USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

THE MEDIA AND NATIONAL SECURITY DECISION-MAKING

by

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ABSTRACT

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The Operation Iraqi Freedom embedded media program provided a constant flow of breaking news reports to both American and international audiences through television cable channels and their internet web sites. This greatly influenced both audiences' opinion of the war fight and the aftermath. National public opinion polls on the conduct of the war changed constantly based on the tenor of the reports from the embedded reporters traveling with U.S. Forces in Iraq and this reporting also influenced decision makers. It is my opinion that national-level decision-making has been altered by this 24/7 news coverage and that the embedded media program itself has greatly elevated the media's influence over national-level security decision making. Today's current access to real-time global events adds a new and critical step in national decision-making. The decision-making process, and the embeds will serve as a substantial element within the ever-growing informational pillar of national power.

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THE MEDIA AND NATIONAL SECURITY DECISION-MAKING

The media's role in influencing national and international public opinion through around-the-clock coverage of worldwide events has grown immensely in today's ever more connected world. This phenomenon has led media makers of both television and the Internet to an even greater role in influencing high-level national-level decision-making. The media with modern communication technology and direct access to the front lines has made decision-makers, and the public they serve, acutely aware of situations presented in "raw" form in almost real time with little or no substantiation or corroboration against which opinions and decisions are rendered. This research paper will demonstrate that more than any other time in history the media by embedding reporters within military units has affected public opinion and moved decisions made at the national level. This does not imply that decisions made are solely with the media in mind, but that the media especially if they are embedded are a potent criterion that must be considered when developing a strategy and maintaining its theme. This paper will also recommend enhancements to the present embedded media program that may help give the public and national decisions-makers higher quality information.

In past decades, the public and their decision-makers relied on print media, then print media and news reels followed by television, which underwent its own evolution; paralleled by the evolution of computers and the creation of the internet, leading to communications innovations that have revolutionized media reporting capabilities. This evolutionary process has changed news coverage forever. The constant bombardment of reports from the embedded reporters on the frontlines in Iraq made the general public feel as If they were part of the war, and they wanted immediate answers from their political and military leaders. This presented a new and complicated challenge to the country's leadership, who at all levels were desperately trying to answer the multitude of questions being asked of them. The embedded process has helped sell the military as a viable institution performing its duty for the nation, but it has also complicated the decision maker's world and grown the power of the media within the informational element of national power.

INFORMATION ELEMENT OF POWER

The media plays an important role in high-level decision-making and strategy formulation. It is not necessarily the adversary of the military that many think, but can be a very valuable asset as demonstrated in the embedded program. Possibly thought of as a muscular component within the informational element of power, the media can provide another weapon in an arsenal used to attack the enemy psychologically as well as to gain public support within ones own nation. The media can affect the morale of enemy soldiers and that of the citizens of their nation's, whose support will wane if unhappy with the political-military situation. The same is true for the United States. Without the support of the public, the cause is soon forgotten and the morale of the military is adversely affected as we have seen in past conflicts. In the recent Iraqi conflict, the embedded media program tied the American public to the soldiers fighting for the nation. The media is a valuable tool to the strategist, but he must remember that honesty between the military and the media is imperative, for once the military's integrity is compromised, this informational tool can become its greatest nemesis.

The media is a strong instrument of national power due to its incredible influence over our adversary as well as our own public. Near "real-time" news coverage has altered the decision-making process and influences our ability as well as that of our adversary to quickly manage its effects. This also works in reverse, and used properly will affect the decision making cycle of an adversary targeted in an informational operations campaign. In the past, much of the "third world" was in an information void with no access to global events, but this has changed largely due to the expanse and availability of multimedia reception as well as communications devices. During Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) as well as Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) it was common to see Bedouin nomads in the most austere portion of the desert talking on a satellite telephone. Now, one may argue that they were more than just Bedouin herders, but the real shock is that someone in the middle of nowhere, riding a camel, has the ability to communicate anywhere in the world. This is not just advancement in technology, but the evolution and dispersion of informational power.

