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SEEKING EVERY ADVANTAGE:

THE IMPACT OF MILITARY-MEDIA RELATIONS ON THE OPERATIONAL COMMANDER

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Joint Military Operations Department.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Technological advances have greatly improved reporting from the scene of battle and conflict, and therefore have radically increased the media's potential to influence and impact the outcome of future military operations. The overriding issues of contention between the military and the media revolve around three critical factors: access, censorship, and timely reporting from the field. Operational commanders' foremost concerns center on operational security, mission accomplishment and troop safety. Their two disparate yet complementary objectives must be reconciled. Military commanders control sanctioned access to the military area of operations; the situation is thus rife with potential for conflict between the two. Various methods of information control have been employed through history. Censorship, ground rules, denial of access and media pools (the most widely used) each has its pros and cons.

The unique attributes of military operations other than war have further complicated the issue for operational commanders. Information provided by the mass media can be a force multiplier for the astute commander; he must adopt a proactive approach toward media relations in order to realize the media's potential for improving his chances for mission accomplishment. His approach must include personal involvement, organizational reform and force-wide education and training as he seeks to balance the legitimate and worthy objectives of both the military operation and the media covering the story.

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Abstract of

Seeking Every Advantage: The Impact of Military Media Relations on the Operational Commander

Technological advances have greatly improved reporting from the scene of battle and conflict, and therefore have radically increased the media's potential to influence and impact the outcome of future military operations. The overriding issues of contention between the military and the media revolve around three critical factors: access, censorship, and timely reporting from the field. Operational commanders' foremost concerns center on operational security, mission accomplishment and troop safety. Their two disparate yet complementary objectives must be reconciled. Military commanders control sanctioned access to the military area of operations; the situation is thus rife with potential for conflict between the two. Various methods of information control have been employed through history. Censorship, ground rules, denial of access and media pools (the most widely used) each has its pros and cons.

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Introduction

Two recollections of events during Operation Restore Hope in Somalia offer resounding commentary on the way today's mass media cover and report military operations and combat; both illustrate the remarkable impact the media can have on operational commanders and the operations they lead. The first case recalls how Navy Seals and Marines who conducted the amphibious assault on the beach at Mogadishu were engaged by a phalanx of lights, cameras and reporters as they waded ashore rather than by enemy obstacles and fire. The second, far more agonizing, image was from a live satellite broadcast of grinning Somali gunmen dragging the lifeless, mutilated body of an American Ranger through the streets of Mogadishu in a grisly celebration of victory.

Technological advances have greatly empowered reporting from the scene of conflict and battle and therefore have radically increased the media's potential to influence and impact the outcome of the operation. The media will not willingly retreat from its front-line presence, nor from the wide access it has enjoyed in previous operations. Operational commanders can no longer hope to relegate journalists and correspondents to after the fact, next-day coverage. Relentless technological advances offer the media an ever-increasing array of tools with which they can potentially influence the outcome of military operations across the globe. Only commanders who recognize the significant potential impact the media has on unfolding military operations and who endeavor to plan for, and work with, the media throughout the conflict can reasonably expect the impact to be favorable to their interests. Information, in its larger context than that usually ascribed it by military planners, is a weapon that can be

employed by friend and foe alike; both can use information to achieve advantages at all levels of war. On-scene mass media provide information to any who care to tune-in, log-on or subscribe, and the information they provide will usually influence all but the most brief and limited military operations. As commanders face increased requirements and expanding missions with downsized forces, only those who welcome the media to their theater and prepare properly for its integration into their deliberate planning equation can hope to garner meaningful operational advantage regardless of the phase of the operation or where on the spectrum of conflict events have placed them.

As background, this paper will briefly review the fundamental problems of military-media relations predicated by the institutions' juxtaposition in our democratic society's framework and will therein summarize attributes of the two which acerbate their imperfect alliance. Further, the history of military-media relations will be addressed as a backdrop for analysis of current guidelines governing interaction between the less than enthusiastic partners. The role of the operational commander relative to the media in military operations other than war (MOOTW) is also examined. The paper concludes with recommendations to the operational commander and his staff designed to improve their effective utilization of an asset -- information generated by mass media -- which they cannot afford to overlook in pursuit their operational objectives.

