

Reports of War

Thomas R. Lansner

"I hate newspapermen. They come into camp and pick up their camp rumors and print them as facts. I regard them as spies, which, in truth they are. If I killed them all, there would be news from hell before breakfast."— General William Tecumseh Sherman

"We turned to a new media plan, an invaluable component of which we called 'embedded media.' We believed that public support for our conducting the mission would be immeasurably heightened by the stories written or broadcast by reporters who had true access to the soldiers doing the real work."— General William Nash

The present-day attitudes of soldiers, officials, and the broader public toward press coverage of conflict are often as dichotomous as those expressed by General William Tecumseh Sherman, Union army General during America's Civil War, and General William Nash, U.S. commander in Bosnia in the mid-1990s. But whether journalists' presence is reviled or shrewdly manipulated, there is no doubt that, since the inception of war reporting, the media have become more influential in shaping public perceptions and, in some cases, public policy.

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Although the outcome of the first major war of the twenty-first century remains uncertain, coverage of the Iraq conflict illustrates the media's evolving role in at least three interconnected areas: access, awareness, and new communications technologies. Yet, alongside these developments, there is continuity in war reporting that resonates to the early days of professional war correspondence in the mid-nineteenth century. An active, open media may question the causes, costs, and conduct of a conflict. Less-independent reporting may serve political agendas and sometimes manipulate public opinion by demonizing enemies and proffering faultless victims. And the "visceral visuality" of war images still excites and occasionally horrifies audiences.

American media reporting on the run-up to and conduct of the war in Iraq reinforces concerns over media's role in enabling an informed public's democratic participation in decisions regarding war and peace. People's misperceptions of several crucial issues in the months before the U.S.-led invasion Iraq were strongly linked to their news sources.¹ This evokes Walter Lippmann's and Charles Merz's analysis of *New York Times* coverage of Russia's civil war between the White Army and the Bolsheviks (1917–1918), which concluded: "[A] sound public opinion cannot exist without access to the news.... [and there] is today a widespread and growing doubt whether there exists such an access to news about contentious affairs."² During each of these conflicts, separated by eighty-six years, uncritical reporting of ideologically driven official claims dangerously misled the public.

Proximity: Wars Reported... or

Not. Wars and other violent conflicts are reported because they are matters of life and death. They are also reported because the drama of war news attracts readers and viewers. But not all conflicts are treated equally. Applying the notion of "proximity" helps explain why. Proximity may be geographic; in an open media, conflict at home or nearby is sure to gain attention.³ Economic proximity sometimes drives coverage: conflicts in oil-producing areas, even those as remote from most countries' security interests as Nigeria's Niger Delta, often gain global attention. Historical proximity evokes reporting on former colonies and possessions. And ethnic or religious ties to a conflict are proximities that often draw coverage in media that reach a global diaspora. Thus, any Israeli-Palestinian violence receives especially intense reporting from media in New York City, which has the world's largest Jewish population outside Israel. And events in Haiti are reported more in Miami, with its large Haitian immigrant population, than elsewhere in the United States.

Perceived threats to national security create the most pressing proximity. More generally, any conflict in which a country is spending blood or treasure—or in which its nationals are endangered—attains high proximity in the media and the public mind. Conflicts that for years attract scant media attention become instant headliners, especially in the United States, when the nation's own forces become involved. The power of such proximity can be demonstrated through one rough measure of mass media attention: the number of times a country in conflict is mentioned on the U.S. nightly network news broadcasts, which remain the single most important news source for most Americans.

Somalia, a country still wracked by civil strife that began in the late 1980s, was mentioned exactly once on any U.S. network evening news program during the entire year of 1990. In 1993, at the height of an American military intervention that “crept” from famine relief to costly counterinsurgency, Somalia was mentioned 357 times, nearly once every day. After U.S. and, later, UN forces withdrew from the country, network mentions dropped precipitously to sixty-two in 1994 and eventually to only three in 1999—while, for Somalis, the hunger and war and killing and dying went on.⁴

In another African country, Uganda, where proximity to American interests is not easily established, there were only a handful of U.S. network news mentions from 1981 to 1985, when a terrible civil war claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. Uganda was not a Cold War proxy conflict, and it could claim no great mineral resources. One of the very few reports was U.S.-centric: a twenty-second spot on the evacuation of American diplomatic dependents as fighting intensified.

