud between two institutions who only rarely have much to do with each other hardly seems a threat to the democratic process. In fact, the two institutions have fought tooth and nail over the same issues since the founding of the republic with little real consequence. On the other hand, however, the repeated and conscious attempts by presidents and their advisers to obstruct the functioning of the press during war and to replace journalists’ products with their own messages and images pose the threat of poisoning the everyday working relationship between the president and the press. Regardless of whether one believes that the measures taken by presidents in recent conflicts have been appropriate, they have certainly incurred the wrath of the media. Moreover, this wrath has not disappeared after each conflict, but instead becomes a part of the media’s approach to interpreting the rest of a president’s tenure in office. In this age no one needs reminding how central the press is to a president’s ability to govern effectively. A press corps convinced during a conflict that a president unfairly seeks to
manage the news for personal political gain will without doubt prove a barrier to presidential policy making. Thus, presidents risk losing the war by restricting the press during a battle. Worse, problems between the president and press will not remain local, but will likely spread to the rest of the political system. Anyone who needs proof of the damage a tear in the president/press relationship can cause should simply think back to the credibility gap and to Watergate, for which the entire political process is still paying a heavy price.

My findings also encourage us to rethink the modern connections between presidents, the press, and public opinion. While conventional explanations for press restrictions ignore the role of presidents, this thesis has shown that presidents in fact have taken an active role not only in shaping wartime press policies, but in trying to mold public opinion. In addition, the argument I have proposed here provides clues to the nature of the relationship between the press and government more generally, and suggests potential disfunctions in US foreign policy in the future which the focus on the military as chief press restrictor has obscured.

**Presidents, the Press, Public Opinion, and War**

One broad but undeniable consequence of the new media strategy can be identified from the case studies: The public knew less about the conflicts than they would have if the press had been left to its own devices. Relatedly, had there been no press restrictions, the public would have seen more of what journalists think is newsworthy about war (ie-casualties, combat, action, soldiers) than they did. Instead, in each conflict the public clearly received a version of events very close to what White House and Pentagon officials wanted it to get. Officials were quite successful in keeping the horrible side of war out the news with the result that the public has not had to witness American casualties or the toll taken by American military might on the enemy.
But while is it clear that the public was less knowledgeable, it remains somewhat less clear whether or not the public would have felt any differently about the conflicts or the presidents who initiated them if the press had been allowed to cover them more fully. It seems quite reasonable to assume that the nature of press coverage, being the dominant source of information for most people about a war, should have a similarly major influence on how people assess war, their civilian and military leaders, and so on, subject of course to individual beliefs and attitudes about such things. Mueller, however, has argued powerfully that media coverage of war had nothing to do with the level of public support. As long as the casualty list grows, public support will continue to decline.

This thesis does not directly confront Mueller’s contention that the connection between war and public opinion does not depend on media coverage. Mueller notes in his recent book on the Gulf War, and I agree, that the Gulf War was a poor test of that connection for the simple reason that there were so few American casualties and the war so successful.\(^{746}\) The Grenada and Panama invasions offer similarly weak tests of the relationship between casualties and opinion. Nonetheless, the cases studied here reveal quite clearly that Mueller’s argument gives an incomplete picture of the importance of the interplay of the media, war, presidential actions, and public opinion.

Whether or not press coverage affects the level of public support for war, presidents, military leaders, and other government officials believe it does, and further, they act vigorously on that belief. This belief, in fact, is so widespread among elite circles that it has taken on a self-fulfilling momentum. If everyone in Washington, D.C. believes that the president would be wounded politically by graphic coverage of war dead, or by negative commentary concerning military performance, then, ipso facto, he will be wounded, and people in Washington will act accordingly.\(^{747}\) The result of this belief, as I have shown, has been the growth of press controls and public relations to prevent

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\(^{747}\) This argument follows Richard Neustadt’s line of argument in *Presidential Power* (data)
negative coverage and to frame issues and events in a positive and politically advantageous manner. What we have witnessed over the last generation has been the institutionalization of a theory of the war-press-public opinion connection. Military public affairs policy, the DoD press pools, and White House public relations tactics now play a permanent and integral role in trying to mollify the impact of war and press coverage of war on public opinion.