The Great Divide

"The roots of tension are in the nature of the institutions. The military is hierarchical with great inner pride and loyalties. It is the antithesis of a democracy -- and must be so if it is to be effective. It is action-oriented and impatient with outside interference. To the contrary, a free press -- one with great virtues and elemental constituents of a democracy -- is an institution wherein all concentration of power is viewed as a danger. By its very nature, the press is skeptical and intrusive. As a result there will always be a divergence of interest between the military and the media." [1]

"At their worst the military wraps itself in the flag and the media wrap themselves in the First Amendment and neither party listens to the other." [2]

The overriding and enduring issues of contention between the military and the media boil down to three critical factors: access, censorship and the timely reporting of news from the battlefield.[3] These concerns remain timeless and universal as a result of the widely disparate, yet complementary, roles each institution plays in our democratic society. Many newsmen see their role as one which serves to connect the governed and those at the seat of government to the military, and vice versa. Naturally, the media perceive a strong need, even requirement, to be exposed to and aware of the military's actions and intentions. They want total access, absolutely no censorship, and to quickly get their stories out, unimpeded, to their editors and audiences alike. Military leaders, and in particular operational commanders, demand the option to exercise various forms of control for operational security and troop safety concerns. The battle within the battle thus becomes one between perceived responsibilities on the part of two contenders on the same side of the battlefield. Newsmen

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[1] Winant Sidle, "A Battle Behind the Scenes," Military Review, September, 1991, p. 52.
[2] Peter Andrews, "The Media and the Military," American Heritage, July/August, 1991, p. 79.
[3] Douglas Kellner, The Persian Gulf TV War (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), p. 81.

contend they are compelled by a collective obligation to uphold the "public's right to know" implicit in the First Amendment. They feel that constitutionally-sanctified obligation should almost always prevail over concerns regarding operational security raised by their military counterparts. The argument is a compelling one; a functional democratic government requires that the public remain informed. In the words of James Madison, "a popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy, or perhaps both." [4] In order to keep the public informed, the media believes it requires unrestricted access to report on all aspects of governmental action, including military. Any significant restrictions on the media, it is argued, undermine the very foundation of our constitutional republic.

The media's constitutional argument is neither absolute nor universally accepted. Many observers, military and civilian alike, reject the contention that the people's right to know is in fact constitutionally mandated. Review of Supreme Court rulings regarding the media's right to access to report on government, indicate that such access, and therefore the people's right to know, is limited. In fact, legal scholars generally conclude that the media have no constitutional right of access to military operations.[5] Specifically, the Court has held that access may be denied if the denial is "necessitated by compelling government interest, and is narrowly tailored to serve that interest." [6]

The operational commander, therefore, is granted the discretion to exclude media from the theater or battlefield; indeed, he has a duty to do so if in his judgment operational security or

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[4] Loren B. Thompson, ed., Defense Beat: The Dilemmas of Defense Coverage (New York: Lexington Books, 1991), p169.
[5] Ibid., p. 173.
[6] Ibid., p. 172.

troop safety would be unduly influenced by their presence. The commander's first priority is and must remain the mission success and the safety of those entrusted to his command. The presence of media in his theater before or during conflict increases the likelihood of leaks which could provide an enemy with information useful in pursuit of their wholly contrary priorities.

The military's lingering cultural distrust of the military not withstanding, there are real advantages, and at times even obligations, which dictate allowing media access to an operation. As a link between the people, their government and their military, the media play a crucial role in informing and educating, all the while influencing public opinion. When they report objectively, the media's impact is appropriate and advantageous to the proper functioning of a free society. Therefore, when the operational commander considers denying access, he must carefully weigh the impact such denial may have; the impact upon national morale and public support must be considered as the commander endeavors to exercise the operational art of transforming battlefield victory into the successful achievement of the desired strategic post-hostility end state.