Wire services and newspapers (especially those of Uganda’s former colonial ruler, Britain, which has historical proximity) offered far more reporting of the country’s bloody turmoil, as did specialty radio services such as the BBC Africa Service. The very limited television coverage, even in Great Britain, points to another powerful determinant of television news coverage of conflicts anywhere—the availability of images to be broadcast, particularly scenes showing actual violence or its victims and survivors. Very little could be had from Uganda during this time, so the country’s tragedy remained largely off the world’s small screen.⁴ In addition, visual media, which tend to present even the most

complex situations with vivid simplicity, are far less suited than print media to explaining the intricacies that underlie most conflicts and to outlining processes that might lead to their resolution.

Awareness, Access, and Technologies.

The current war in Iraq demonstrates the convergence of three factors changing conflict reporting: increased awareness, greater access, and new technologies. Global audiences’ awareness of conflicts in remote areas is growing. So, too, is the knowledge that correspondents bring to war coverage. For many journalists, some background in military affairs is now complemented by an understanding of the laws of war and crimes of war. Correspondents who realized that they were ill-equipped to report on atrocities they witnessed in the Balkans wars of the 1990s have compiled an extremely useful guide that details humanitarian law in conflict for media and wider audiences and is largely based on the Geneva Conventions and Protocols.⁶

Access to far-flung conflicts is also easier now than at any time in history. In 1848, one of America’s first war correspondents, George Wilkins Kendall, rode into battle as one of a handful of correspondents reporting on the American invasion of Mexico, an action that his newspaper, the *New Orleans Picayune*, had long championed. He also created a relay of mounted couriers and steamboats to file his dispatches. Modern air travel and telecommunications now make it possible to quickly deploy reporters and to keep in touch with them from the mountains of Afghanistan to the rain forests of the Congo. During the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, many of the over seven hundred correspondents accompanied U.S. forces into battle.

They were equipped with media tools that were smaller, lighter, faster, and more powerful—much like the weaponry of the military in which they were embedded.

New technologies not only enhance the speed at which embedded reporters can file their stories but they also allow anyone with Internet access to become online correspondents. Interactive websites, e-mail, and weblogs mean that many more people not only can receive information but also can offer their own opinions and accounts, unfiltered by traditional media hierarchies. This “disintermediation” of information causes the media cycle to spin ever faster, although information of uncertain provenance and reports that lack even the putative credibility of established media outlets must be approached very cautiously. A number of Iraqi bloggers have established legitimacy through accurate and perceptive postings.⁷ Accounts by U.S. soldiers serving in Iraq have offered a compelling candidness that is absent from most traditional media reporting and is worrying to government officials. In late 2005, the U.S. military warned that such “milblogs” should be closely monitored for classified and other “inappropriate” content.⁸

Press, Propaganda, and Manipulation. “The first casualty when war

wartime,” Winston Churchill added during the Second World War, “truth is so precious that she must be attended by a bodyguard of lies.”⁹ Governments and armies worldwide traditionally have practiced not only strategic deception, but also severe censorship, aimed more at limiting coverage that could rouse negative public opinion than safeguarding military operations.

It is essential for anyone covering conflict to accept that all parties might at any time be less than completely truthful—and that at any moment they might be purposefully lying. In wartime, governments lie, militaries lie, political parties lie, antigovernment movements lie, and individuals lie—sometimes to save lives and sometimes to make killing easier. In the pantheon of possible sins in wartime, lying is certainly among the least venal, and it may be deployed for tactical or strategic military aims or simply for political gain. If media do not or cannot challenge lies and incitement, information that could help prevent or resolve violence will not reach parties to the conflict. The Rwandan genocide of 1994 and the murderous Balkans wars of the 1990s demonstrated that the media could become an active tool in campaigns of murder and ethnic cleansing.¹⁰

Greater public information constrains political and military options. In his

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comes,” U.S. Senator Hiram Johnson warned famously in 1917, “is truth.” “In

memoirs, Edwin Lawrence Godkin, an Irish-born writer who reported from the

Crimea for the London *Daily News* as one of the first professional war correspondents, wrote, "Correspondence from the field really became a power before which the generals began to quail.... It brought home to the War Office that the public had something to say about the conduct of wars and they are not the concerns exclusively of sovereigns and statesmen."¹¹ Reporting by Godkin and other correspondents provoked a public outcry that led to better treatment for soldiers in the field.

