

1983

Two Routes to the Wrong Destination: Public Affairs in the South Atlantic War

Arthur A. Humphries

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Humphries, Arthur A, (1983) "Two Routes to the Wrong Destination: Public Affairs in the South Atlantic War," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 36 : No. 3 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol36/iss3/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

Two Routes to the Wrong Destination: Public Affairs in the South Atlantic War

by

Lieutenant Commander Arthur A. Humphries, US Navy

The conflict in the South Atlantic in mid-1982 between Argentina and Great Britain offers us the opportunity to examine news management and its effects on public opinion in a crisis. This undeclared limited war for the Falkland Islands, or Malvinas, also provides us with a classic view of the differences in public information policies in an authoritarian government and in a democratic society. My intent is not to discuss the morality of propaganda, sophism, or blatant lying by a government in a crisis but to account for its existence and explain why and how it happens, along with the less oblique problems of misinformation and speculation.

There has been a tendency in the wake of the crisis to compare the public affairs or news aspects to America's experiences in the Vietnam conflict. I don't think that Vietnam provides an apt comparison. While both Vietnam and the Falklands were limited wars, there were too many dissimilarities to allow for historical analogy, especially in the area of public information. There was a great deal of time for the US Military Assistance Command in Vietnam and the government back home to plan and set up facilities for the press corps in Vietnam. The news media also had a great deal of time to develop attitudes about, and strategies for, approaching that particular crisis. There was no such urgency in Vietnam as we saw in the South Atlantic. But there was one striking similarity—the capability for immediate mass communication.

Mass Communications. There was the potential in the South Atlantic to show the folks back home a vivid, real-life, real-time picture of men from two opposing nations on two ordinary and theretofore unimportant islands doing some very permanent, ugly things to each other. After the Vietnam Tet Offensive of 1968, the American public, and for that matter the whole world, saw a sample of South Vietnamese-style capital punishment—a real execution of an enemy soldier, via their television sets in their own homes. That is not the sort of thing that would engender support at home for a war. If you want to maintain popular support for a war, your side must not be seen as

ruthless barbarians. Realistically, you cannot expect them always to be portrayed as knights in shining armor, either.

When relatives of servicemen see their boy, or someone who could be their boy, wounded or maimed, in living color, through imagery right in front of them, that tends to erode their support for their government's war aims. That happened during the Vietnam war. We know what happened to public opinion as a result of repeated doses of blood and guts given to a public that wasn't prepared to cope with it. The issue remains, then: What can a government do about that sort of problem, given the factors of high-tech communications capabilities and a worldwide public attuned to freedom of information?

The Public Affairs Problem. Public opinion was vital to the initiation and the conduct of the South Atlantic war. Except in a totalitarian state a war cannot be conducted without first mobilizing the public; but there are certain public affairs strategies and tactics which can work and others that are not likely to work in the process of mobilizing and exploiting public support for a war. What were the strategies and tactics used by the belligerents in this conflict to achieve and maintain public support? Were they effective? How were those strategies facilitated? As the primary media for the belligerent governments' messages, what were the reactions of the print and electronic news organizations to those strategies and tactics? What wisdom is gained about the ways of mobilizing and exploiting public support for a war in a modern industrial democracy?

Wisdom Relearned. The public affairs wisdom gained from the Falklands war certainly wouldn't be considered conventional wisdom, that is, in a society accustomed to free information. The unconventional wisdom might play badly in such news and mass communication jungles as Rockefeller Center in New York or Fleet Street in London. The unconventional wisdom plays well, however, in Buenos Aires; there is little or no choice but to accept it there. Yet, in spite of a perception of choice in a democratic society, the Falklands war shows us how to make certain that government policy is not undermined by the way a war is reported.

Here's the wisdom: control access to the fighting, invoke censorship, and rally aid in the form of patriotism at home and in the battle zone. Both Argentina and Great Britain showed us how to make that wisdom work. One of Britain's correspondents from World War II, the father of Falklands war correspondent Max Hastings, made the point then and it can still apply: "Objectivity can come back into fashion when the shooting is over." And, when the war was over, the armchair PAO quarterbacks could reflect with some objectivity that the disinformation from the British government and military was intended to deceive the Argentines; whereas the disinformation from the Argentine junta was intended to deceive the Argentine public.

Road to War. The Argentines had a public information plan and a psychological action plan for this war. Both plans are still classified and are still inaccessible. The British, on the other hand, winged their public affairs efforts. Except for the British Official Secrets Act, facilitated by a D-Notice Committee, there were no official British public affairs guidelines or directives to help the news management efforts of this war at the outset. There was a PAO plan on the shelves, a draft originated by the army in 1977, but it was discovered far too late to be of any help, at least for this war. It's not surprising that the MOD didn't have public affairs plans, knowing as we do now that they didn't have operational plans for anything outside of a Nato context.