Mueller’s argument, moreover, should not obscure another central theme of this thesis: that there are many reasons for a president to want to control the press and influence press coverage of war. Presidents worry not only about the percentage of people who say they support the war, but also opinion and attitudes about a number of other issues. Even if a president could do nothing to prevent a decline in public support for war as casualties increased, consider again the other critical realms of opinion he may influence.

First, as noted in each of the cases, a president has a good deal of power to use the media to justify the need to go to war in the first place. In the Panama and Gulf cases, Bush launched a public relations attack on the enemy-to-be, villifying Noriega and Hussein and emphasizing their heinous acts in an attempt to ensure that the public would understand why using military force would eventually be necessary. In both cases, Bush successfully convinced much of the public that these evil men had to be confronted. At the very least, the White House’s preparation of the public allowed Bush to avoid any unpleasant surprises on the public opinion front when crisis turned into conflict.

Second, by dominating press coverage before a conflict begins, a president may be able to frame the crisis in terms favorable to his preferred solution and which allow him to determine the criteria for successful resolution of conflict. In Panama, Bush’s rhetoric made it clear that ousting Noriega was necessary and that this goal, rather than ensuring Panama’s long range well-being, was the main criterion for successful US policy toward Panama. The proof of Bush’s success in framing the crisis in this way became clear once
US forces had nipped up the PDF but Noriega remained at large. Both opinion polls and politicians in Washington refused to call the invasion a success until Noriega was captured. Once Bush could appear on television to announce his arrest, victory and public support were his.

Finally, even if one agrees that the way in which the media cover events does not affect the public’s interpretation of them, it still makes sense for a president to keep the press away from the battlefield. The more journalists there are on the battlefield, the more events they will cover, and the greater the chances that one of them will file a report which upsets the public, makes the US military look bad, challenges official statements about the war, or raises questions about how well the president is managing the military operation. Though these episodes may not affect the level of public support for the war itself, they could very well affect public support of the president. And as the cases reveal, presidents must attend as much to their future political fortunes as to fighting current battles.

In sum, Mueller may be correct in asserting that the media have no impact on the decline in support for war as casualties rise. It will take the misfortune of another costly war before this finding can be replicated. In the meantime, however, this thesis makes it clear that presidents disagree wholeheartedly with Mueller, and that even if he is correct, they still have other political interests which demand the use of press restrictions and public relations during war.

The Relationship between the Press and Government

By identifying the president/press relationship as the central dynamic behind press restrictions, this thesis adds a set of case studies to the debate which has raged over the last generation concerning the role the press plays in the American political system. Three competing theories vie to describe the relationship of the media to government: the “watchdog,” the “lapdog,” and the “attack dog.” Watchdog theory asserts that the

Each theory predicts a different output from the news-making process during war. The watchdog theory suggests that we should see a good deal of analysis of government decisions, including the most important one about whether or not to use military force. Press coverage should be critical, not in the sense of negative, but in the sense that it should focus on problems and should not shy away from calling a government failure a failure and identifying those responsible. Lapdog theory, however, predicts that press coverage will be fundamentally uncritical of government leaders and their actions. Most news, moreover, will come directly from the government without a great deal of independent analysis from the press. Attack dog theory, finally, predicts that press
coverage will be quite negative toward government officials and their policies, focusing on the sensational aspects of events at the expense of substantive elaborations of policy.

This thesis lends support to the lapdog theory. In all three cases, the press did little analysis which raised questions about the need to for moving to a military option. And once the fighting had begun, the majority of news stories and columns accepted the president’s assertions that such action was necessary. In no case did criticism of an administration’s actions reach a significant proportion of total press coverage, particularly on television. One study found that during the Gulf War 95% of all sources on television made positive comments about the US military's performance. And as lapdog theory predicted, what criticism there was focused almost entirely on the best means to achieve victory, rather than on the need to go to war in the first place. During each conflict, relatively few journalists took the risks necessary to circumvent the military’s restrictions to gather information independently. Most stayed close to the military briefers in Saudi Arabia and to their beats in official Washington. And in the aftermath of war, when one might expect to see more calculated discussion or analysis of a conflict, instead we saw yet more positive coverage, much of it praising the boldness of the president and the effectiveness of the military. Few stories raised questions of the legality, morality, or wisdom of using military force. Those follow-up stories of a critical nature the press did produce (again-usually concerning military performance) tended to wind up buried deep in the papers, with very few making it to the evening news. As a result, neither the watchdog nor the attack dog theories find much support in the cases presented here.

