

1995

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Recommended Citation

Rather, Dan (1995) "'Honest Brokers of Information'," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 48 : No. 4 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol48/iss4/5>

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"Honest Brokers of Information"

Dan Rather

AS A BEGINNING, I WANT TO MAKE a confession: I am not a sailor. For a brief time during the Korean War I served in the United States Army Reserve, the Second Armored Division. I was a private. This included short bursts of active duty, training at what were then Camp Chafee, Arkansas, and Camp Hood, Texas. Later, but also during the Korean conflict, I was a private in the Marines. This was full-time, active-duty service, but it didn't last long and—as was the case with my Army service—it was undistinguished.

These experiences, however, did leave indelible marks. For time invested, time spent, I believe I may have learned more from those brief, intensive brushes with military training than from anything else in my life. The discipline and dedication to mission exemplified by those officers, commissioned and non-commissioned, who tried to train me were eye-poppers and mind-openers for me. The commitment to country and to excellence of those teachers is burned in my memory forever. So is what they taught through example about ancient words and values such as honor and valor.

This may make me biased. If so, so be it. For that I have no apologies. But to friend, foe, and those in between, I can and do say that my life since then has been dedicated to trying to make of myself a journalist of integrity—one who believes in Independent journalism, with a capital "I," the kind of journalism

An address delivered on 9 March 1995 to the "National Security and the Media" Conference at the Naval War College, Newport, R.I.

Mr. Rather is the Anchor and Managing Editor of the CBS Evening News. He also anchors and reports for the CBS News broadcast *48 Hours* and is a regular contributor to CBS News Radio. A journalism graduate of Sam Houston State Teachers College in Huntsville, Texas, Mr. Rather was a reporter for the Associated Press, United Press International, Texas radio and television stations, and the *Houston Chronicle*, and was the news director for KTRH (radio) and KHOU (television), in Houston. In 1962 he joined CBS News, where he has received virtually every award available to broadcast journalists, including several "Emmys."

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Naval War College Review, Autumn 1995, Vol. XLVIII, No. 4

that plays no favorites, pulls no punches—whether covering crime, conventions, or combat.

It may surprise, even astound you, but I consider myself to be in the “national security” business, every bit as much as you are. In some ways, perhaps even moreso. Here is why, and how.

Yours is the sacred responsibility to defend our beloved nation from enemies beyond our borders. Part of mine is to help with that, by serving as an honest broker of information about what is happening internationally. But an even larger part of my duty as a professional is to be a guardian of democracy within. “National security” in our country begins with conserving the Constitution, including the Bill of Rights. To do that, to meet that responsibility and that trust, I, and every other journalist trying to be worthy of a free press, strive to be a kind of civic educator, stimulating citizens’ interest in self-rule and providing specific information citizens need to keep their nation secure and to hold their government accountable. This includes, of course, the military arm of the people’s government.

In preparation for our visit today, I was reading Christopher McKee’s book, *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession*.^{*} Perhaps you know it. As I read, the thought occurred that the book is important if for nothing but the title alone, partly because it is so reminiscent of the term “an officer and a gentleman.” Taken together, the title of the book and the familiar term compose a self-image that I know is prevalent in the officer corps of all the U.S. armed forces. And I have reminded myself that especially in addressing a group of senior officers, one must keep this in mind. You adhere to a code of honor and principle; you are and you must be, regardless of gender, officers and gentlemen.

Many of your fellow Americans do not realize that this is a living sentiment. They include many journalists. I am not one of them. Whatever my other faults—which I know to be many—I do know that you are dedicated to lives of honorable service, and that no man or woman reaches your status in the world’s best military force without dedication to the ideal of living your professional life as . . . an officer and a gentleman.

For those who are joining us from other countries today, I can say that I have seen similar attitudes in some military officers in some countries.