Generals and government leaders—and indeed common soldiers—can only be made accountable to public opinion if there is access to information and the ability to publish it. The Crimea experience was notice that a free media would not always unquestioningly toe the official line. Wartime censorship quickly became the norm. Nearly a century and a half after the Crimean War, British officials imposed tight controls on the few accredited correspondents during the 1982 campaign to reclaim the Falkland Islands from Argentine forces. Explaining the controls, an official of the renamed British Defence Ministry (no longer the Ministry of War) remarked, "The essence of successful warfare is secrecy; the essence of successful journalism is publicity."¹² He could have admitted more frankly that the military welcomes—and endeavors to create and enable—publicity that is selective, favorable, and on its own terms.¹³

The United States imposed serious restrictions on reporting in conflicts from the Spanish-American War through the Korean War. Many commentators have argued that the largely unimpeded reporting on U.S. troops in Vietnam, seen for the first time by a large segment of the American population on nightly news broadcasts, seriously eroded public

support for U.S. engagement in the war. While this contested perception is largely anecdotal, the military responded by limiting reporters' access to the front lines—and, consequently, the amount of combat coverage—during U.S. interventions in Grenada and Panama in the 1980s and during the expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait in 1990.

From Censorship to Embedding.

The American military's attitude shifted during U.S. peacekeeping operations in the Balkans in the mid-1990s, when a revised strategy of cooperating with (and, some would argue, co-opting) rather than excluding media was adopted. Then-U.S. commander General William Nash later wrote of his "new media plan, an invaluable component of which we called 'embedded media,'" he explained. "We believed that public support for our conducting the mission would be immeasurably heightened by the stories written or broadcast by reporters who had true access to the soldiers doing the real work."¹⁴ General Nash rightly believed that correspondents who spent longer periods with the troops would usually offer more sympathetic reports.

The embedding process became more sophisticated during the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, when hundreds of reporters, traveling with American forces, relayed dramatic real-time battle-field images and accounts through digital cameras and satellite uplinks. Yet, because of the isolation of these correspondents within their combat units, nearly all reports from the valuable but narrow perspective of the advancing and overwhelming U.S. forces offered what has been well described as a "straw's eye view" of the war.

The embedding process—and heavy media reliance on official U.S. pronouncements regarding the conflict—has caused the scale of Iraqi loss to be woefully underreported, especially in the United States. Much undernoted, too, has been the growing grievance among many Iraqis against the U.S. military killings of civilians—accidental, mistaken, or otherwise—that have fueled the ongoing insurgency.

Media, Demons, and Democracy.

President George W. Bush, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and other American military leaders still argue that “Saddam loyalists,” foreign fighters, religious extremists, and criminal elements comprise the Iraqi insurgency—all illegitimate “wreckers” who are opposed to peace, justice, and progress. This official message, too often relayed uncritically by some media outlets, holds fast even as insurgent attacks—on Americans, on other foreigners in Iraq, and on Iraqis allied with them—grow more savage and effective.

Such demonization of enemies is a common currency of conflict. From “Great Satans” to “axes of evil,” rhetorical attacks aim to rouse the public’s “righteous” anger. Imputing the literally diabolical to one’s nemesis allows moral justification and sometimes spiritual comfort for those who will be called upon to kill, as well as for those in whose name killing will be done.

As President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair continue to argue to their nations and the wider world that the ongoing war in Iraq is a necessary moral crusade, each country’s media must more forcefully assert their responsibility to inform their audiences of the causes, costs, and consequences of the conflict. At this crucial juncture, the media must

not abandon its watchdog role by uncritically offering the “patriotic” line or, worse, by baying for the blood of a demonized, dehumanized enemy.

Media practitioners must remind themselves that all sides to a conflict seek advantage in the court of public opinion as fiercely as on the field of battle. Yet, in an open society, the weight of accurate and honest reporting must be borne most seriously, and the information offered by our military and political leaders must be vetted as scrupulously as that obtained from any other source.