750 This can be seen most clearly in the Grenada case, when follow up reports found a great deal to be desired in the military’s performance, but commented little on the highly debatable question of whether the Americans on Grenada were ever in any real danger.
The next question to ask is how generalizable these findings are for the day-to-day government/press relationship. The answer is not completely, though we have gained more than a simple analysis of military/media tensions would have offered. The combination of press restrictions, public relations, and the position of the president works to make playing any role other than lapdog very difficult. As noted in the previous section, wartime gives a president great resources for exerting control over information, the physical and logistical capabilities of the press, and for getting his views heard by the public. This power, as the cases show clearly, erodes the ability of the press to provide independently gathered news about armed conflicts. Moreover, the overwhelming importance of the president’s role during war would make it difficult to maintain a balance between competing views of crisis and war, even if the press wanted to do so.

The lapdog theory thus wins support from these cases not necessarily because they make it obvious that the press is fundamentally a lapdog to government, but because during war the press has been severely constrained in its newsgathering options. During war, more than at any other time, the press must go to government officials for information and analysis of the day’s events, despite how journalists feel about this. It seems clear that most of those correspondents who went to cover the US conflicts wanted to report on much more than they in fact did. Whether their intentions were to assess critically US performance or the necessity of military action or simply to send back visually exciting footage of combat, the end result under a less restrictive system would have been a far less subservient press. No self-respecting news organization would have used government-provided footage of aircraft taking off or second-hand accounts of battles when eyewitness reports and on-the-scene footage were readily available. Further, it seems very likely from the few instances in which journalists did manage to gain independent access to information, such as the encounter at Khafji, that the press, if left free to roam the battlefield, would have reported poor military performance, misconduct, and noted inconsistencies and inaccuracies in government statements.
without hesitation. A better way to describe the press during recent wars, therefore, might be to call it an imperfect watchdog on a very short leash.

**US Foreign Policy in the Media Age**

Finally, this thesis raises questions about how well the increasing presidential reliance on the new strategy for waging war will serve American foreign policy interests. As presidents look to employ political, military, and media strategies guaranteed to enhance their prospects for quick military victory, for keeping press coverage of combat to a minimum, and for maximizing public support for the use of force, the very fact that they feel obliged to adopt such strategies reveals the potential for increasing policy disfunction, even though recent presidents have enjoyed great success. So does the fact that presidents, their political foes, and the media all believe that a president’s political fortune rests on the nature of press coverage and short term public opinion ratings during crisis.

Presidential concern that victory be swift, bloodless, not seen on television, and supported overwhelmingly by the public has two implications for US foreign policy, both of which have already been realized in the Media Age in at least limited fashion. The first implication of the new strategy is that presidents and their advisers may become so concerned with avoiding casualties and lengthy military engagements that they decide not to commit the US military in some situations despite believing that there are good reasons for doing so. Indeed, in general, it seems a safe conclusion that the increased potential for media scrutiny of US military action will act as a brake on White House willingness to use force in situations in which media coverage will be hard to manage. The most recent example which illustrates this dynamic is US policy toward the conflict in Bosnia. Beginning with George Bush, American presidents have been reluctant to send US forces to the Balkans because the likelihood of sustaining casualties and becoming more deeply involved was high. This has been so despite the fact that Bill Clinton and his national
security team felt that ending the war was in the US interest and that US military involvement could have helped end the war sooner. The media coverage from such a Bosnia expedition, both presidents must have feared, especially if it managed to focus on the human costs of American involvement, would have quickly made it necessary to reverse policy. Given these fears, presidents have not pushed hard for a US military commitment to resolving the conflict in Bosnia.