Technological advances in communication throughout the U.S. alone provide immediate feedback to national decision-makers. Reactionary style decision-making

due to the immediacy of information will force the strategist to use the media as criteria during the planning process. Understanding the media and the singular power it possesses can allow the strategist to make much more informed decisions by treating the media as a critical element of power. The strategist must take the bad with the good and understand that this relationship and its impact on national security decision-making is extremely complex and requires a great degree of care and cultural change. This change within the military is underway, as evidenced through the acceptance of the embedded media, but those last few leaders who refuse to embrace it and never fully understand its power are fated to receive its potential wrath. In terms of "**ends, ways** and **means**," the media is a **means** by which to alter and influence enemy actions so as to reach the strategist's desired **ends.**

FROM VIETNAM TO IRAQ

" Was the United States defeated in the jungles of Vietnam, or was it defeated in the streets of American cities?" Colonel Paul Vallely and Major Michael Aquino asked, in a 1980 article for Military review that the U.S. had "lost the war – not because we were outfought, but because we were out PSYOPed." They felt that the media had failed to "defend the U.S. public against the propaganda of the enemy." This ability to influence public opinion through the media and to influence the media itself are much the same tactics that current day terrorists use to gain support for their cause, and negatively influence the public's support of their adversary. This is not to say that operational and tactical commanders make poor decisions, but the time to analyze, develop and arrive at a decision is acutely abbreviated. Many factors influence this, and the increasing public awareness on global issues, thanks to the abundance of information, makes this a complex task. The attention and support Americans give to an issue is in direct proportion to the amount of press coverage it receives. [1] The media is a moneymaking business and focuses on stories that sell, which are largely centered on sensational events. Images of the suffering, dead and mass destruction not only sway public opinion, but can distort policymakers' perceptions of the crisis as well. [2] There is no longer a filter between the public and the event. The events presented by the media in Vietnam were perceived to be true to much of the American public and

many of the nation's decision makers. Their coverage swayed public opinion and influenced decision makers. Press coverage, specifically television, changed the perception of warfare beginning with the Vietnam War. The public was able to see the grotesque images of war up front, no longer separated by thousands of miles. These horrible images that were previously only heard or read about now faced them head on. Our soldiers were dying daily as it became an “in your face” war. There was no hiding from these images broadcast globally and the government was forced to deal with this new effect on public opinion.

In October of 1983 the U.S., with the support of neighboring Caribbean states, invaded Grenada to oust the People’s Revolutionary Government and protect U.S. citizens in an effort to restore the state’s legitimate government.[3] With the memories of Vietnam still fresh in the minds of the U.S. leadership, the press was not allowed to participate in the invasion. There was great concern over the operational security of the mission, and the possibility of the press endangering its success as well as the lives of the military involved. Additionally, there was possibly the concern over broadcasting problems the U.S. may encounter and was not prepared to handle, or did so poorly. The plan had excluded the media completely from the operation until the leadership was convinced they could do no harm.[4] “There were no first hand reports from Grenada until 2 ½ days after the operation began. The media, citing the American people's right to know, and frustrated at their inability to provide the level of reporting that they would have liked, protested loudly about the military's gross oversight in failure to permit journalists to accompany the operation.”[5] The media would have obviously picked up on the communication problems that the invading force encountered as well as the lack in topographical information available for Grenada. [6] Due to poor interaction between the media and the military, a panel was formed to determine the best way to conduct military operations while keeping the public informed.[7] The answer the panel came up with was the Department of Defense National Media Pool (DoDNMP) or the “press pool.”

In December 1989, in response to General Noriega’s declaration of war, the United States invaded Panama, principally in support of treaty obligations to ensure the unhindered operation of the Panama Canal, and to protect the lives of U.S. citizens and

their property as well as restore a legitimate democracy to the isthmus. This time the press was pulled into the operation based on decisions, which came about as a result of the Grenada invasion, however; they were still disgruntled since the “press pool” didn’t provide the access that they had envisioned.