How, then, is the issue of access to be resolved between two camps with dissimilar objectives yet both pledged to the same high ideals of American governance? Given the operational commander's usual control of access to the theater, he is in the unenviable position of having to make this determination, of having to implement his decision, and of having to stand the glare of the bright lights of scrutiny after the fact. A review of past efforts at reconciling these two public interests illustrates the difficulty of satisfactorily

balancing them and highlights those methods which have had more and less success in dealing with this double-edged issue.

In the Beginning...

American military media relations since the Civil War have been lukewarm at best and downright hostile at worst. Even since before the United States was a nation, history has seen the tides of cooperation and trust between the two ebb and rise through conflict at home and abroad.[7]

Rather than review this aspect of research from a chronological perspective, it may be more effective to address methods of control imposed in the past grouped by method rather than order of occurrence. Issues of access, censorship and timely transmission remain the crux of the issue.

Censorship. By far, censorship was the most widely utilized method of control employed by the military between the American War for Independence and the Korean War. Circumstances during the Revolution -- few reporters, few newspapers and few readers -- presented little opportunity for friction between the military and the media. As time and technology marched on, though, censorship proved to be an increasingly more difficult task. Censorship during the Spanish American War, for example, was not effectively managed and was often disregarded. World War I saw censorship's effectiveness wane, but a patriotic press offset the negative effects of inadequate military media control efforts. World War II was the high water mark for censorship, both stateside, where censorship was voluntary, and in-theater, where it was mandatory. Again, the patriotism displayed by reporters seemed to factor greatly in the success of the military's information control efforts; reporters' nearly

[7] Andrews, p. 78.

absolute freedom of movement within the combat zone and their wide access to operational and strategic level commanders likely played a part in mitigating, if not altogether silencing, their objections to censorship as well. Censorship was employed well throughout the Korean War to the apparent satisfaction of military and media leaders alike.[8] Vietnam, on the other hand, proved a far greater challenge.

By the time events regarding American military involvement in Vietnam had become newsworthy, the American and international media had grown in size, stature and influence. Television was now a *bona fide* news media element. Communication technological advances began to erode the effectiveness of censorship efforts and journalists, as a whole, felt far less obligated to let patriotism influence their reporting.[9]

Ground Rules. Recognizing censorship as no longer viable, DOD chose to adopt Ground Rules for media personnel in Vietnam. These consisted of 15 rules forbidding reports which revealed information of clear value to those opposing the counter-insurgency war being waged by the South Vietnamese and American forces. Non-compliance with the rules led to loss of accreditation by American military authorities in-theater and resulted in the reporter's loss of access and assistance (transportation, communication, billeting, *et al*). This method of control was quite effective but contributed significantly to the rapidly widening gulf between military and media camps.[10]

Denial of Access. Total exclusion of the media from the combat zone was only employed once in modern history: during the American invasion of Grenada in 1983. The result was an

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[8] James Fallows, Breaking the News (New York: Pantheon, 1996), p. 24.
[9] James H. Webb, Jr., "The Media and the Military," Marine Corps Gazette, November, 1984, p. 33.
[10] Sidle, p. 54.

angry media and a sullied military image while the negative reports of media exclusion subsumed the invasion to become the story within the story. Denial of access is now acknowledged as a lose-lose proposition and is no longer seriously considered a viable option for information control.[11]

Recognizing that since Grenada, military media relations had grown increasingly acrimonious, General John W. Vessey, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), convened a panel in 1983 which included respected reporters and public affairs officials to develop recommendations for how the military should try to handle the media and information control in the future. The Panel, chaired by retired General Winant Sidle, became known as the Sidle Panel and reported out in 1984. Their most important recommendation involved the creation of Media Pools.[12]

Media Pools. DOD instituted the recommendations of the Sidle Panel regarding Media Pools when it stood up the National Media Pool (NMP) in 1984. The NMP was envisioned for use in cases where the military circumstances of certain operations would prevent unlimited media participation. DOD selected the agencies to be represented in the Pool and they, in turn, selected the reporters. Materials generated by the NMP would be made available to interested parties not included in the pool. The NMP was to be brought in-theater using military transportation and technical support as close to H-Hour as possible, and were to be replaced by "full coverage" as soon as feasible within the confines of case-by-case military considerations.[13]

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[11] Frank J. Stech, "Winning CNN Wars," Parameters, Autumn 1994, p. 39.
[12] Sidle, p. 56.
[13] Ibid.