The second implication of the emphasis the White House places on quick and painless victories and favorable press coverage of military operations is that US foreign policy may be more fragile and subject to emotional and irrational decisionmaking than in the past. The Clinton administration's rather sudden exit from Somalia in the wake of vivid press coverage of less than twenty American soldiers, one of whom was dragged about the streets of Mogadishu by shouting Somalis, illustrates this problem. When the president is so concerned about how a policy plays on television or in the papers, as opposed to whether the policy continues to further US interests at a reasonable cost, the US risks having its foreign policy determined by the luck of TV crews and the misfortune of American soldiers.

Prospects for the Government/Press Struggle

This thesis has established both the elements and the consequences of the post-Vietnam development of a White House media strategy for wartime as well as documented the successes of that strategy in recent conflicts in restricting negative coverage of war and in amplifying positive presidential messages to the public. It is now time to consider the prospects for the government/press struggle as it heads towards the twenty-first century.

A Return to Censorship?
Most treatises on government/press wartime relations include a call to either the military or the press to mend their ways and to respect the other's unique role in society. Such efforts, however well-intended, are a waste of time. Proposals voiced on behalf of the media beseeching the military to permit greater numbers of reporters on the battlefield, to give them greater access to the military's activities, or to get rid of security review and trust reporters instead, all benefit the press at the expense of the government. In addition, they wrongly tend to focus on the military instead of the principal press restrictor—the White House. Likewise, proposals offered on behalf of the military, such as asking the press to send fewer reporters to wars, to submit their reports cheerfully to common sense security review, and to accept the need for military escorts, all benefit the government while doing nothing but make covering war more difficult for the press and while ignoring the fact that the press has no way to organize itself to agree to such conditions anyway. Since neither side will give the other something for nothing, simply listing all the things everyone ought to do in a perfect world does no good. And worse, almost all advice given to the combatants ignores what I have argued here, which is that several fundamental trends underlying the government/press relationship are driving the White House to restrict the press. Proposals which focus on symptoms rather than root causes will offer little in the way of results.

The only proposals worth making, then, are those which would make both sides better off and have some likelihood of adoption. After over 200 years of government/press struggle during war without resolving these issues, many observers find it unlikely that such a proposal exists. And in fact only one existing proposal merits a close look given today's circumstances—a return to full-scale military censorship. On the face of it, arguing that military censorship would represent an improvement for

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everyone might sound facetious. Surely the press would not benefit, people would argue. But no less giant a journalistic icon than Walter Cronkite has endorsed such a proposal.\textsuperscript{753} And an analysis of the censorship option does suggest that it has the potential to resolve many of the tensions raised by recent struggles over wartime press coverage.

A return to official military censorship would probably involve much the same set-up as seen in Desert Storm with a few key changes. Qualified military intelligence officers in the rear, as opposed to public affairs escorts at the scene, would censor, not just review, all press materials before releasing them for transmission to news organizations. As in the past, there would be guidelines detailing what information could be published and what could not. The list would look very similar to that drawn up in the Gulf, which in turn had been culled from World War 2 and Korea censorship rules, among others. There would probably be an appeal process for journalists to challenge the censors, but unlike in Desert Storm the government, not the press, would make the final decision whether or not to allow a story to be published.

From the military's perspective the benefits are clear and in fact many military officers have clamored for a return to such a system. Only with censorship, they argue, can the military be totally secure in its knowledge that the press will not provide useful information to the enemy. And from a more professionally interested perspective, the military would likely view a censorship system as far less likely to reveal its warts and failures, even though technically these issues would not be subject to censorship.

The White House would also be very likely to endorse such a system, having over successive administrations attempted to move closer to that model surreptitiously anyway. To presidents, any system which provides for a greater level of control over

journalists’ reports, the better. And censorship, regardless of what the details of the system might be, stands for the ultimate possible control over the press.

Given that the military and White House have less-than-pure incentives, why might the media benefit from such a system? Recall that a journalist’s wartime dilemma is resolving the tradeoff between autonomy and access. Though war correspondents obviously would prefer to operate autonomously and without restraints, their highest priority is to get close to the action regardless.

