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Desert Shield/Storm: The War of Words and Images

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The War of Words and Images

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> Once you've got all the forces moving and everything's being taken care of by the commanders . . . turn your attention to television because you can win the battle or lose the war if you don't handle the story right.
>
> General Colin L. Powell, U.S. Army
> Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, in
> *The Commanders*, by Bob Woodward, p. 155

IT IS CLEAR that the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Central Command understood that there were not only massive fast-paced ground-air and sea campaign maneuvers in Operation Desert Storm, but before, during, and after the war, a fast-paced war of words and images.

We all became prisoners of the TV-war, thanks primarily to CNN (Cable News Network), with its twenty-four-hour and "live" coverage of Desert Shield/Storm. Admiral Frank B. Kelso II, U.S. Navy, Chief of Naval Operations, referred to CNN's "War in the Gulf" coverage by saying, "We had no idea how this would change our jobs and our lives."[1]

One of the most important lessons learned from Desert Shield/Storm is that in all future wars the news media "army" (and television in particular) will be a twenty-four-hour instant news wartime player—like it or not! A senior U.S. Army officer in a recent *Wall Street Journal* article said, "Some people say the media is the enemy, but in fact the media is really a battlefield, and you have to win on it."[2]

Television even became a medium for diplomatic dialogue. On countless occasions, a government spokesman from Washington, Riyadh, Baghdad, Israel,

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or Moscow would deliver a statement or proposal on live television, and governments involved in negotiations would rely on the television medium to issue quickly their replies. As commentator John Chancellor told his NBC-TV audience on 29 January 1991, "Saddam has found a way to continue politics during war; he has found CNN." It was not diplomatic notes, under the Geneva Convention, which told the United States who our prisoners of war were, but television reports and pictures from Baghdad, however shocking. Our military families, as well as the public, got the latest word from CNN which, more often than not, beat any word from the chain of command or family service center ombudsman network. In Washington, navy-marine corps 1-800 information numbers received over 450,000 calls during Desert Shield/Storm from our military family members seeking information—many of them clearly reacting to news media reports. In this age of instant communications, families feel that the navy should answer their questions more quickly than in past wars.

Public Opinion

While media critics are still loudly registering their disapproval of Desert Storm media guidelines, media pools, military escorts and security review, it is clear that the public believes both the military and the media did a good job in the war. A *Times-Mirror* public opinion poll conducted on 25 March 1991 indicated that eighty-four percent of the American public gave the press an excellent or good grade for Desert Storm coverage. Also, eighty-three percent said that military restrictions on news reports during the conflict were a good thing. A Gallup public opinion poll taken soon after Desert Shield/Storm disclosed that eighty-five percent of the public held a high level of confidence in the military as an institution—the highest public confidence rating in our history. Where did the general public get its perception of the military's professionalism? From news media reports! What critics of the military did not like were the Desert Shield/Storm words and images which substantiated that our all-volunteer forces worked, our weapons worked, and our military people were trained, dedicated professionals—with real faces and families!

Every war is different, and we must be careful in our assessment of lessons to be learned from Desert Shield/Storm. If we accept the fact that we must be prepared to deal with the hi-tech news media in a responsible way, there are some public affairs lessons to be gained from this experience.

Media in the Field

The military experienced an unprecedented, inordinate number of news media people "in-field" to cover Desert Shield/Storm. Beginning with seventeen members of the DoD National News Media Pool in mid-August 1990,

ultimately more than 1,600 news media and support people were deployed to Saudi Arabia by the start of Desert Storm on 16 January 1991. For example, ABC-TV alone had ten two-person camera crews, eight correspondents, and fifty to sixty support crew members in Saudi Arabia. There were five satellite TV uplinks at Dhahran in Saudi Arabia (ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN and BBC). The massive news media influx was mainly the result of the electronic media—TV. In contrast, during World War II we had 467 reporters registered at Supreme Allied Headquarters for D-Day at Normandy. But, only twenty-seven reporters (no TV) went ashore with the troops on D-Day. On Desert Storm D-Day, we had about 165 news reporters, cameramen and soundmen in combat media pools with the army, navy, marines and air force for the ground phase. In Vietnam, there were about seven hundred reporters in-country, with only about seventy-five "in the field" at any one time.

The point is, the media can not continue to flood the battlefield with a growing number of people and equipment who expect to go wherever they want, whenever they want, for the purpose of reporting news in times of war. Media pools during Desert Shield/Storm were a commonsense military response driven by the need to accommodate a huge number of media people. The logistics to transport and support so many journalists and their equipment posed a major problem for the military, not to mention our primary concerns which are for troop safety and operational security. Even the news media organizations themselves (who are now paying the huge Desert Storm bills) are questioning the millions of dollars they spent on war coverage. Some TV networks have begun to lay off hundreds of news people as their advertising revenues drop. Surely common sense would tell news executives to reach agreement among themselves to pool their future war coverage resources and lessen their own costs as well as the logistics demands on the military. Unfortunately, that does not appear to be the media's intended course.