Spinning the Children. In America, HBO’s 2003 docudrama lionizing CNN’s coverage of the “first Gulf War” in 1990–1991 offered a cautionary tale about war reporting, media manipulation, and the public’s understanding of conflict. A powerful scene depicted journalists’ visit to a hospital in Kuwait as they pursued reports that Iraqi soldiers, looting hospital equipment, had savagely and inhumanly murdered helpless Kuwaiti babies by tossing them from their incubators. Unfortunately, the program failed to make clear that the rumor was in fact much more than merely false. Whatever other crimes the invading Iraqis committed—and there were many—this was not one of them. The incubator story, related in October 1990 by a tearful purported eyewitness before appalled members of the U.S. Congress, was a carefully crafted deceit. It was presented with the aid of private American public relations experts hired by Kuwait and was designed expressly to evoke the American public’s repugnance against the alleged atrocity and to elicit support for the war against Iraq.¹⁵

Here was a rare report that could command public attention, even absent the “visceral visuality” of dramatic photos or

video. The public relations specialists had read their history well. One of the most effective British propaganda posters of World War I depicted animal-like German soldiers impaling Belgian babies on their bayonets. Accusations of infanticide are anywhere and anytime a terminally damning indictment. They suffice to define the perpetrators of such barbarities as beasts beyond moral redemption, demons deserving of whatever punishment can be visited upon them.

The pattern has been repeated in other conflicts. In April 1999, shortly after NATO launched the aerial assault that eventually compelled Serbia's retreat from Kosovo, the *Financial Times* offered a disturbing description of Serb soldiers stabbing to death an eight-month-old Kosovar baby after the child's parents could not bribe them sufficiently at a roadblock. Only later in the article—if we have read that far—are we informed that the murder “was impossible to verify” and that “people who vividly describe massacres later concede they are repeat-

president Kim Jong Il as “Dr. Evil.”

There is no doubt that the young—the most vulnerable and the most innocent—should be particularly protected. Their suffering compels emotionally wrenching attention. Saddam Hussein's publicists knew this as well as Beltway spinmasters and famine fundraisers. In the run-up to America's invasion of Iraq, Hussein's media minders served up scenes of Iraqi children slowly dying in hospitals—reportedly starved of medicines by the U.S.-led embargo—to closely guided international television crews. The pain of these children and their parents and doctors was vivid to any viewer. Their story was simply told and easily sold. More subtle realities of the shared responsibility for this suffering were apparently too complex for television reporters to convey.

Media and War in Our Name.

Journalists must resist the tendency to color their reporting through lenses of even sincere patriotism—such as talking of “us”

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ing stories told by others.”¹⁶

Later that month, as the war raged and more abuses were reported, Serb leader Slobodan Milosevic appeared on the cover of *Newsweek*, ringed by what was surely hellfire and denounced as “The Face of Evil.”¹⁷ As another crisis brewed on the other side of the world, *Newsweek's* 13 January 2003 cover featured North Korea's

when reporting on their country's government or military. Even worse is cynically jingoistic hype aimed at raising audience share—all too common in the tabloid press and increasingly on American cable television. Free people require full and honest information to assess a conflict and to assert their democratic right to express their opinions about it. Uninformed con-

sent is essentially meaningless.

Reporters must educate themselves and their audiences about the laws of war, and they must be unafraid to examine the actions of all parties to any conflict in terms of these internationally recognized standards. For example, especially during the early stages of the war to oust the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in late 2001, the American press reported less often and in much more guarded terms about the impact of American bombing on Afghan civilians than did the European media. And U.S. media remain remarkably reluctant to report on the horrendous scale of civilian casualties in Iraq that well-documented studies have attributed to American action.¹⁸ This may be partially explained by the difficulty of verifying casualties in remote areas or uncertain situations. But it must also be attributed to most American media's reluctance to offer "counter-narrative" information that so clearly challenges the official U.S. position—and prevailing cultural perspective—that American soldiers always take great care to avoid harming noncombatants. Almost entirely absent is the important discussion of whether the actions of U.S. soldiers and

private "contractors" are helping to sustain and legitimize Iraqi resistance rather than to suppress it.

The American media's largely unreflective use of the term "contractors" reminds us that the authorities' language of description within a conflict should not be unthinkingly adopted and thereby sanctioned as an accurate description of reality. Media must not desensitize their audiences with euphemisms—such as "collateral damage" or "incidental civilian casualties"—that camouflage the unvarnished ugliness of the killing of innocents. An independent media should seek to reveal the reality of war rather than help generate jingoism through "sanitized" reporting.

Both the press and the public must remain wary of demonizing any party to a conflict, which makes resolution more difficult. Atrocities should be amply investigated, harshly condemned, and, if found to be crimes of war, properly punished. But even such savagery—much less merely rumors of it—should never serve as an excuse to diminish our own grave responsibility, as members of democratic societies, for the costs and consequences of war in our name.