This is something like the code of chivalry that guided the knights of yore. It may surprise you to know that there is a strain of this in my own profession. Perhaps now, in the 1990s, it is a fading and distant strain, but still at least perceptible. This is the belief that one can be, should be, must be a journalist and a gentleman if one is to be recognized, over the length and breadth of a long career, as a first-class, world-class reporter. The late, great Edward R. Murrow made this clear at CBS News from the beginning, when he helped to invent electronic journalism and personally hired the very first team of CBS News correspondents.

* For this and other books mentioned by Mr. Rather, see “Recommended Reading,” page 42. *Eds.*

I have taken you through this to acknowledge your history and your code, and to call your attention to my own, which is shared by many others in my craft, many more than you may think exist.

Whatever you or others among your peers may believe about the American press, know this: There are among us those who strive every day to abide by a code of honor as exacting as your own. We seek to maintain ours as a gentlemanly and honorable profession. The problem with this approach is that journalists sometimes behave in less than honorable fashion. I do not except myself from this criticism. We make mistakes. We have our bad days. And we do have in our midst some—perhaps I should say many—who make little or no effort to conduct themselves along the lines of an honorable journalistic code. And yes, we do have some who scoff at even the idea of any such code.

You may want to consider how close, if at all, this is to your own experience in the military, with the military's own ideals. We all know that whether one is speaking of the Ten Commandments, the officer's code of conduct, or the journalist's code of ethics, striving for perfection is one thing, achieving it quite another—whether one is speaking of a person or a group. It is true that, especially in the recent post-Vietnam past, there have been instances in which some journalists have behaved in less than honorable fashion toward the military. And I believe the reverse of that is also true.

A second book I want to mention is John Lehman's *Making War*. It is both a chronicle and a polemic on the conflicts within the American government over war powers, a fundamental aspect of national security. This conflict is constitutional: the executive branch versus the legislative. This conflict is also partisan and ideological: left versus right. It is also institutional: the so-called mandarins, who have experience and the presumption they know best, versus the rest of the world. What impressed me in this book is the fact that we of the press often are caught in between the lines of these conflicts. This has led to us being both used and abused. It is powerful food for thought when addressing the topic of the military and the press.

The independent, ethical journalist, trying to do work of integrity and trying to fulfill the role of an honest broker of information, today faces tremendously difficult new challenges. To have any chance of meeting those challenges, such a journalist needs the help of honest military leaders committed to constitutional government, civilian control, and other democratic ideas and ideals. History has taught us that much depends on those ideals—and on such honesty.

I'd like to talk now about history, recent and ancient: its uses and its limitations. History is tricky. It is elusive, ambiguous, and sometimes unfathomable. As Stanford historian James J. Sheehan has written, "History often seems to lie just beyond our reach. But at the same time, it is all around us,

shaping the way we view the world and insinuating its lessons for the future. And this can be dangerous.”

Let's take the Persian Gulf War as an example. The history of the Persian Gulf War, the biggest military action in recent history, is already badly skewed and is at risk of being forever skewed in many ways. For example, little if any credit is now given to the United States Navy's air forces and carrier groups, who played such an important role as a highly mobile deterrent to any further encroachments by Iraq immediately after the invasion of Kuwait. The Navy's positioning also allowed the expeditionary force to get into place, and when combat with Iraq began, the Navy gave the commander of Operation Desert Storm more flexibility and more options. This is the kind of interservice cooperation to which attention must be paid, not only because it works so well but because the opportunity to practice such cooperation is too seldom seized. But make no mistake, the United States Navy contributed to the kind of victory of which legends are made, from the ringing, windy plains of Troy to Normandy: doing the impossible, and doing it in record time.

But—and this is the reason for raising this now—*over-* censorship and control of the press hid much of the accomplishment at the time and has shrouded much of it since then. The shroud includes a weave of confusion and uncertainty caused by the fact that so little *independent*, first-hand record was allowed to be compiled by independent witnesses. History may not give this victory the full measure of what those who earned it deserve because the record is sparse, and what there is of it is confused and confusing and not compiled by independent sources.