The Argentines were prepared and so ever increasingly confident of their position that they even announced publicly their imminent invasion. On 24 January 1982, General Galtieri promised in a *La Prensa* article to possess the Malvinas before 3 January 1983, before the British and Falklanders could celebrate the 150th anniversary of the British settlement. Even certain members of the Argentine Embassy in the United States held no reservations, over cocktails or private dinner parties, about early advertisement of their government's intentions.

One month later, on the 24th of February, the British press warned of suspicious Argentine movements. Had the British become so complacent that they could mark these forthright warnings as only dictatorial rhetoric? It certainly seems that senior Foreign Office and MOD officials were satisfied with that explanation though they could read otherwise in their daily newspapers and in similar warnings from their embassy in Argentina. The British government made a fateful decision. At every turn they simply seemed to say to Argentina, "Come ahead and have your pleasure. We're not really interested in coming to a conclusion on our negotiations for the islands; we're not interested in defending them either since we're getting ready to scrap our only vessel there, the *Endurance*, plus some of our amphibs here, and we're selling our ASW carrier *Invincible* to Australia." With that kind of response to their warnings, the Argentines felt pretty comfortable about recouping what they saw as rightfully theirs.

So it was with that set of preliminaries that the Argentine occupation of the Falkland Islands took the British public by surprise. Yet, in spite of Britain's perceived indifference indicated to Argentina, the Falkland invasion was seen by the British public as an affront to British sovereignty and national pride that could not be ignored.

The British Performance

Prime Minister Thatcher had stronger public opinion behind her than any of her predecessors facing an international crisis, except Churchill, who in 1940 rallied his public in their country's greatest danger. A

large majority of Parliament, most of the public, and the news organizations enthusiastically supported their government's determination to use force if a settlement couldn't be negotiated. A public opinion poll showed 83 percent in favor of regaining the Falklands and 53 percent preferred the use of force. The latter percentage was to increase as negotiations faltered. *The Times* of London had a clear vision of what was necessary when, on 8 April it editorialized that: "In strategy one must disregard the method by which the decision is reached and consider only the outcome that is desired. That outcome is to force our adversary to accept certain terms which must be imposed on him and which, at present, he says are unacceptable. In the dialectic of wills the decision can be achieved not just through a clash of arms but psychologically"

The day before, another British daily, *The Guardian*, said, ". . . we must be sure that British opinion is prepared—through the waves of fervour—for a solution that meets the needs of the Falklanders." These editorial comments thus reflected the majority and indicated, at least here in postmortem, a willingness by these news organizations to do their part to win the war. Could the MOD afford to look so closely in the mouth of this seeming gift horse?

Good Policy, Bad Technique. Margaret Thatcher rose to her country's crisis openly and with honest explanation to her constituents. She bore the Parliamentary brunt of hard questions about lack of advance warning or preparation. She did not deceive or manipulate. It was she who insisted that to allow only six journalists to embark with her Falklands fleet was not enough. More had to be allowed to go. In the end, 29 journalists, technicians, and photographers sailed with the fleet. Her principle was right—allow coverage of the British side of the war. Her initiation of that principle was right—send journalists to tell the story. It was the inadequacy and the lack of a technique in managing the journalists, that harmed her government's public information effort.

Two principles—the public's right to information and the duty to withhold information for operational security—were the government's basis for information policy. They are not, nor do they have to be, diametrically opposite, in theory at least. But in actual practice they can easily conflict. The concept of operational security can be justified too loosely with such a response as, "that's an operational matter," particularly if the information being referred to is uncomplimentary to the person or unit or circumstance being discussed. If that happens, then the news media, writing for public consumption, will lose confidence and respect for the government or military spokesmen reflecting that attitude.

The other consideration, however, is the possibility of the news media becoming too cavalier with sensitive information because of naiveté,

“What I have said throughout to that kind of question is that interesting though it may be, I have throughout the whole of the last four weeks never made a comment on it, but have always said that I hope that no one will think my comment means more than, quite simply, no comment.”

**British MOD Spokesman
Ian MacDonald
Falklands War briefing**

pressures of deadlines, self-righteousness, or political bias. At that point a government might lose any willingness to release even nonsensitive information. Where exactly the balance could be found, came out in Parliamentary investigation as one of the major difficulties involved in formulating information policy. There is some wisdom to be gained from the dilemma. It is vital that no government seeks, in its urgent need to prosecute a war successfully, to insulate itself from the process of public accountability.

