

# The Army and the Media

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*I have made arrangements for the correspondents to take to the field . . . and I have suggested that they should wear a white uniform to indicate the purity of their character.<sup>1</sup>*

—Union General Irvin McDowell

**T**HROUGHOUT AMERICAN history, the esteem that Army leaders have held for the media has changed little. Just a few years ago, McDowell's remarks would have been considered popular and applicable, particularly in the post-Vietnam era. It seems, however, that attitudes are changing. At a 1997 conference of senior military leaders and members of the media, conferees agreed that relations between the military and the media were "perhaps the best ever."<sup>2</sup> Although certain areas of tension and misunderstanding remain, consideration, facilitation, and cooperation characterize the current state of the military-media relationship. In recent military operations, the military has accommodated the media in a manner unprecedented since the Vietnam war. The operations in Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia provide ample evidence that the military, in stark contrast to earlier operations such as Grenada and Panama, recognizes the value of allowing the media to cover military operations.

The picture is not entirely rosy, however. A 1995 study of the military-media relationship conducted by Frank Aukofer, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, and Vice Admiral (Retired) William P. Lawrence showed sharp differences between the two institutions. The source of the disagreement appeared to be the "Post-Vietnam Blame the Media Syndrome."<sup>3</sup> In the Aukofer-Lawrence study, more than 64 percent of military officers agreed with the statement, "News media coverage of the events in Vietnam harmed the war effort."<sup>4</sup> This great divide between the two institutions continues to plague their relationship today. It is not the continuing angst over the Vietnam war's outcome that affects the military-media relationship today but, rather, its derivative effect: an ingrained cultural mistrust of the media

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throughout generations of military leaders. To dispel this mistrust, Army leaders must understand the historical and philosophical bases of the military-media relationship.

Fewer than 30 reporters accompanied the entire invasion force to Normandy, France, on 6 June 1944. In contrast, more than 500 journalists appeared within hours to cover combat operations in Grenada in 1983 and Panama in 1989. At the beginning of Operation Desert Storm in 1991, more than 1,600 news media and support personnel were present, and some 1,500 reported on hurricane relief operations in Florida in 1992. Reporters provided live television and radio coverage of the night amphibious landing that marked the beginning of Operation Restore Hope in Somalia in 1992 and the end of the UN operation during Operation United Shield in 1995. More than 1,700 media representatives covered the initial phases of peacekeeping operations in the American sector of Bosnia in 1996.<sup>5</sup>

During World War II, cooperation and commitment to a common cause characterized the relationship between the media and the military. John Steinbeck, a war correspondent of the time, put this characterization into plain words when he said, "We were all part of the war effort. We went along with it, and not only that, we abetted it."<sup>6</sup> The War Department based the World War II military-media

paradigm on censoring and strictly controlling correspondents. American military correspondents overseas were not allowed in war theaters unless they were accredited. Accreditation was granted only to correspondents who agreed to submit copy to military censors. For a major assignment, a group of correspondents would be selected beforehand with the condition that they shared their stories with colleagues. The success of these arrangements, at least in the eyes of the military, set the standard by which the military would judge all subsequent military-media relations.<sup>7</sup>

At the beginning of the Korean war, there was no censorship, only a voluntary code of war reporting whose goal was preserving military secrecy. Six months into the war, in December 1951, full military censorship was imposed. A month later, the military received full jurisdiction over correspondents. Reporters not adhering to censorship rules could be punished by having their privileges suspended or even court-martialed for violating any of a long list of instructions.<sup>8</sup>

The Vietnam war was a watershed event in the history of military-media relations. Indeed, its aftermath set the conditions for today's debates. Vietnam was the first major war in modern history to be fought without some form of censorship.<sup>9</sup> Instead, reporters accepted voluntary security ground rules. Unlike past wars where the military strictly controlled access to the battlefield, Vietnam was fully accessible to most correspondents. The enduring legacy of media coverage of this war is the charge that the media lost the war by its negative reporting. Whether true or not, this "post-Vietnam blame the media" legacy effectively built the stone wall that was erected between the two institutions.