There are many reasons, some of them accidental and simple luck of the draw. There are many other reasons having to do with personalities, bureaucracy, interservice rivalries, and battles for budget dollars. For the purposes of our discussions here today, just note that too many unnecessary controls and ill conceived policies concerning the flow of information fogged up a great story of great skill, great strategy that worked, and a mighty triumph. And this is a reminder that an overemphasis on censorship and control of information has many dangers for the country and for the military itself. But enough of the example. Back to the overall second point, about the limitations of history in preparing for war—including how the press is to fit in.

It can be dangerous to apply the lessons from past battles to the future. This is because what are believed to be “lessons” may be the wrong lessons. It can even be dangerous to apply the lessons from past wars about propaganda and press relations—or, as the military prefers (I do not), “media” relations. This is the point: just as many lessons that naval historians believe were learned from one previous war or another about fighting turn out to be wrong, so it is with many lessons about news and propaganda.

The general thesis, that many lessons believed to have been learned from previous wars turn out to be wrong, is brilliantly made in British historian Michael Howard's book, *The Lessons of History*. In a chapter of the book entitled "Men Against Fire," he writes that on the eve of World War I the leaders of every European army frantically searched recent history for clues to what was about to happen and how to deal with it. The war between Russia and Japan, 1905, was closely studied for the lessons it supposedly taught. The lessons that particular war was believed to have demonstrated—the lessons European generals believed they had learned—included this: well disciplined and well led troops could generally triumph over firepower. This turned out to be wrong, given the improved weaponry that was developed after the Russo-Japanese War and before World War I. It cost many lives. The belief helped open doors to disaster on World War I battlefields. The military's vaunted historical studies were of little use in the 1914-to-1918 slaughter.

Generalizing from false premises based on inadequate evidence is dangerous. It was dangerous in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. It is dangerous now in the wake of the Persian Gulf War, both as applied to the way the war was fought and to the way the war was reported.

Let me state something else clearly and with the hope that, if you remember nothing else from my remarks, you will remember this: What the U.S. military believes it learned about news coverage and how to handle the reporting of war from the Persian Gulf experience is not likely to be of nearly as much value in the next war as many of our political and military leaders now seem to believe. The reasons: the technology of news coverage is changing so much, so quickly; the internationalization of news coverage is spreading so far and wide, so quickly; and, this was a short war, with few casualties on the allied side. (Also, the other most recent episodes of extreme press restrictions, Panama and Grenada, were comparative skirmishes.) The next war in which we are involved may be similar, but odds are that it will not be. Certainly not all future wars will be. (Yes, I too pray that we may never have to fight another war. And I too pray that if there must be another war it will be short, with few American casualties. But what we are talking about here is not prayer but preparedness, in case—as I suspect—reality turns out some other way.)

And a fourth reason: The press . . . the news "media" . . . will almost certainly behave differently, under different leadership, than it did during the most recent major conflict. Put another way, the next war will not be happening so closely behind the Vietnam experience, with all of the Vietnam War's ramifications on the attitudes of the public and on those of political, military, and press leaders.

Now, some quick commentary and a few details to fill in around those main points.

About the changing technology of news coverage: Miniaturization of equipment and other advances are making everything from cameras to the electronics involved in reaching satellites much more adaptable to battlefield conditions than anything available in the Persian Gulf War. Example: CBS News had some of the smallest, most up-to-date equipment for live, on-scene coverage. It was part of what made CBS the first to report with live pictures and sound from Kuwait City. It fit on the back of a jeep. Very soon, one correspondent will be able to carry all that it takes inside a backpack, and soon after that, it will all fit in the pocket of a bush jacket. Besides this, there is the fact that independent pictures taken from satellites are increasingly available to news organizations, not just to the military and intelligence agencies. All of this, and more, in the exploding world of new, smaller, better technology has ramifications wide and deep for how much and how little control any commander may have over what is and is not covered. This is especially true when you consider the rapid internationalization of news coverage—including mergers of international news organizations and cooperative news-gathering efforts by news organizations of different nations.

