

# Get Over It!

## Repairing the Military's Adversarial Relationship with the Press

Jason D. Holm

**D**ESPITE TECHNOLOGICAL advances in both warfare and media communications since World War II, the military-media relationship has shown marked regression. A news-minded public has demanded a competitive, fast food-style, 24-hour media that provides instantaneous updates. Yet, even as the media has evolved, the military's reaction to the press refuses to rise above a pouting post-Vietnam adversarial relationship.

There is no doubt that the media can enhance military efforts. Few argue that the military does not need public understanding, support, and funding. And most can recite the constitutional need for a press free to report on those with guns. Yet, current military leaders who were in diapers during the Vietnam war still act like temperamental poster children for uninformed antimedia sentiment. Their angst is fueled by hearsay, moldy facts, and stories handed down from generation to generation. Bluntly, the military has missed the boat and continues to miss opportunities to use the media to shape positive public support for the military.

### The Military-Media Continuum

American military history illustrates the collapse of the military-media relationship. The Revolutionary War first displayed the American public's odd relationship with the military—odd because the public was the military. The Continental Army's challenge was to raise public support and solidify public opinion. The infant press helped General George Washington forge the public's will to win and establish a people's army by distributing pamphlets and exposing truths about British rule.

By World War I, technology had expanded coverage, increasing pressure on journalists. As the

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United States mobilized for war, the Committee on Public Information was formed to sell the war to end all wars and to maintain public support. Effectively, this was a form of censorship that successfully maintained public support for the war. Parents sent their sons to the good fight and were rewarded with sanitized clips of U.S. successes.

World War II's total mobilization began with strict censorship laws in place. Military public affairs pundits responded to radio's addition to the expanding news-reporting media by mandating a growth of propaganda. The Office of War Information was formed to inform the American people about the war. It made early use of journalists embedded within ground units. News reports from these journalists were often subject to heavy censorship, but they were successful in maintaining American public support for the war effort.

The Korean conflict served as "a transition period when reporters still had fairly good access to combat troops, with some limited censorship as the conflict progressed."<sup>1</sup> This censorship was created by the military in response to the media's criticism of UN commanders and is alleged to have caused the media's hypercoverage of President Harry S. Truman's firing of General Douglas MacArthur.

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war. These journalists were met with excessive classification and contradictory reports from the “five o’clock follies.” From the vantage point of its living room, the American public was instantly aware that their sons were dying at an alarming rate and that previously heroic notions of warfare did not apply. As public support for the war waned, the military turned its anger toward the agency that had exposed its flaws—the press.

Operation Urgent Fury, the 1983 invasion of Grenada, marked the United States’ triumphant return to victorious warfare; however, the 600 journalists who flocked to Barbados to cover the invasion were stranded there for the operation’s duration. Only 15 journalists received a tour of Grenada’s airfield, but they refused to share their material. A U.S. victory went largely unreported. In response, the media, citing the American people’s right to know and frustrated at its inability to provide continuous coverage, protested loudly about the military’s gross oversight. Missing the battle meant missing the war.<sup>2</sup>

In response to the media’s outrage, the Sidle Panel was formed to address the question of the public’s right to know versus operations security. This bipartisan panel, chaired by retired Major General Winant Sidle, was charged to determine the best method for providing media coverage of a military operation without compromising security. The panel established the National Media Pool to limit or control the number of correspondents who could be equipped and transported via military assets during a military operation. Furthermore, the panel recommended that “Planning should provide for the largest press pool that is practical and minimize the length of time the pool will be necessary before ‘full coverage’ is feasible.”<sup>3</sup>

Operation Just Cause in Panama during 1989 marked the National Media Pool’s first operational deployment. Unfortunately, poor planning prevented the media from witnessing any operations. The media were notified late, deployed late, and upon arrival, were detained at Howard Air Force Base, Panama. After being sequestered and sketchily informed by military channels, these late arrivals could only watch as reporters already on the ground in Panama covered the fighting.<sup>4</sup>

Mistakes in Panama led to the Hoffman Report, which required ground commanders not only to address the media pool but also to support it. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Colin L. Powell sent a message to major military commanders to stress the importance of incorporating news media coverage into military operations: “Commanders are reminded that the media aspects of military operations are important . . . and warrant your personal attention. Media coverage and pool support requirements must be planned simultaneously with operational plans and should address all aspects of operational activity, including direct combat, medical, prisoner-of-war, refugee, equipment repair, refueling and rearming, civic action, and stabilization activities. Public affairs annexes should receive command attention when formulating and reviewing all such plans.”<sup>5</sup>