The NMP system has since enjoyed only moderate success and acceptance. Critiques by those agencies and reporters represented in the pools after their use in Operation Earnest Will (Persian Gulf tanker escort operations in 1987-88) were generally favorable, but the concept did not work well during Operation Just Cause. In Panama, the NMP arrived late and members were unable to adequately cover the story to their satisfaction; worse yet, non-pool reporters beat the NMP to the theater and continued to arrive throughout the conflict. Pools were later used in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm; military public affairs officials assigned to the pools were in some cases accused of attempting to manipulate reporters rather than assist them.[14] Pools, it seemed, were not the final answer to the problem.

The difficulty associated with reconciling the need of the military and the media draws to some degree from the evolving nature of conflicts in which the military finds itself increasingly embroiled. It is important, then, to briefly discuss the changing nature of operations in which military commanders endeavor to succeed.

Operating in the Gray: Seeking Every Advantage. The military will likely be involved in far more MOOTW before it sees another relatively more organized and more easily reconciled conventional war. The strategic landscape is continuously changing as the combination of MOOTW's unique attributes and the instantaneous nature of modern media coverage draw the strategic and tactical levels of war ever closer.[15] Military decisions made and actions taken in today's crisis have increasingly significant impact on strategic decision-makers at home and abroad. The nature of the operational commander's role is evolving, too. He must

[14] Lloyd J. Matthews, ed., Newsmen and National Defense (McLean, VA: Brassey's (U.S.), 1991), p. 93.
[15] Harry G. Summers, The Making of Military Strategy for the Twenty-First Century (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1997), p. 44.

not only understand the changing priorities brought on by MOOTW, but also the growing and immediate impact his actions can have far outside the theater of conflict or crisis. Further complicating the operational commander's responsibilities is the requirement for mastery of sensitive diplomatic skills necessary to operate effectively within multinational coalition forces under the auspices of the United Nations or similar organizations. In short operational commanders can expect little more than the unexpected. National leadership will continue to employ American military forces in roles and missions of expanding scope which require ingenuity, flexibility and resourcefulness from commanders and their staffs.[16] Further, mass media involvement of from the outset of nearly every operation of consequence is virtually assured.[17] As the operational commander seeks to effectively don an ever-increasing number of hats, he must not forget the need to interact, both personally and through his staff, with media representatives covering the operation. To do otherwise would be to squander a potential asset which is, to a degree at least, at his disposal.

[16] Joint Chiefs of Staff, Doctrine For Planning Joint Operations (Joint Pub 5-0) (Washington, D.C.: 13 April 1995)

[17] Judson J. Conner, Meeting the Press (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1993) p. 23.

Recommendations

"The press' instinctive rejection of self-improvement schemes ...leaves little room for hope of wholesale reform. Thus, accept the press as it is, whether that seems fair or not. Learn to work with this flawed institution and seek over time to persuade journalists to be aware of military concerns." [18]

Little will prove to be of greater value to the individual commander than his personal and sincere resolve to adopt the premise and spirit of the quote above. Operational commanders have a responsibility to pursue a three-tiered approach to improving their effective interaction with the media; these include personal responsibility, organizational reform, and educational and training initiatives. From an individual perspective, he must adopt something akin to a personal code for dealing with the media and embrace his personal responsibility regarding the management of the media's impact in his theater. The commander must set the example for his staff and their dealings with the media, and can do so by internalizing the following rules:

Never Lie. In a speech as National Security Advisor in 1988, General Colin Powell said,

"I do not believe a public official...having sworn an oath to the Constitution and to the people of the United States, has any part in any set of circumstances to lie, either to Congress or the press." [19]

While commanders have an obligation to safeguard sensitive or classified information, lying is an unacceptable way to do so. The media is a link between the military and the public, therefore lying *to* the press is actually lying *through* the press to the people.[20]

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[18] Elie Abel, quoted in Matthews, p. 134.
[19] Richard Halloran, "Soldiers and Scribblers Revisited: Working with the Media," Parameters, March, 1991, p. 133.
[20] Ibid., p. 134.