U.S. Southern Command had made no plans for the press to accompany any of the units, thus none of the media witnessed any actual combat. In fact, the independent journalist were “sequestered” and detained at Howard Air Force Base, presumably for their safety.[8] Additionally, the media was ill prepared to cover the war. They had experienced numerous problems in their initial planning, which translated into poor logistical support as well as limited capability to file a story once in country.[9] Media involvement in military operations still had a long way to go, and although not the complete lock out as in Grenada, the “press pool’ concept was not providing adequate access to the action, and media logistical support needed greater emphasis in its planning.

Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait resulted in the build up of U.S. forces in 1990 and the kick off of the First Gulf War in January 1991. The U.S. led a coalition in the ousting of the Iraqi force from Kuwait, and penetrated deep into Iraq for a resounding defeat of Saddam’s forces. The operation was a great success, yet the press still experienced problems in regard to access to the troops and action. They were forced to always be accompanied by a Public Affairs Officer anytime they spoke with the troops, and their stories reviewed by the military and passed back through military communicative means. Even when their stories did reach the U.S. they claimed censorship due to the delay experienced by this process. Although included into the plan this time, U.S. Central Command dictated their every movement on the battlefield as well as reviewed each report prior to release. This was far from the unfettered access the press had envisioned.[10]

President George H.W. Bush ordered U.S. troops into action in December of 1992, to restore order in Somalia, which at that time was in the middle of a civil war and mass starvation. This presented new challenges for both the press and the military. The battle of Mogadishu turned out to be the most intensive close combat that Americans had faced since the Vietnam War.[11] The unfettered access the press had to the

battlefield during this operation was dramatic. This was the very thing that the military and national leadership had feared in the previous mentioned vignettes.

The media most assuredly shaped public opinion and ultimately became the catalyst for the U.S. pull out. As mentioned earlier, images of starving children and dead U.S. servicemen being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu was shocking. “The media’s access to the battlefield influenced operations in a manner previously unseen. Consider the frustration that the U.S. troops felt when the international press corps reported on the Task Force Rangers’ seemingly bungled raid on an U.S. compound in Mogadishu in August 1993. Three days later, a U.S. Army Quick Reaction Force patrol approached a suspected military mortar firing position that was housed in a humanitarian relief organization compound, and this time they knocked on the gate and asked permission to search.” The media had influenced the actions of the patrol.[12]

Today, the presence of CNN and other news agencies on the battlefield may influence the combat leader’s decisiveness and the decisions made by both his military and political superiors. The public, through the eye of the media, will see a situation unfold at the same time as the military leadership making media involvement an important criterion to be used in crisis analyses in order to produce a viable course of action. Access to real-time global events has added a new and critical step in the decision-making process. Public opinion changes rapidly and is influenced heavily by visual images seen on television. Additionally, mobile communications, facsimiles, and the Internet have made access to both political and military decision-makers more available than in the past. Further enhancing this effect today is the proliferation of the personal computer. The public has access to immediate information on about any topic or event. Computer speed has doubled every twelve to eighteen months for several years. This means that raw information is sent so quickly there is no time to prepare or react, and in most cases the public sees it as it occurs. This “real-time” flow of information can and often will adversely impact the reaction time a leader has to make a decision, and limits the ability to analyze its affects. Time is the most critical resource in analyzing a problem and now it has become even more so with the ability to see a crisis event as it is unfolding. Due to this global awakening, a single person can have

strategic impact on world events. This may also influence the ability to make rapid decisions in a very constrained timeline.

THE MEDIA AND RECENT NATIONAL SECURITY DECISION MAKING

Did the "Yellow Press drive President George W. Bush to war" or did he use the press to open the door?[13] The war in Iraq certainly had many different strategic and political motivators. There is no doubt of Saddam Hussein's cruelty to his own people, and his ability to obtain and manufacture weapons of mass destruction (WMD). His use of chemical agents on his own people is proof of his willingness to use WMD on an adversary. Was this reasoning enough to make a unilateral decision to go it alone and depose this "evil" dictator? The media most certainly played an incredibly large role in getting this message out. This information was easily used to help incite U.S. public opinion and support the President's position to go to war against Iraq. The U.S. Congress, also influenced by this information, saw themselves scrutinized as they deliberated this resolution to go to war in front of millions of viewers who were also their constituents.