Despite the Hoffman Report’s recommendations, Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm presented new challenges. Although cooperation between the Pentagon and the press made media coverage the most comprehensive to date, lingering mistrust denied the press full access, denied the public proper information, and denied the military proper credit for its successes. Each armed service differed greatly in accepting embedded media. The U.S. Marine Corps cared for and fed the media, thereby garnering air time not available to other services. The other services realized afterward that their inattention to accommodating the media resulted in virtually no public visibility for their units.<sup>6</sup>

Despite harmony between the military and media during operations in Somalia and Haiti, Operation Allied Force revealed a continued division. Kosovo had tighter news restrictions than ever, so tight that for the first few weeks the size and scope of the air campaign was misrepresented as a massive air attack. Unfortunately for the military planners who assumed Serbs would cower in the face of NATO aggression, Slobodan Milosevic failed to back down. What was presented as overwhelming force directed against fielded Serb forces turned out

Marines use their jeep as a dolly as Walter Cronkite and a CBS camera crew interview a battalion commander during the battle for Hue City, 20 February 1968.



U.S. Marine Corps

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to be modest bombing against Serb antiaircraft sites, and NATO's effort appeared inept. To compound the publicity nightmare, Milosevic's spokesmen used the press to expose NATO's mistakes and collateral damage, in some cases depicting the Serbs as victims of oppression.

The clampdown was so great that the "sterile war," fought by nameless, out-of-sight pilots, led to the American public's apparent lack of engagement in the war effort.<sup>7</sup> This assessment comes from the same military that still mourns the loss of public support in Vietnam. Perhaps, the *National Journal's* James Kitfield is right when he later wondered, "If, as has been said, the first casualty of any war is truth, the first casualty of a war in the Information Age may prove to be the trust that sustains the relationship between those who fight America's wars and those who report on wars."<sup>8</sup>

### **The First Amendment versus Operations Security**

In the battle over media freedom, military requests to protect operations security are inevitably met with the press' counterarguments of trampling first amendment liberties. The actual truth is undoubtedly

somewhere in the middle. It is difficult to comprehend a press that actually wants to put America's sons and daughters in harm's way; likewise, it is implausible to suggest that the military advocates suspending the U.S. Constitution. Yet, the media does sometimes push operations security too close to the edge, and the same military cross-culture that supports the constitutional right to bear arms is fairly willing to deny rightful media access.

So in remote cases in which the media violate operations security, how are they to be handled? In his article, "The Challenge of Media Scrutiny," David Wolynski writes, "The First Amendment states, 'Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech or of the press.' Some in the press take this to mean that the media has a right to print whatever it wants, whenever it wants. On the other hand, most experienced journalists understand the need for operational security. And we in the military must understand that even though we have the right to refuse to answer certain questions, the media still has the right to ask them. For those journalists who do not abide by the operations security rules, we have the right—and the responsibility—to complain quickly to their editors and never to

provide information to the offending reporters.”<sup>9</sup>

This implies that the military should handle each reporter as an individual rather than as part of a greater problem. Implausible? No more than asking the media to separate the military from William

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Calley; Tailhook; Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland; and the gay bashing at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. If the media is without trust, filled with liberal hacks of questionable patriotism, then why is the military not described as murderous, adulterous, rapist, and gay bashing?

Those who would not allow the media to cover military operations fail to realize that the military would not want it any other way. The first amendment protects us from ourselves. It recognizes the need for an independent media, even an imperfect media. Someone has to watch the guys with the weapons, those with fingers in the till, and those who make rules for the rest of us.<sup>10</sup>

In his essay “Stop Whining,” General Walter Boomer, commander of I Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) during Desert Storm, agrees: “This is a democracy, and a free press is the fundamental underpinning of everything that we stand for, fight for, and believe in. Now, it doesn’t make any difference then whether you like the media or you don’t like the media, they’re here to stay. It is healthy for the American military to be exposed through the media to the public. After all, they pay our salaries. The American people need to know what happens in war. Perhaps if more people understood the horror, we would be less inclined to go to war.”<sup>11</sup>

## **Remnants From Vietnam**

Although many grow weary of discussing the Vietnam-era military-media tango, it remains the crux of the dispute and warrants examination. Specifically, the subject matter is so toxic and the differences so great that the resentment has outlived the players. Current military leaders were not filling sandbags in Da Nang during the conflict; they

were filling diapers in Kansas City. Yet, the military’s hatred for the media has been passed down like crew drills—as if despising the media is an obligation rather than a choice.