The invasion of Grenada in October 1983 is another military-media relationship landmark because it resulted in many efforts at military-media cooperation. For the first 2 days of the operation, the U.S. government decided to bar the news media from the island. On the third day, only one 15-person press pool, out of approximately 600 reporters at Barbados, was allowed on the island. The media strongly protested this blackout. In response, the Secretary of Defense promulgated and released the Principles of Information on 1 December 1983, which states, in part: "It is the policy of the Department of Defense to make available timely and accurate information so that the public, Congress, and members representing the press, radio, and television may assess and understand the facts about national security and defense strategy. Requests for information from organizations and private citizens will be answered responsively and as rapidly as possible."<sup>10</sup>

The media's furor forced the military to examine how military crises and wars would be reported. Then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General John W. Vessey, Jr. created a panel of experts from both the military and the media to examine the Grenada operation and recommend how to address

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future problems. He directed the panel to answer, "how do we conduct military operations in a manner that safeguards the lives of our military and protects the security of the operation while keeping the American public informed through the media?"<sup>11</sup> Retired Army Major General Winant Sidle was selected to head this project. Sidle formed the Military-Media Relations Panel, more commonly known as the Sidle Panel, to address the question. The panel's answer laid the foundation of how the media reports military operations as we know it today.

The Military-Media Relations Panel was comprised of various media representatives and public affairs personnel from the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs) and operations spokespersons from the Joint Chiefs of Staff and each of the armed services. The commission met for a weeklong conference that included both media and military presentations in an open session and panel deliberations in a closed session. At the conference's conclusion, the Sidle Panel presented eight recommendations and a Statement of Principle to govern military-media relations. The Statement of Principle provided a more detailed account of the basis of the military-media relationship than had been previously expressed in the Department of Defense Principles of Information: "The American people must be informed about the United States' military operations, and this information must be provided through both the news media and the government. Therefore, the panel believes it is essential that the U.S. news media cover U.S. military operations to the maximum degree possible consistent with mission security and the safety of U.S. forces."<sup>12</sup>

Among the panel's eight recommendations was introducing a standing media pool—the DOD

National Media Pool (NMP)—and voluntary media compliance with ground rules versus submission to censorship. The recommendations also pointed out the importance of incorporating public affairs considerations in operational planning. Interestingly,

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the final recommendation encouraged both the military and the media to improve their understanding of each other.

The eight Sidle Panel recommendations established the basic paradigm for covering future military operations. A scant 6 years later, this paradigm was tested in the December 1989 invasion of Panama. Journalist Steve Katz reported, "This was the Pentagon's first test of the military's ability to adopt the recommendations of the Sidle Panel. It flunked the test."<sup>13</sup>

On the evening before the invasion, then Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney and Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs) Pete Williams deliberately called out the DOD NMP so late that journalists missed the first hours of the attack.<sup>14</sup> While the military bore the brunt of this criticism, many believed that it was the political climate at the time that was really to blame. During the week before the invasion, President George H. Bush and Vice President Dan Quayle both told Cheney they doubted that the pool could maintain operations security but were leaving final decisions about the pool up to him.<sup>15</sup> Without a doubt, this put Cheney in somewhat of an awkward situation. Many media members chose to believe that Cheney was solely responsible for the latest debacle.

Once again, the handling of the media during the invasion and its associated outrage forced the military to reexamine its media practices during crises. Just days after this latest fiasco with the media, Williams asked Mr. Fred Hoffman, a former *Associated Press* reporter and DOD official, to research the facts surrounding the DOD NMP deployment to Panama.<sup>16</sup> Hoffman agreed and produced what is now known as the Hoffman Report.<sup>17</sup> It provides a comprehensive list of events that led to the mis-handling of the media.

Hoffman spoke with planners and public affairs personnel at every level at the Pentagon and the U.S. Southern Command, the unified command responsible for the operations in Panama. Hoffman learned that while the Joint Staff issued instructions to incorporate public affairs planning with operational planning, this did not occur. Hoffman also found that an excessive concern for secrecy prevented DOD's media pool from reporting the critical opening battles.<sup>18</sup> An excessive concern for secrecy had been a major criticism from the media following the invasion of Grenada. Even so, the White House and the Pentagon's civilian leadership decided not to inform the media of the operation.