Journalists during World War II accepted the censorship system fairly willingly not only because they believed in the cause, but because the system allowed them great access to the battlefield and to secret information concerning battle plans. Knowing that journalists could not broadcast their eyewitness knowledge of military information to the enemy, the government was far more willing to allow them to travel throughout the war zone for news. Censorship also allowed military officers to speak much more candidly and openly about their actions and decisions. Reporters who covered World War 2 remember sitting in military field tents going over battle plans, sometimes even being asked for their advice. Even before D-Day, Eisenhower went over the attack with journalists; the secret did not leak. And although journalists would prefer to report such information as they received it, it remains valuable for postwar articles and histories nonetheless. In the eyes of a journalist it is far better to reveal this information eventually rather than let it remain undisclosed forever.

During the Gulf War, in stark contrast to World War II, journalists got nowhere near the battlefield as a rule, in large part because there were no security guarantees, and because television technology had intensified the dangers of reporting from the front. In addition, candid conversation about battle plans between officers and correspondents was rare during the Gulf War. For the most part during the Gulf War military leaders felt that they had to be wary of talking with journalists capable of releasing the details of their conversation in capitals around the world minutes later. As a result, military officers
often did not feel comfortable revealing much information to the press, causing tension with reporters trying to piece together a very complicated story. Perhaps the ultimate example of the untrusting military/media interaction was General Schwarzkopf’s successful effort to trick the press into thinking the main assault against Iraq would be the Marine amphibious attack instead of the Hail Mary in the west.

A return to censorship, then, might benefit journalists because it could reestablish trust between a nervous military and a skeptical press. If the press in the future could count on getting enough access to military operations and leaders, censorship might conceivably be worth the resulting lack of autonomy. Journalists might also escape the public wrath they have incurred as a consequence of their visible complaining about government restrictions.

A brief analysis thus indicates that a return to censorship might resolve many of the tensions between the government and the press. Nevertheless, two questions remain. First, is the system likely to work in the idealized manner suggested here? Second, would such a system benefit the public and democracy?

The answer to both questions is “No.” Recent history should prompt serious doubts about whether censorship would either resolve the government/press struggle or operate in a manner acceptable to a democracy. Official fear and loathing of the press’s power to disrupt their policies, heightened by the media age trends noted above, make it almost certain that the government cannot be trusted to employ censorship today in an evenhanded manner guided by the principle of freedom of information. Far more likely is that the government would use the system to increase its control over the press, the news, and public opinion.

Three consequences in particular seem probable should such a system be implemented. First, the access the press expected by acceding to censorship would be unlikely to be forthcoming. The experience of the last decade, but especially in the Gulf, indicates that the last thing presidents and militaries want to do is to let journalists film
combat or witness combat firsthand. While censorship would make moot issues of operational security, nominally the reason for limits on access, it would not reduce White House political interests or military institutional interests in keeping the press away from the blood, the confusion, and the horror of warfare.

Second, a censorship system would not improve the military's public affairs shortcomings which proved so disastrous in recent conflicts. A system which provided even more control over the press to the military would in fact curb, not encourage, incentives for improvement. It is worth noting that the information center in Vietnam was the most organized of recent wars, when the press was most free. JIBs were far less well organized in more recent conflicts when the press was shut out and kept away from the action. Under censorship, press reports would continue to be delayed for days while they worked their way through the military's bureaucratic system, made even slower by the need to censor reports rather than wave them through after a quick perusal. Nor would there be any reason to improve logistics, communications, or any of the other public affairs problems which have plagued reporters' news gathering efforts.