Writer Joe Galloway stated: “A generation of officers emerged from that searing, bitter, orphaned war looking for someone to blame for the failures manifest in our nation’s defeat. By placing full blame and responsibility on the press they could avoid delving deeper, peeling to the underlying layers of the onion and exposing the more important failures of political leadership at home and military leadership right down the chain of command.”<sup>12</sup> A defeated journalist teaching at the U.S. Army War College echoed the sentiment, remarking, “A generation of soldiers will go to their graves hating all journalists for the reporting of some.”<sup>13</sup>

The fact is that leadership was misrepresenting and misreporting what was happening in Vietnam. It was obvious to the press early on that there was a vast difference between what the Americans in the field were saying and the artificial optimism the ranking Americans in Saigon were reporting. There were only two explanations for this disparity—neither flattering. Either the heads in Saigon were so out of touch with the soldiers in the field that they truly did not know the extent of the damage, or they knew the battlefield situation and misreported it to the American people.

Henry Gole writes: “Happy news was reported, and unhappy news was suppressed. The American public had every reason to believe that all was going well in 1968 when the bottom seemed to fall out. Both the press and the American people were shocked at the intensity and duration of enemy activity. . . . Leadership, not the media, had failed to prepare the nation.”<sup>14</sup>

So the press began reporting what it saw rather than what it was told. The press described the resolve of the enemy and the anguish and suffering of our own troops in victory and defeat. Journalists told stories of conscripted soldiers dying in a far-away land for ideals they could not hope to understand. Once the folks back home began reading and watching these reports, support for the war began to wane. And the military never forgave the press.

Nancy Ethiel of the McCormick Tribune Foundation said, “Trust is just one of those issues that lingers from Vietnam—a lot of Vietnam-vintage officers had heartburn over the television coverage of that war. My feelings are that the politicians who send you in and the public who support a war have to know the true cost of war. Trying to sanitize it, like we did in Desert Storm—where there were to be no bodies, no blood—is a false picture of conflict and does not serve the military well.”<sup>15</sup>



Lieutenant Kelly Flinn and her attorney, Frank Spinner, at Minot Air Force Base, North Dakota, May 1997.

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## Media as a Partner

In reality, the media in Vietnam was a partner of the fighting man. If America's sons and daughters were dying in a foreign land, their families had a right to know if their deaths were justified. If, after evaluating the facts the press presented, public support for the war disappeared, then the media was an effective tool in the democratic process.

Many of these reporters had a personal stake in the men they watched and reported on. Although the military leadership called the press the enemy, the better reporters were actually wading through rice paddies with the soldiers on the ground. The war's leadership, not the media or the ground soldier, was operating out of air-conditioned offices. The reporters who had taken the time to embed themselves with units often better grasped the war's human elements than did the practitioners of public policy. Galloway explains, "There, at the cutting edge of the war, you find yourself welcomed and needed—welcomed by the soldier as a token that someone in the outside world cares about him and how he lives and dies."<sup>16</sup> Yet, by continuing to believe that the press was the enemy in Vietnam rather than the vehicle that got them out of a bad war, today's soldiers are being victimized in absentia by the lies General William C. Westmoreland and U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson perpetuated 35 years ago.

## Missed Opportunities

By continuing to label the press as the enemy, the military is getting an enemy. Unfortunately, an enemy press will not be very forgiving when the chips are down. An organization as large as the U.S. military is certain to reflect a cross-section of all aspects of the population it draws from—both good and bad. So there are bound to be situations in which bad elements in the military do the wrong thing, and some of those things warrant public scrutiny—just as if the wrongdoer were a banker, schoolteacher, or congressman.

Rather than embrace diversity and allow an occasional negative story to accentuate the many positive stories in comparison, the military's response has often been to circle the wagons. Most of the military's public wounds have been self-inflicted. Look no further than the public response to the Tailhook, Aberdeen, and Kelly Flinn scandals. In Tailhook, the Navy assumed an ostrich stance, guessing the scandal would evaporate while its head was in the sand. The Navy guessed wrong, and Tailhook is now synonymous with officer misconduct. Because the Navy minimized the situation, the media dictated the pace and extent of the story.

Conversely, the way the Army handled drill sergeants' sexual abuse of female trainees at Aberdeen Proving Ground is textbook media relations. The

President Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara briefing congressional leaders in April 1965.