In his report, Hoffman made 17 recommendations that affirmed the DOD NMP system and suggested numerous ways to improve it. The recommendations also heightened the intensity and interest with which military planners incorporated public affairs planning into operations planning. To emphasize this point, General Colin Powell, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, sent a message to the major military commanders in which he reminded them of the importance of planning and support for news media coverage of military operations. It read in part, "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>19</sup>

This directive helped greatly to change attitudes about the media and to convince senior leaders that public affairs planning was an important part of operational planning, not just the public affairs officers' responsibility.<sup>20</sup> As the events that led to the Persian Gulf war began to unfold in 1990, no one in the U.S. military or media had thought about covering the type of war that was to evolve.<sup>21</sup> The Persian Gulf war would set a precedent for how wars would be waged and reported. It also provided an awesome display of technology-based precision warfare and lethality that television viewers around the world could see instantly. Just before the ground war, more than 1,000 reporters wanted to cover the action, quite a change from the 27 reporters who went ashore at Normandy.<sup>22</sup>

Essentially, the military's procedures to facilitate gulf war coverage were modifications of those developed for Panama. All reporters had to process

LTG James T. Hill, Commander, I Corps and Fort Lewis, being prepared to address waiting media by his PAO. A lineup of HMMWVs has been arranged as a backdrop.



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through and be accredited by the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) Joint Information Bureau (JIB), which controlled all press activities. Journalists who wanted access to military units were assigned to pools, usually five-person groups, with escort officers. At any one time, there might be 25 pools somewhere in the field, with the remaining 1,000 or so journalists “mostly stranded in luxury hotels.”<sup>23</sup>

Operation Desert Shield media personnel followed ground rules and guidelines remarkably similar to the Sidle Panel’s recommendations. However, after citing an excessive number of correspondents, host nation restrictions, and exceedingly dangerous conditions, CENTCOM issued new instructions that required public affairs officers to review all dispatches before release to ensure compliance with security guidelines.<sup>24</sup> The decision to publish was left up to reporters’ news organizations under both the voluntary compliance and prior review guidelines. During Operation Desert Storm, 1,351 print pool reports were filed, but DOD only received 5 for review. Four were cleared for publication. The reporter’s editor in chief agreed the fifth story violated security ground rules and should be changed.<sup>25</sup>

After the war, news organization leaders once again strongly criticized the military’s handling of the media and complained of the military’s lingering attitudes toward the media. News organizations once more felt their coverage of the gulf war was

not as good as it could have been.<sup>26</sup> Although the military practiced overt censorship to some degree, the media claimed the military exercised covert censorship by controlling access to units, a practice far more damaging. These attitudes led the news organizations and the Pentagon to work together to produce the DOD Principles for News Media Coverage of DOD Operations.

This agreement stated that during conflict, the military services would follow the new principles to improve combat news coverage. While this document highlighted concepts and procedures that had been in other DOD documents for years, it emphasized to military commanders the importance of their personal involvement in planning for news coverage of combat operations. Furthermore, it solidified three concepts: that open and independent reporting was the standard for combat coverage for the future, that pools were to be an exception rather than the rule, and that voluntary compliance with security guidelines was a condition of access to U.S. military forces. These principles form the bedrock that governs the current military-media relationship.

Almost as soon as these new guidelines were signed into policy, they were put to the test. Operation Uphold Democracy in Haiti showed that there could be common ground and accommodation between the media and the military in covering U.S. Armed Forces in conflict. One of the many lessons

learned during Uphold Democracy was how to strike a balance between operations security and the public's right to know.<sup>27</sup> Unique to the Haiti operation was the concept of embedding or merging the media into operational units before the invasion began.

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reporters who would cover the final planning and initial assault.<sup>28</sup> The U.S. Atlantic Command requested that the DOD media pool be allowed to accompany the assault troops. In addition to being given access to the fighting units, the media pool members were thoroughly briefed on the plans for the invasion. As events turned out, the forced entry into Haiti did not take place because of the accords arrived at between U.S. President Jimmy Carter and General Raoul Cedras. Nonetheless, the idea of media inclusion was validated at all DOD levels. Merging reporters into tactical units gave them a frontline seat as the remaining phases of the operation unfolded.<sup>29</sup> Although many reporters were thoroughly briefed on the operational plan before operations began, there were no leaks.<sup>30</sup>