Third, and most worrisome, would be the temptation for officials to use the censorship system for political reasons rather than for strictly military reasons. This problem revealed itself in the Gulf War with the security review system, even though the military had no authority to censor press reports. Many journalists found that their copy had been reviewed by several different officers interested in limiting what was reported, and in several cases officers made changes in violation of public affairs policy. Under a censorship system, there would be little to stop military censors from operating out of professional self-interest, rather than from operational security guidelines. Journalists, busy trying to put together stories for deadlines in a chaotic wartime environment, would have difficulty challenging such censorship at the time. And the White House would have little incentive not to instruct the military to censor particular items of political importance, knowing that all the press could do would be to complain, and that it could
not publish the material until after the war when it would carry less impact. Even if in
general the White House respected the guidelines for censorship, the political incentives
that would exist at critical moments, such as in the wake of a disastrous defeat which
could cause panic among the public or among allies, or before a presidential election,
would encourage presidents to censor for political security first and justify their actions
later when the danger had passed.

In a worst case, the censorship guidelines would foster such behavior. In World
War II valid areas for censorship included unauthenticated reports and rumors, and
anything that would harm the morale of Allied Forces. Such guidelines today, as in fact
was the case even then, could and would be used to justify much censorship of a political,
rather than military, nature. 754 Would details of a horrible defeat harm morale? A White
House could easily argue that it would. And in light of official concerns that journalists
actually seek to derail presidential policies, the opportunity to stop critical reports before
they did their damage would be too great for officials to pass up.

Regardless of its consequences, however, a system of military censorship is not a
live option in the current “negotiations” between the government and press on future
public affairs policies. The most basic reason for this is that in order to declare
censorship, Congress must have first declared war. Quite obviously, the majority of
future conflicts will not meet this essential criterion. If the president wishes to launch
war entirely on his own authority, as Reagan and Bush did in Grenada and Panama,
censorship will not be an option. And second, censorship may have much to recommend
it, at least on the surface, and especially to officials, but it lacks wider political
acceptability. The military dropped its field censorship reserve units because it realized
that the age of censorship was long over. In large part this reflects an understanding of the

central role of the press in politics and the journalists' changed attitudes and stance toward government. Today's journalists would be far less willing than their counterparts fifty years ago to accept the level of control over their work that outright censorship implies, despite the promise of greater access. The press is now accustomed to the power to tell all, including those things which will damage morale or disrupt policy, as long as they consider the informa ́t 5 x ÷8m ́TM3 Āō w#2 Ź ĀōLÆ has become an increasingly less.

least in any situation short of another world war. Limited restrictions carried out for reasons of operational security are easy to sell to the public, but censorship of press dispatches from Grenada, for example, a tiny nation of no possible threat, would become an incre

heavy-handed. No president wants to deal with the media firestorm and political backlash that would accompany such a misguided effort at control. In today's world where sophistication in public relations is the standard, presidents look to more subtle methods of control. This helps explains, in fact, why recent restrictions have taken the form they did.

If we will not return to censorship any time soon, we must ask about what the players involved are doing instead to improve their lot for the next conflict. As noted in Chapter Five, representatives from fifteen major news organizations wrote a letter of protest to Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney, setting forth both their concerns about Gulf War press policy and their proposed guidelines for the next conflict. Once again, officials have made noises about making press policies more friendly, and some rethinking of public affairs policy has cropped up in military journals. But after

several years public affairs policies look much the same as they did at the end of the Gulf War. And as Grenada, Panama, and the Gulf illustrate, it would be foolish to pay much attention to what the military says press policy will be next time. The promises the military makes will almost certainly will vanish in the wake of presidential political interests and White House control over press policy once crisis strikes. In addition, as we will see below in a brief analysis of the near invasion of Haiti, it would be foolish to assume that the press would rely in the future on negotiating with the very institutions which have restricted journalists in the recent past.

The Government/Press Struggle Continues...

The fundamental nature of the trends which have brought us to our current situation invites an obvious prediction: As long as we live in this media age, presidents will continue to seek to impose restrictions on the press and to shape the news through public relations during war. We should expect, therefore, to see press restrictions for the foreseeable future as media technology continues to advance, officials and reporters continue to view each other as adversaries, the US continues to lack consensus in foreign policy, and the White House continues to view public relations as a key tool of governance.