Lyndon B. Johnson Library

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media could not release the bombshell because the Army had already scooped them. The Army seized the initiative and “went ugly early,” and it was rewarded with a much more forgiving public with a much shorter memory. The Air Force’s mishandling of the Flinn case shows what happens when the press and public are forced to fill in the blanks. The fact that this is even referred to as the “Kelly Flinn adultery case” is evidence that the Air Force story was not told in time. Tony Capaccio explains that “covering the story was made all the more difficult because the Air Force wasn’t saying much.”<sup>17</sup> In fact, critics say the Air Force bears a great deal of responsibility for some of the flaws. Time and time again, according to reporters, top officials refused to talk about the case.

The result was that the public heard Flinn’s attorneys and public relations machine turn her case into a story about a woman who made a mistake and was now being victimized by the Air Force. It became a case about adultery rather than one about lying under oath and about why certain behavior is prejudicial to good order. The media heard and told this story because it was the only story available.

Perhaps the biggest mistake the Pentagon made was not its inability to make the occasional negative story go away but its inability to sell its multitude of positive actions. Grenada? No one saw it.

Just Cause? No one saw it either. Haiti? No one cared. Somalia? Certainly no one cared outside of Fayetteville, North Carolina, until dead U.S. soldiers were dragged through the streets of Mogadishu.

“When I look back at the military-media experience in the Gulf War, it is with sadness for lost opportunities on both sides of the equation,” Galloway explains. “Because of poor planning, paranoia and over-control, the details of a great victory of American arms were virtually lost to history. . . . The only thing the Pentagon had to hide in the Gulf was the finest military force this country has ever put into the field, and it did that very efficiently.”<sup>18</sup>

Conversely, Boomer used the media much differently during Operation Desert Storm. He gave the press access to his troops and embraced the media. Boomer allowed the press to eat, sleep, and ride with his troops. The result was perhaps an overrepresentation of I MEF’s exploits in Desert Storm media coverage. “Now, there’s a caveat here,” Boomer explains. “If you’re going to do that, you better have faith in your troops. If you don’t trust them, you can’t turn the media loose. But I would submit that if you don’t have faith and don’t trust them, you’re not a very good leader and you shouldn’t be there either.”<sup>19</sup>

Boomer’s remarks support the U.S. Marine Corps philosophy that every Marine is a public affairs

officer. Every rifleman is a spokesperson for the Marine Corps, and the corps gives its Marines the freedom to talk to the media. This is possible because Marine Corps leaders are confident that, given the opportunity, Marines will say the right thing, and the corps will look good. This is not some artificial, coerced sentiment; they just know that while Marines may not always be happy about their current situation, they will always portray pride at being Marines. The result is continuous positive coverage for the Marine Corps.

**The Next Step**

How is this military-media conflict resolved? Boomer complains that we have already spent too much time on the topic, and both sides should quit whining. Unfortunately, as events in Kosovo show, the relationship is not repaired. The result is limited coverage of what the military does well and limited public understanding of what the military is doing at all. Thus, it still needs to be discussed.

The differences between journalists and soldiers are marked. One exudes a liberal questioning of authority and the other a conservative blind faith. Perhaps, in first understanding these differences, the necessity for both is obvious.

“It is time to stop trying to resolve the perceived problem of military-media antagonism and recognize that this relationship is natural,” explains Willey.<sup>20</sup> Learning to nurture mutual differences enables building on similarities and mutual interests, and recognizing differences can create a trust and confidence between the two that will result in fairer media coverage of the military and greater media access. Willey continues, “The key to success in this relationship is understanding the other side and being willing to endure a few frustrations and setbacks along the way. Equally important is the realization that the natural tensions between military and media will always exist. The best approach is to

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educate each side, as much as possible, on the peculiarities of the other’s culture.”<sup>21</sup>

As the Tailhook and Flinn situations show, it is essential that the military abandon its self-protective, reclusive nature when responding to the press. In the absence of response, the American public will fill in the blanks, often not to the armed services’ favor. Former *New York Times* journalist Richard Halloran explains, “If military officers refuse to respond to the press, they are in effect abandoning the field to critics of the armed forces. That would serve neither the nation nor the military services.”<sup>22</sup>

Embedding is humanizes both the journalist responsible for informing the public and the soldier tasked with protecting the people. In addition to providing realistic coverage of history unfolding, it ensures that the media are not operating independently on the battlefield. Most important, embedding provides an empathetic forum for a journalistic profession with far too few former soldiers and a profession of arms with too few former journalists.

Everyone agrees that the military and the media have made mistakes. It is time to get over it and accept the fact that, as Boomer states, “hate ’em or love ’em, the media is here to stay.”<sup>23</sup> **MR**

**NOTES**

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