Media Response

Major television and print news executives wrote to Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney on 24 June 1991 and said, "We believe the Pentagon pool arrangements during Operation Desert Storm made it impossible for reporters and photographers to tell the public the full story of the war in a timely fashion. Moreover, we believe it is imperative that the Gulf War not serve as a model for future coverage." The news executives enclosed with their letter a "Statement of Principles" which they said should govern future news media combat coverage including:

- Independent reporting will be the principal means of coverage of U.S. military operations.

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• Use of pools should be limited . . . last no longer than the very first stages of a deployment . . . the initial twenty-four hours to thirty-six hours . . . and should be disbanded in favor of independent coverage. Pools are not to serve as the standard means of covering U.S. forces.

• Journalists will be provided access to all major military units.

• News material—words and pictures—will not be subject to prior military security review.

• The military will be responsible for the transportation of pools.

• The military will supply PAOs [Public Affairs Officers] with timely, secure, compatible transmission facilities for pool material and will make these facilities available whenever possible for filing independent coverage.

• The military will not ban communications systems operated by news organizations.[3]

News media competition, as well as the number of reporters and support crews, will likely continue to increase in future crises and war operations. However, the responsibility "buck" will stop with our government's political and military leaders.

Media Technology

In Vietnam, print reports out of Saigon were often more timely than television reports. In the early 1960s, television was still using 16mm film, and then later changed to videotape. The Vietnam video was sent from the field or fleet to Saigon, then via plane to Hong Kong to the only regional TV satellite uplink. The freshest Vietnam video was two to three days old. In Desert Storm we had live feeds from satellite uplinks in Saudi Arabia. Video delays of several hours were considered major problems. If, as in Vietnam, video had been delayed three days, you would have missed timely TV coverage of the lightning and thunder of our hundred-hour ground war! Toward the end of the ground battle, reporters with coalition forces used their satellite telephones to report live radio reports on the marines' advance into Kuwait City. They soon followed with live video reports. Thus, the era of instant electronic war-reporting had arrived.

Today, military leaders must understand the importance of the media technology. As author Ben J. Wattenburg has said, "The most important new weapons of war are lightweight television cameras and television satellites. The new rules of warfare concern the way they are used nowadays."[4]

When questioned by *The New York Times* about how technology had impacted on field commanders, General Colin L. Powell, U.S. Army, Chairman, JCS, put it this way: "It isn't like World War II, when George Patton would sit around in his tent with six or seven reporters and muse with the results transcribed and reviewed for eventual release. . . . If a commander in Desert

Shield [Storm] sat around in his tent and mused with a few CNN guys and pool guys, it's in 105 capitals a minute later."[5]

It is clear that Desert Shield/Storm was the most challenging military-media relationship in our history. How did we do? Overall, the military commanders and public affairs officers did pretty well and got done the job that gave public recognition to our military people. We did have problems in getting media pool reports and videos back to satellite transmission points. We were also lacking in dedicated military transportation for the news media. However, the military might as well understand that they can never completely satisfy the news media demands, which always stipulate open and full access to everything right now! The real test of public affairs success is: Did the public get our story accurately and objectively?

George Watson, ABC-TV Washington Bureau Chief, has been a vocal critic of pools, escorts, and security review. But he has also stated, "My impression is that despite the dissatisfaction with the [pool] system, the story that we got and the American people got was a pretty fair reflection of the reality. So, the story got out."[6]

Finally, what major public affairs lessons did we learn?

• The hi-tech news media, with live satellite capability from the battlefield, became a reality in Desert Storm. The war of words and images became a real-time event with related troop safety and operational security concerns. Guidelines different from past wars were necessary.

• The huge number of news media people (due mainly to the electronic media) was a major logistic and security problem for the military. In Desert Storm, media pools were a commonsense solution, although it remains to be seen what a future war may bring as relates to media pools.

• Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney, General Powell, and General Norman Schwarzkopf demonstrated their direct personal interest by working in good faith with the news media. However, peacetime media "business as usual" (open access) is *not* possible in modern warfare where the enemy is watching twenty-four-hour television coverage and we are involved in a fast-paced campaign. The public understands this military fact of life. The news media should too.

• Military field/fleet commanders, who are always primarily concerned with their combat mission, must give more attention to accommodating the news media. Throughout the six months of Desert Shield/Storm, the navy hosted 1,000 members of the news media in sixty-nine afloat units. More fleet visits *could* have been accommodated if navy-dedicated media transportation had been made available by battle group commanders.