Some might question this prediction despite the evidence presented here. Opponents of America's recent conflicts may be inclined to point out that two conservative presidents with little love for the press were responsible for initiating the growth of controls on reporters. They might argue that the need for press restrictions arose because the conflicts were either unjust or unnecessary. Without such curbs on the

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756 The vanishing likelihood of any real change became evident with the adoption eight months after Desert Storm of "new" principles of wartime press coverage. In fact the new principles looked a lot like the old principles which had been routinely ignored by the White House over the last decade. See "DoD Adopts Rules for Combat Coverage," Marine Corps Gazette, July 1992, p. 6; also Lt. Colonel Richard F. Machamer, Jr., "Avoiding a Military-Media War in the Next Armed Conflict," Military Review, April 1993, pp. 43-54
press and without heavy doses of public relations, the public likely would not have supported these wars. Had the wars been just and the presidents more liberal, the argument concludes, there would have been neither the need nor the inclination to impose severe restrictions on the press.

Enticing though this argument may be for some, it is faulty, based on a poor understanding of the forces at work in the White House. All presidents, liberal and conservative, fall into what I labeled earlier the "national interest" camp. Their role as commander-in-chief demands that they worry far more about the outcome of their war policies than about whether journalists are happy with their experiences as war correspondents. And just as importantly, presidents also belong to the self-interest camp. In today's media-dominated political environment, their political interests force them to seek ways to control the news, to influence what the public sees and hears about war. If they cannot, presidents know that the media have the power to turn even a military victory into political defeat. No matter whether presidents presiding over future conflicts are liberal or conservative, they will find themselves looking for ways to reduce the risk posed by journalists on the battlefield. As I will discuss below, the Clinton Administration's instincts during the build-up to the aborted invasion of Haiti illustrate that even Democratic presidents are certain to disappoint those who believe that Reagan and Bush were themselves the primary cause of press restrictions in America's last three conflicts.

...As Haiti Goes Prime Time

The near-invasion of Haiti displayed all the traits of war in the media age including White House efforts to control the press and manage the news to its advantage. The press was a pervasive presence throughout the crisis. The intense press coverage of the Haiti dilemma raised the political stakes for Clinton, not only by creating popular awareness of violence and abuse in Haiti, but by providing an outlet for the harsh
criticisms aimed at Clinton by congressional Republicans and other opponents of Clinton foreign policy. The scathing media commentary over Clinton's perceived waffling on Haiti policy created tension between the White House and the press, and made conceiving and implementing policy more difficult for the troubled president, especially as pressure mounted in the summer of 1994 for him to take decisive action.

Haiti illustrates that even liberal presidents will seek to spare themselves the potential consequences of televised military action and deploy their officials in public relations blitzes to secure public support. Like all White Houses in the media age, the Clinton White House attempted to use public relations to create a favorable climate of opinion for its Haiti policy. Unfortunately, it did so in a highly charged political environment with a distinct anti-military intervention bent. Republicans in Congress—particularly minority leader Robert Dole—and several prominent Democrats, including Sam Nunn, opposed an invasion, and pressed Clinton to seek congressional approval for any use of force in Haiti. In addition, two-thirds of the public opposed an invasion.

Knowing that congressional approval would not be forthcoming, however, the Clinton Administration opted instead to "go public" in a major last-ditch effort to sway public opinion before committing military forces. The big gun was Clinton's prime time television address on September 15, during which he told Haitian military leaders that it was "time to go" and outlined the justification for his decision to invade if they did not step down immediately. 757 Unfortunately for Clinton, his speech was made into what one commentator called a "howling political gale;" Clinton's speech changed few minds, and fell on deaf ears in Congress. In fact, as preparations for an invasion moved forward, the House began its preparations to vote to cut off funds for the invasion should it take place,
a belated attempt at last by Congress to curb the imperial presidency.\textsuperscript{758} To his good fortune, Clinton was spared the need to invade Haiti at the last moment when his all star negotiating team—Jimmy Carter, Sam Nunn, and General Colin Powell—managed to convince Haiti's military leaders to step down just as American planes were heading towards Port-au-Prince.\textsuperscript{759} Like any president, Clinton immediately went back on television to claim credit for the entire operation.\textsuperscript{760}