The evolution of official policy on media coverage of military operations has mirrored the military-media relationship itself. Of particular note is the recent addition of two very important concepts of which Army leaders need to be aware: security at the source and embedding. Security at the source means military personnel being interviewed must ensure that they do not reveal classified information. Embedding means treating members of the news media as members of units and allowing them to accompany the units on missions.<sup>31</sup>

Since the end of the Vietnam war, the military has made significant strides in reducing friction with the media. It is worth noting, however, that the evolution of military-media policy was hampered by the "post-Vietnam blame the media" attitude many military leaders demonstrated. This attitude fostered mistrust, which unfortunately many Army leaders still harbor. Of course, a certain degree of skepti-

cism is both expected and healthy, especially in the planning arena, because of the sensitivity of classified information. The military's perspective is that any measure designed to protect the lives of military personnel is justified. On the other hand, the media's perspective is that too much information is classified or restricted. The media further suspect that restrictions simply cover up misdeeds.<sup>32</sup>

From World War II to the present, several trends have emerged within the military-media relationship. These include an increased diversity of military operations, the increased operations tempo of the armed services, the increased number of media outlets and personnel covering military operations, advances in journalistic technology, and increased media competition. The sum of all these trends, multiplied by the fact that "few stories compare with that of military forces in action," equates to a major change in the military-media operating environment.<sup>33</sup> The significance of this change requires Army leaders to become more accepting than ever before of the role the media play in American society.

When considering the ongoing debate with the media, Army leaders often do not account for a third important participant in the debate—the American public. It is the Army's relationship with the American public that provides the philosophical basis of our relationship with the media. Army leaders who ignore this relationship, and the roles played within it, are simply shirking their duty.

The U.S. political system's philosophy as described in the Constitution is that sovereignty ultimately resides with the citizenry. The military's authority to operate flows from and is limited by the trust that people have for the military. Hence, Army leaders are ultimately accountable to the American public for their actions. The public reserves the right to inspect what the military is doing and to decide whether it is getting the job done. The media, as provided for by the first amendment, assist the public in developing those judgments.<sup>34</sup> One can certainly argue as to the relative efficiency and honesty with which the media perform this role. One must keep in mind a fundamental observation of the American press as Alexis de Tocqueville articulated in *Democracy in America*: "I love it more from considering the evils it prevents than on account of the good it does."<sup>35</sup> In the Army, however, there is little latitude within which to criticize the media's performance, nor should significant effort be expended to control or manipulate it. Indeed, the military's role in overwatching the media is limited to preserving operations security and attempting to accurately portray events to the public.

In *On War*, Carl von Clausewitz identifies a holy trinity of the people, the military, and the govern-

ment without whose support the effective conduct of war was not possible. Clausewitz argued that the active support of each segment was critical to success.<sup>36</sup> In American society, the media plays a unique and important role by serving as the critical information link among the three elements. The effective conduct of military operations demands that we communicate with the people; therefore, Army leaders must engage the media.

Ultimately, the Army's role is to fight and win to preserve American society. America's moral courage will be measured by the moral courage the Army demonstrates on the battlefield. The Army's value to the nation, then, is displaying the moral character to do the right thing. In a sense, the Army's role is to reflect the enduring values of loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage. As leaders, we will fail miserably in this challenge if we do not seize every opportunity to communicate with the American public. Mistrust of the media is akin to mistrust of the American public. Media coverage of military operations has a direct effect on public opinion and will continue to influence wars and conflicts at all levels.

The net effect of media coverage of military operations is best summed up in a passage written by Edwin Godkin during the Crimean War: "I cannot help thinking that the appearance of the special cor-

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respondent in the Crimea . . . led to a real awakening of the official mind. It brought home to the War Office the fact that the public had something to say about the conduct of wars and that they were not the concern exclusively of sovereigns and statesmen."<sup>37</sup>

Then, as now, reporting military operations significantly affects the operation by submitting the military immediately to the public's scrutiny. The media allow the nation to account for its military activities and help create a conduit for a collective conscience. It is to that conscience that military leaders owe their primary allegiance. Most of the military's communication with the public is channeled through the media. Military leaders must accept the reality that dealing with the media is part of their past, present, and future. As Walter Cronkite is so fond of saying, "That's the way it is!" **MR**

**NOTES**

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