Lose the organizational baggage. While the commander, like everyone, is entitled to his opinions, it does neither him nor his mission any good to perpetuate animosity between "us and them." Keeping up the mantra of "those lying press dogs" does little to protect his forces from the abuses of the media and sours relationships with professional and empathetic journalists. Perhaps most damaging is the message a bellyaching commander sends to his staff; it can quickly nullify all the good intentions which reams of public affairs guidance offer by way of service and joints publications and directives.[21]

Stick to subjects appropriate to your rank and position. The operational commander should not avoid the press, but he must always remain keenly aware of where he fits in the big picture. Despite the impact and demands placed on him by the need to exercise diplomacy and understand political subtleties, the commander, when fashioning responses to queries regarding political issues, decisions and possible motivations behind them, must tread carefully. In essence, he must stick to discussion of those issues appropriate for military, vice political, leaders.[22]

Organizationally speaking, the commander should ensure that public affairs elements of his command team are viewed as a force multiplier[23] and included early in operational planning. Moreover, he should empower the public affairs principal on his staff with influence on, not just observation of, the staff's planning process. Media interest is usually near its height during the deployment phase of a MOOTW scenario. The commander must therefore ensure that early and adequate planning has been conducted to develop a public

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[21] Frank Aukofer and William P. Lawrence, America's Team: The Odd Couple (Nashville, TN: Freedom Forum First Amendment Center, 1995), p. 56.
[22] Halloran, p. 134.
[23] Ray Eldon Hiebert, "Public Relations as a Weapon of Modern Warfare," Public Relations Review, Summer, 1991, p. 111.

affairs strategy which will maximize his force's positive image and accuracy in responding to media questions upon initial arrival in theater.[24]

Personal and organizational efforts can go a long way toward improving the commander's, and his staff's, effective media relations and in doing so will enhance the likelihood of mission accomplishment. Education and training will consolidate the positive impact of such efforts. Commanders should direct the education of their forces regarding likely media interest in the operation as well as the media's role overall in American's democratic republic. The First Amendment should be explained as it relates to the media's role of relaying information about operations from the theater to the public. Once a foundation and particular level of knowledge has been achieved through such a long-term education program, more specific and focused training can be conducted in order to ensure each individual assigned to the force understands not only his responsibility regarding interaction with the media, but also his rights. Education will have taught them the value of the media and their reporting as a means to further the objectives of the force when involved in an operation. Training should then prepare members of the force for interaction with the media to maximize their potential effectiveness as part of the force's overall public affairs strategy.

[24] Bernard E. Trainor, "The Military and the Media: A Troubled Embrace," Parameters, December, 1990, p. 7.

Conclusion

The large-scale presence of mass media in theater with instantaneous connectivity to broadcast and print nodes around the world adds variables to the operational commander's equation which are here to stay and are likely only to increase in number, effectiveness, and impact. The commander is obligated, then, to recognize the potential which that presence and reporting will have on his operation and its outcome. Further, the commander is obliged to do everything he can to mitigate any potential negative impact to the best of his ability while cultivating a positive and vigorous relationship with the media to best advance his interests and ultimately his accomplishment of the mission.

Information, as the currency of the modern mass media machine, has become an element of the battlefield which arguably approaches that of a principle of war. That is, mass media information has evolved into an asset which can be turned to the advantage of friend or foe alike. He who devises a better plan for implementing his public affairs strategy stands more likely to benefit from coverage which furthers his operational aims and political objectives.

Operational commanders who recognize the growing influence which the media has on the public's perception of his military effectiveness and mission accomplishment will embrace the media and cultivate a positive relationship with it to take advantage of this force multiplier's potential to positively influence the outcome of his operation and ultimately further his objectives. Additionally, he will ensure his forces are educated and trained regarding the role of the media and their individual part as an object of the media's reporting.

Sound and proper public affairs strategy can ensure operational security and troop safety while still allowing adequate media access and effective military-media relations. The operational commander possesses ultimate authority regarding sanctioned access to the combat zone. His plan, therefore, must embody flexibility, adaptability and cooperation as he seeks to balance the legitimate and worthy objectives of both the military operation and the media reporting on it.

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