About short wars: Quick, decisive wars with few casualties on your side make it comparatively easy to get control and keep control of news coverage. Stonewalling, sophistry, even outright lying may work, may hold for a short time, especially when the euphoria of victory overwhelms all. Long, bloody wars, in which the outcome dangles in doubt, make it harder. I believe they make it impossible in a society such as ours. That, let there be no doubt, I believe is an *advantage* . . . yes, an advantage . . . for our warriors. *We* may—you and I, military leaders and journalists—agree to disagree about this. But I do fervently believe that in a constitutional republic based on democratic principles, such as ours, a high degree of communicable trust between the leadership and the led is absolutely essential, especially in times of crisis, such as wars.

This, I believe, is *the* great lesson of the Vietnam War, one that *will* stand the test of time. There is an old cliché: “In war, truth is the first casualty.” It doesn’t have to be. And one of Rather’s Rules of War Coverage is, it had better *not* be, not when the United States of America has fighting men and women in the field. For *our* country, I believe, in war truth is our best weapon, even the tough truths; even the truth, when it *is* true, that we are getting the hell kicked out of us. I am not saying that every commander in every circumstance must tell every reporter the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth in any and all circumstances. I *am* saying that it is best not to lie, it is best to tell as much of the truth as possible, as quickly as possible. In the United States of America, only an informed citizenry can and will defend itself. In our beloved country, only an informed citizenry will send its young people to fight and die for any extended period—and only then if American citizens are convinced that the cause is just

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and worth the price, and that no other reasonable course is open. It is one man's opinion, clearly labelled—this man's—but I believe any military commander who tries to mislead about the truth very much for very long is doomed; and there is high probability that the forces he leads are doomed as well.

In war, truth is the first necessity. But in war, as in so much else in life, the easy wrong is tempting in the face of the tough right. Political leadership is especially susceptible to this. An example: It was the easy wrong to make the American people believe during the Vietnam War that they did not need to go all-out, make major sacrifices—that is, *everybody* make major sacrifices—in order to win. In the short run, it worked; in the long run, it was a grievous error. The officers and men who actually had to fight the war knew from early on how difficult it was and that an all-out effort was necessary if the United States was to prevail. So did journalists who covered the fighting first-hand. But the top political leadership of the country, Republican and Democrat, was determined to have the people believe otherwise. And I'm sorry to say a few top flag-rank officers went along to get along—and, as the saying goes, the rest is history.

This much we—military people, journalists, and citizens in general—must not forget; we forget it at our peril. The consent of the governed is basic to American democracy. If the governed are misled, if they are not told the truth—or if, through unnecessary official secrecy and deception, they lack information on which to base intelligent decisions—the system, some system, may go on, but not a constitutional republic based on the principles of democracy. Political leadership may survive the politics of lying, at least for relatively short periods. The country may *not* survive sustained politics of lying, not for long anyway. And the ultimate military mission, war, cannot be sustained for long and cannot be victorious in a society such as ours if the military systematically engages in the politics of lying.

This is tough, harsh talk, I know. It does not suggest that we disagree, you and I, America's military and America's journalists. Indeed, I believe we do agree on the basics: the need to get the American people the truth and straight information about their fellow Americans in uniform. It is in the nature of political leadership to want to drive a wedge between us. I see us as partners in patriotism, each needing the other to fulfill our different roles—roles that sometimes place us in adversarial positions, but partners in trying to get the truth to our fellow citizens. We should be alert to, and resist, efforts to wedge us. In that spirit, together, the military and the journalist, two great American professions, can work out ways to work together, whatever the new and different demands are for keeping the peace and fighting the next war, if there is one.

* * *

In the question-and-answer period that followed, an exchange took place that illuminated an issue fundamental to Mr. Rather, the Naval War College audience, and the Military-Media Conference itself. (The editors)

Questioner. Commander . . . United States Navy. Mr. Rather, about ten years ago, I saw you on a PBS show; it had to do, I believe, with ethics in America. And on that show you were given a scenario where you were attached as a press reporter to an enemy squad. They were laying in wait for an ambush on an American patrol coming up. You were asked what would you do in that scenario, and you said you would remain quiet and report on the incident. My question to you is, in the past ten years, do you still stand by that statement; and if you do, how do you equate that with your prepared remarks, where you said we are partners in patriotism?