• If a service or unit complains that it did not get its fair share of news media coverage, the blame is usually at our own doorstep for not seizing the opportunity to tell our people's story. The news media were there and usually available,

but some commanders were unwilling to host them. Later, these same commanders wondered why their ships failed to be given their fair share of public recognition.

• Because of navy-marine corps unique ship transportation, communications and billeting challenges, it is always more difficult for naval afloat units to host news media. And, since afloat units are usually out of public view, the navy-marine corps afloat units must work harder to get the media to the fleet in order to tell the story of their maritime operations and sea campaigns. When the ground war begins, very few reporters want to "go to sea" and risk missing the ground action.

• On many occasions, when it was impossible to arrange for the news media to cover a navy-marine corps operation, our own combat camera teams were not utilized and historical still or video documentation (COMDOC) opportunities were lost. Operational commanders must be sensitive to their COMDOC requirements and better understand the role/mission of Combat Camera Group.

• The air war coverage in this "video" war was at a disadvantage since our naval aircraft video mission recorder systems are old and do not meet broadcast standards. Copies of mission recordings transferred to commercial video tapes for news release were of poor quality. Modern aircraft video mission recorder systems are a must in a television war where the recorded content and image quality are so important. Videos of aircraft taking off and landing in an air campaign are not good enough. The images must show what we did during the mission.

• If the news media won't come to the fleet, we must go ashore to the media with navy combat veterans, combat camera, and all manner of navy video and photos to tell our story in news conferences. Some commanders flew their sailors or officers into Saudi Arabia for a news media "show and tell."

• News media publicity can be helpful to the military in a variety of circumstances, such as accenting the broad range of naval threat capabilities from CONUS departures of naval forces to off-the-beach presence, including amphibious assault capability, thus encouraging the enemy to react and expend considerable effort and resources to counter the threat. In Desert Shield/Storm, it was clear that the Iraqis used CNN television as an intelligence source.

Finally, whether you were the commander-in-chief or a field/fleet commander, the ability to communicate our story via the news media reached a new importance in Desert Storm. The reason a busy commander must learn to practice good media relations skills in war or in peace is *not* for personal publicity or gratification, but for recognition for our people—to tell their story to our families and the general public. Public understanding and support of the navy-marine corps team is a process in which the news media will always be an important player. We have to be both warriors and public affairs officers. As Rear Admiral Riley D. Mixson, U.S. Navy, Commander Battle Force Red Sea,

in the USS *John F. Kennedy*, said, "We must learn to play the press better. We tend to avoid them."[7]

It is clear that in the wake of Desert Storm we are seeing defense budget decisions impacted by public and congressional perceptions of what and how well the navy-marine corps team did in the television war. We, as military commanders must be sophisticated enough to understand that the willingness to take time to accommodate the news media may be an added temporary burden during combat, but in the long term it will prove profitable. As a commanding officer in the Persian Gulf said, "This media pool embark may help generate understanding and support for just how badly we need a navy in the post Cold War period. We'll really need public support after the war."

If John Paul Jones were alive today—in this age of instant communication—it is likely that his famous statement about naval officers would be revised to read:

> It is by no means enough that an officer of the Navy should be a capable mariner. A naval officer must be that of course, but also an effective communicator. A naval officer today must be television street-smart, with a sense of news timing and the ability to speak in ten-second television sound bites.

We must never underestimate the great success our navy-marine corps team had in Desert Storm, but also, we must never underestimate the need to communicate vigilantly our people's story via the news media.

Notes

1. Admiral Frank B. Kelso II, U.S. Navy, Chief of Naval Operations, "Remarks at Forrestal Lecture," U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, Md.: 17 October 1990.
2. Walter S. Mossberg, "U.S. Used Press as Weapon," *The Wall Street Journal*, 28 February 1991, p. 3.
3. Letter from Mr. Roone Arledge, President ABC News et al. to Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, 24 June 1991.
4. Ben J. Wattenberg, *The Good News Is the Bad News Is Wrong* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), p. 390.
5. Jason DeParle, "Long Series of Military Decisions Led to Gulf War News Censorship: Covering the War," *The New York Times*, 5 May 1991, p. 1.
6. George Watson, ABC-TV Vice President and Washington Bureau Chief, in conversation with author at Marine Corps University Media Symposium, Quantico, Va., 5 April 1991.
7. Rear Admiral Riley D. Mixon, U.S. Navy, Commander Carrier Group Two and Commander Battle Force Red Sea, during war in the Gulf. Remarks at Symposium on Naval Aviation, Pensacola, Fla.: 9 May 1991. Also see article by Rear Admiral Mixon, "Where We Must Do Better," United States Naval Institute *Proceedings*, August 1991, p. 39.

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