In preparing to wage war in the media age, however, the Clinton Administration had run into several difficulties. Haiti represented the limits of presidential powers to curb media impact. When the press can get to the war zone and report on its own without military assistance, presidents have little opportunity to restrict press coverage. And since the White House had been trying for weeks to coerce Haiti's military to leave power by threatening a US invasion, the press had had plenty of time to set up camp in Haiti. By the scheduled day of the invasion, the press corps in Haiti was hundreds strong, armed with even more advanced technologies than had been available in the Persian Gulf. Television crews, in particular, were prepared to film and transmit the sound and fury of combat in living color, with the potential for live coverage of the invasion as it unfolded.\textsuperscript{761} Journalists were camped out anywhere the US military might land. The quintessential evidence of how close the press was to story was Dan Rather's extended interview with General Raoul Cedras, Haiti's top military leader, which took place the same night that Clinton issued his ultimatum on national television. And when US military units arrived as peacekeepers rather than invaders, they were met by scores of


\textsuperscript{760} "Transcript of Clinton Television Address," \textit{New York Times}, September 19, 1994

television cameras and reporters. As one officer noted, "Then, when we landed over here, I saw a bunch of press, which was good. I assumed if the press was here, then the enemy probably wasn't."762

Facing such a media onslaught, the Clinton White House was unable to take advantage of press restrictions in the way that Reagan and Bush had done. This did not stop the White House from trying to limit what the public saw of the invasion, however. First, the Pentagon called up the press pool, despite its redundancy in light of the media hordes on Haiti already.763 The most likely use of the press pool would have been to justify not giving any assistance or access to US military units to journalists operating unilaterally in Haiti, as was the case during the Panama invasion. Second, the White House, finding itself unable but clearly desiring to restrict television coverage of the opening scenes from the invasion, called the major networks to implore them to observe a television blackout for the first six to eight hours of the operation. In addition, the White House sought to get an agreement from the networks to abide by a set of reporting guidelines which would prohibit broadcasts showing troops movements or revealing their locations as they landed in Haiti. The networks, while agreeing not to report anything that would endanger the lives of soldiers, refused to blackout coverage. The Pentagon, perhaps in a fit of pique, told news organizations that the military could not be responsible for the danger to camera crews perched atop hotels and other tall buildings if they were mistaken for enemy troops with guns.764


763 Debra Gersh, "Press Pool Ready to Go," Editor and Publisher, September 26, 1994 A small improvement was that it appeared that this time the pool might actually make it to the opening skirmishes in a conflict in Haiti.

Haiti illustrates the circumstances under which a president may lose control over press access to the battlefield and his influence over press coverage. In fact, Haiti probably lies near the extreme end of scenarios in which control is beyond the White House. Clinton had almost nothing going for him. The media had no trouble gaining access to Haiti or in setting themselves up to cover the invasion from advantageous locations. The long forewarning gave the media time to send in its troops and, just as importantly, the equipment that would allow it to send back reports from the invasion without military assistance or interference. In addition, the long lead time to the invasion allowed plenty of time for critics of Clinton foreign policy to make themselves heard. Because Clinton did not enjoy the rally effect of public opinion that others had done after launching invasions, he did not enjoy the patriotic and White House dominated press coverage featured in Grenada or Panama. Whether Clinton might have regained some measure of control once an invasion had actually begun is another matter. Certainly the press would have had to turn to the Pentagon and White House for some information and for comment, but with so many journalists already in Haiti, Clinton’s ability to set the tone for wartime coverage would have been very slight at best.

Finally, the Haiti case illustrates that despite the almost routine success of the White House in the cases studied in previous chapters, predicting the outcome of the government/press struggle is a dangerous and foolish game. The best that can be done is to outline the conditions under which presidents will have an easier or harder time plying their media strategies. Without knowing where future conflicts will take place and under what circumstances, we must conclude assured only that the White House will make every effort to employ press restrictions and complement them with heavy doses of public relations. We must then wait to see whether in the future the press will succeed in evading its restrictions and providing an independent view of events, and whether presidents will be able to maintain control if America’s opponents develop equally sophisticated media strategies.
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