Mr. Rather. I want to say this with great respect, but sir, you're wrong. You have the wrong fellow. I didn't say that.

Q. Then Mr. Rather, I'd like to apologize.

R. Not at all. As one who's just said, "I make mistakes, I have my bad days," believe you me, I've been there, done that. I understand. But the thrust of your question is fair enough. It is very important to me that you understand that it was not I who said that. It was an anchor-person who said that; it wasn't this one. I have made almost every mistake in the book at least three times, and I have the scars to show for it. That mistake, I didn't make.

Under that scenario—and I've played this out in my mind many times, and it is certainly true that various journalists have different answers—my answer would have been to the contrary. I'm not sure that I can defend that to everybody's satisfaction on an intellectual level; on an international, professional-journalism, intellectual level, it may not be defensible. But make no mistake, whatever my errors have been and are, I am an American reporter, and I have many—and again, I know that sometimes this is hard for an audience such as this to believe, [though] I don't honestly believe it is difficult—I have many of the same emotions that you do. I do not honestly think that I could stay in that circumstance and not shout, send up a flare, do something.

Now, the core of that question is something with which journalists struggle. The mainstream of American journalism, for better or for worse, remains committed to both the idea and the ideal of objectivity. I mentioned twice in my prepared remarks—and I did so for a purpose—the phrase "honest broker of information." The ideal is to be that in every way, every day, on every story, [to be] objective. Reporters sometimes say, in their offhand way, "Listen, I cover horse races. I don't breed horses; I don't teach jockeys; I don't bet on horses; I just come to the track and I describe the race." Now the ideal is that kind of

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objectivity, even when it comes to covering combat situations. So you will find reporters—I don't want to mislead you—you will find reporters who make the argument that to be objective, to really meet the idea and ideal of being an honest broker of information even under those circumstances, . . . you have an obligation to keep your mouth shut. I don't agree with that, but I want to make sure you understand that there are many journalists, including many American journalists, who do. . . .

Recommended Reading

Christopher McKee, *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession: The Creation of the U.S. Naval Officer Corps, 1794–1815* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1991); John Lehman, *Making War: The President and Congress from Barbary to Baghdad* (New York: Macmillan, 1992); and Michael Howard, *The Lessons of History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1992). [The books above were mentioned in Mr. Rather's remarks.] Edward R. Murrow, *In Search of Light: The Broadcasts of Edward R. Murrow, 1938–1961*, ed. Edward Bliss, Jr. (New York: Knopf, 1967; London: Macmillan, 1968; and New York: Avon, 1974). John R. MacArthur, *Second Front: Censorship and Propaganda in the Gulf War* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1992); Eric Sevareid, *Not So Wild a Dream* (Cutchogue, N.Y.: Buccaneer, 1993); and Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty: From the Crimea to Vietnam: The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist, and Myth-Maker* (San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt Brace, 1976).

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Call for Papers and Participants

The Netherlands Association for Maritime History, in cooperation with the Netherlands Maritime Museum at Amsterdam and the Maritime Museum Prins Hendrik at Rotterdam, and in association with the International Maritime Economic History Association, announces that the Second International Congress of Maritime History will take place in Amsterdam and Rotterdam on 5–8 June 1996. The Congress has as its theme "Evolution and Revolution in the Maritime World in the 19th and 20th centuries." It will be organized in three thematic sections: "Nautical Science and Cartography"; "The Construction, Equipment, and Propulsion of Ships"; and "The Management of Shipping Companies, Navies, and Ports."

Requests for information can be sent to Mrs. Corrie Reinders Folmer, Box 201, 2350 AC Leiderdorp, The Netherlands.