NOTES

1 The connection between news consumers' media diets and mistaken beliefs regarding crucial facts in the debate over America's possible invasion of Iraq is made strongly in a study by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), "Misperceptions, the Media, and the Iraq War," Internet, http://www.pipa.org/archives/us_opinion.php (Date accessed: 16 December 2005). Individuals who relied heavily on Fox News for information were mostly likely to be most profoundly misinformed. The report does not speculate whether the Fox News reporting that apparently helped create such misperceptions was purposeful disinformation.

2 Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz, "A Test of the News," *The New Republic*, 4 August 1920. The authors' analysis of the *New York Times* coverage of the Russian civil war between the White Army and the Bolsheviks found that the paper's news articles had described the Bolsheviks as being near defeat or col-

lapse ninety-one times between November 1917 and November 1918, even as their Red Army scored repeated victories en route to defeating its opponents. This reporting reflected the U.S. government's line rather than the reality on the ground.

3 The notion of proximity is one of the ideas discussed in Tsan-Kuo Chang and Jae-Won Lee, "Factors Affecting Gatekeepers Selection of Foreign News," *Journalism Quarterly* (Fall 1992): 554–571.

4 A searchable archive of U.S. network nightly news broadcast is found at the Vanderbilt Television Archive, Internet, <http://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu> (Date accessed: 16 December 2005).

5 The author covered the conflict in Uganda from 1980 to 1981. His film of guerrilla camps and training was broadcast on CBS News on 19 November 1981 and was one of the rare broadcast reports about the war. And even this was taken from a report that originally

aired on the BBC.

6 Roy Gutman and David Rieff, *Crimes of War* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), Internet, <http://www.crimesofwar.org> (Date accessed: 16 December 2005).

7 A collection of blogs and other links from Iraq or related to current events there is available on the Internet at http://www.ratzingerfanclub.com/iraqi_blogs/ (Date accessed: 16 December 2005).

8 Leo Shane III, "Military Issues Content Warning to Combat-Zone Bloggers," *Stars and Stripes*, 1 October 2005, Internet, <http://www.estripes.com/article.asp?section=104&article=31111&archive=true> (Date accessed: 22 October 2005).

9 This is frequently attributed to Senator Johnson, from a U.S. Senate speech in February 1917 that warned against American involvement in World War I; a similar statement is found in writings of the Greek dramatist Aeschylus. Churchill's self-reported aphorism from his memoirs of the Second World War is cited in Anthony Cave Brown, *Bodyguard of Lies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 10.

10 The potential for media to promote or directly incite genocide, ethnic cleansing, and other political violence in these cases is discussed in Linda Kirschke, *Broadcasting Genocide: Censorship, Propaganda & State-Sponsored Violence in Rwanda, 1990-1994* (London: Article 19, 1996) and Mark Thompson, *Forging War: the Media in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina* (London: Article 19, 1994). Radio Netherlands offers a useful set of resources on both "hate radio" and "peace radio" on the Internet, <http://www2.rnw.nl/rnw/en/features/media/dossiers/hateintro.html?view=Standard> (Date accessed: 16 December 2005).

11 Philip Knightly, *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Kosovo* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). Knightly's book is an enormously edifying and entertaining primer for anyone interested in the history of war reporting.

12 Derrik Mercer, et al, *The Fog of War: The Media on the Battlefield* (London: Heineman, 1987), 12.

13 The U.S. military and government today run a vast information campaign, both public and clandestine, aimed at shaping American global perceptions. See Jeff Gerth, "Military's Information War Is Vast and Often Secretive December," *New York Times*, 11 December 2005, At. See also James Bamford, "The Man Who Sold the War: Meet John Rendon, Bush's General in the Propaganda War," *Rolling Stone*, 17 November 2005, Internet, http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/story/_/id/8798997?pageid=rs.Home&pageregion=single7&rnd=1132278403939&has-player=true (Date accessed: 12 December 2005).

14 William L. Nash, "The Military and the Media in Bosnia," *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* (Summer 1998): 133-134.

15 John R. MacArthur, *Second Front: Censorship and Propaganda in the 1991 Gulf War* (Berkeley, Calif.; London: University of California Press, 2004).

16 Stefan Wagstyl, "Murder Drives Out a Suffering People," *Financial Times*, 5 April 1999, London edition, 3.

17 *Newsweek*, 19 April 1999.

18 Lila Gutterman, "Dead Iraqis: Why an Estimate Was Ignored," *Columbia Journalism Review* (March/April 2005), Internet, <http://www.cjr.org/issues/2005/2/voices-gutterman.asp> (Date accessed: 22 October 2005).