This message presented by the media justified the President's decision to go to war. Some may argue that the decision was made well in advance; however, the media was used successfully to capture the deliberation within Congress. The American public continued to hear of this evil they would soon have to confront in order to make the world a safer place, and now they were able to see their elected representative either vote yes or no on this very important resolution. The pressure was on and if one disagreed with the notion that war (AKA – regime change) was the only alternative the whole country would see it. This same tactic was also used in the attempt to secure the United Nations (UN) approval. This time it was not as successful. However, the refusal of several security council member states was strongly admonished by the Bush administration and the world was able to see, even if an illusion, how this administration petitioned the UN unsuccessfully for help.

The media and/or the use of the media play a critical role in national security decision-making. It can either be used to the advantage of the strategist or become a millstone. If the media is viewed as an asset and its use is truly understood, then it will

only enable the strategist, however, if misunderstood and used incorrectly, it will most certainly force the strategist to react prematurely and possibly without the support of public opinion. A new level of war is upon us where we receive an “endless” stream of information that can overwhelm us. This information will come from various sources and mostly from the media.[14] Not only shall our decision-making process be hazy but so too will our adversary’s. The enemy will also have the burden to share of sorting out and interpreting all this information before he can make a decision and react.[15] This should be somewhat gratifying and comforting to know that the “bad guys” will also have a difficult time as well as be greatly influenced by the multitude of information mediums and the vast amount they must sift through in order to successfully use it.

EMBEDDED MEDIA

The decision to embed reporters during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) was a skillfully devised strategic initiative executed flawlessly. Media influence works both ways on public opinion. The false idea that the press only wants to report the negative had forced some military leaders into a form of military isolation. No doubt, sensationalism sells and the media is a business where good news stories are generally not top sellers, but the “embedded reporter” was able to report on the good and bad at the grass roots level. The initial idea to embed reporters was met with not only skepticism from within the ranks of the military, but also among seasoned reporters who felt that embeds may lose their objectivity. Serving as part of the team and suffering the many uncomfortable situations the soldiers faced, which included daily life and death decisions, forced a bonding between reporter and soldier. The embedded reporter was less likely to focus on the bad and have a real desire for a positive outcome. Another aspect of this plan was that by devoting a significant number of reporters at the front line level, the press would have little time to invest in finding larger more controversial issues. The military portrayed to hometowns across America, through the media, their soldier’s sacrifices as they fought for our national objectives. This was possibly manipulation of the press, but regardless the situation benefited both the military and the media, and both were able to get an equitable return. The media is an inestimable tool in national and military decision-making.

Many argue that public support is directly in proportion to the amount of media coverage given to a specific topic.[16] "Few humanitarian crises seem to produce a public response unless they have first attracted the attention of the press and television – the so called CNN-effect." General Anthony Zinni said that television has captured the initiative in defining the context in which events take place, how they are proceeding, and how the military, for example, is performing.[17] "We have to tune to CNN to see how we're doing." The power of the press is real and can shape national and international opinion; however, the power of the press can also be a positive influence in how we shape opinion in our favor. As much as the military has complained with regard to the negativism of the press, it has also successfully used the press in its information warfare campaign. The military has invested a lot of training and resources in its public affairs community. "Our message or theme" is well thought out and made available for public consumption and the press is our messenger. As stated earlier, the press represents the truth and serves as the public's "whistle blower." When Americans distrust what comes out of the mouths of our national leaders, they still believe the media. National decision-makers are learning that the press is a respected institution among Americans, and can be an asset in their prosecution of the national agenda.

During Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan selected reporters were allowed access to the mission briefings and plans for Operation Anaconda. These same reporters accompanied the troops during the conduct of the operation. They were not allowed to report on any details or aspects of the mission until after the operation began and they had returned to the Forward Operations Base (FOB). The media not involved in the operation based their reports on speculation, which even though not totally factual could have jeopardized the operation. Not until their return from the operation did reporters like CNN's Martin Savage, and Sean Naylor for the Army Times get factual stories out. This caused a bit of angst initially, but it helped make the operation a success while simultaneously protecting the operation itself, those that fought in it and those that reported on it. Margaret Belknap in her article, *The CNN Effect: Strategic Enabler or Operational Risk*, states that "the military attracts people who follow the rules; the media attracts those who strive on *less is more*," implying that the media will do whatever it takes to get a story as opposed to military personnel who

will follow the rules given by their commanding officer.[18] The media involved in Operation Anaconda during OEF did a good job by protecting information and not releasing it until it was no longer a threat to those on the ground. Whether one subscribes to Margaret Belknap's theory or not, it is possible that at times what the media reports may not have all the details, but may still impact the mission. This is possibly a good argument for the embedding of reporters who share the same risk as the soldier.

In the last century the process of reporting on what occurred during a battle took several days to reach home, but due technological advances the time now is reduced to only hours or minutes. The luxury of time to react and craft the appropriate political statement is no more. It has become an immediate action drill where a prepared sound-byte is used in order to buy additional time. What a soldier does on the battlefield immediately affects national, as well as international sentiment for or against a strategic cause. He is not just a soldier, one of many, but he is a "strategic soldier" capable of changing the entire image of a mission with a bad decision or a bullet that strays from its intended target.[19] "Big decisions are often made by military and political leaders, but the strategic soldier – by his one mistake that is sure to be televised – also affects the military operation." Embedded reporters were able to bring the individual soldier and unit actions directly to the American public and their national decision-makers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The military has made great progress with media relations and the embedded program is the center of this recent success. To build on what has been accomplished it is recommended that the following initiatives be reviewed for implementation.

1. There needs to be greater focus on media operations during training cycles at the Combat Training Centers.

2. Unit Commanders and key unit officers must understand all facets of military-media relations. They must also fully comprehend the fact that there may be "bad" stories reported at times. They must learn to take the good with the bad, and capitalize on what they learn from their mistakes.

3. Media training is essential at the lowest levels. It should be incorporated at all levels of NCOES, as well as officer professional development starting with the Officer Basic Course. A good professional relationship between the military and the media is essential for success in future operations.

4. Embedded reporters from local media outlets should have first priority for assignment with military units from their state or local region so that they can both train and conduct operations with units familiar to them and their media audience.

5. Embedded reporters should be assigned to all levels of military command and throughout the interagency community.

6. Embedded reporters assigned to specific military HQs must receive lessons in military planning and strategy in addition to mandatory media boot camp instruction.

7. Media training must become a mandatory requirement for staff level training and senior service college programs.

CONCLUSION

In a world of immediate access to information, our society wants constant updates on what is happening across our borders, especially in a time of war.[20] "CNN has the technology, the skills, and the money to go live anywhere in the world and can report 24/7 on a global stage before the live camera that never blinks."[21] "Anytime there is military action taking place there will always be a CNN team member available in that specific area to report the action to the people."[22]

CNN along with other news agencies have shown their ability to travel to the unreachable place and report from an austere and hostile environment in "real time." This may influence the military's ability to make well thought out decisions ranging from the strategic to the tactical level, distinctly separate levels which at times have become almost synonymous thanks to the press. Strong images broadcast from around the world make a significant impact on public opinion. The sight of dead soldiers being dragged through the streets in Somalia was enough to enrage the public and influence the Clinton administration to abandon its efforts. Pictures of a war-torn country and starving children led the U.S. to finally introduce a military element into Liberia where little or no U.S. national interests lie.[23] "The media by itself may not be enough to alter

government policy, but a public becoming ever increasingly aware has the ability to make its voice heard in reaction to a media event." This can now be done through email, facsimile, and cellular communications all the way to Washington – from the constituency to the executive branch – almost instantaneously. [24]

The media's effect on national security decision-making is significant. There is no doubt of its influence, and based on the information provided within this record, there can be no doubt of its power and effect on national security decision-making. It has emerged as a viable element of power. Acceptance of this concept will allow the strategist to use information, the second element of power, to its fullest extent.

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