What then should be reported by a government in war? The basic aims of an information policy should be: to provide as full an account as possible of the course of the conflict that is consistent with operational security; to retain the credibility of the government's or military's spokesmen; and to explain the government's case at home and to the international public. In the early stages of the Falklands war, the emphasis was on diplomatic activity, with the military preparations as part of the psychological pressure to achieve diplomatic settlement. At this point it was important for the government to show the resolve and capacity to win militarily, if necessary. When diplomacy failed and fighting started, the aim had to be to release information as quickly and as accurately as possible consistent with the safety and security of the task force.

Was it the MOD's policy always to tell the truth or did they indulge in misinformation in order to deceive the enemy? MOD representatives have freely admitted, and without apology, that they did not always tell the whole truth. They were unwilling though to admit that, on occasion, they deliberately misled the news media in order to deceive the Argentines.

The Ministry of Defence public information policy for this war, according to its Permanent Undersecretary, Sir Frank Cooper, was based on the assumption that “the public has both an interest in and a right to know about defence. But we do not regard these rights as unlimited.”

Force commanders were specifically instructed “not to interfere with the style and content of press copy other than on security grounds,” while news editors back home were “exceptionally cooperative” in responding to requests from MOD public relations personnel to remove certain references in stories in order to safeguard morale or to minimize distress to next of kin.

Whether such an arrangement would be sufficient in a war in which

“instant” television coverage was possible, or in which the scope of the operation was more general, is dubious. What is a commander or a public affairs officer to do about it?

One journalist testifying before a Parliamentary investigating committee noted in this regard that he did not know of any British correspondent who had ever slanted a battle report or knowingly put troops' lives at risk. But, the journalist added, Mao Zedong was only 75 percent right when he said, “Power comes from the barrel of a gun.” In an age of near-instant communication, power also bounces down a beam from a communications satellite and goes to the side which tells the story first. The Israelis are masters at this. While they use strict censorship, their military press officers are not usually obstructive and have the sense to make sure that reporters' copy gets out with all possible speed and that correspondents are given every possible assistance in the field. To a lesser degree, even rag-clad guerrillas are aware of the power of communication.

It was in that censorship or vetting process that the British gained some experience from which we can learn. During the Falklands war, there appeared to be no clear guidelines for censoring or vetting news reports. What the “minders” or censors with the task force and in London did, was something in between censoring and vetting, in that they appraised the correspondents' copy and asked them to remove or rewrite certain passages. The trouble was they didn't do it within a consistent format. Some of it was even ludicrous. As an example, in the pooled copy after the *Sir Galahad* was hit, there was a reference to a young guardsman, 20-year-old Stephen Dobbin. The reporter quoted him as saying, minutes after the attack, “Just tell my mum I'm safe, and keep your chin up. We'll get the bastards next time.” The details of Guardsman Dobbin were bracketed by an MOD censor in London, who pointed out in brackets at the end of the dispatch: [The next of kin of Stephen Dobbin have not yet been informed, therefore we would appreciate his name not being mentioned.]

With the heavy-handedness of Sir Frank's organization in censoring journalistic and photographic products from the fleet, and the force commanders' difficulty in managing the news correspondents in their efforts, it is not surprising that not a single picture was taken of the Argentine surrender. Few people at the Ministry of Defence seemed to appreciate that news management is more than just information security censorship. It also means providing pictures.

The British Commander of the Land Forces, Major General Jeremy Moore, explained that he was being cautious with the negotiation process because of the uncertainty of the situation. The Argentine commander of the Falklands, General Mario Menendez, he explained, was not getting a clear agreement from his government to surrender on behalf of all Argentine forces. Moore added that, in his opinion, it would have been unsafe to allow

any possible distraction to endanger the agreement to surrender. In fact, two military photographers were in the building where the negotiations took place, waiting for the opportunity to document the surrender visually. But, in light of his guidance from London, the approach to publicity adopted by Moore was to secure the surrender as the highest priority and so avoid further loss of life. It is certainly conceivable that Menendez asked Moore not to allow photography of the negotiations or of the instrument signing. It is obvious that the omission of photographers was a deliberate move by Moore rather than an oversight. The point is that Britain was caught in another Argentine psychological ploy, as Argentina still argues to this day that they did not capitulate. Where the general public might not understand the subtle nuances of statesmanship, they certainly understand a simple picture.

On the day the *Sheffield* was fatally hit by an Argentine air-launched Exocet missile, the embarked journalists were told that the story had been embargoed by CinC Fleet in England. Similarly, the story of two Harriers colliding in fog was held up by the civilian censors with the task force, but the details of these and other similar incidents were released in London—causing a great deal of frustration for the reporters at sea. Their concern was not so much that their copy was being vetted for security purposes but that it was not getting to their home offices on time, if at all, and that the apparent lack of coordination between PAO personnel at sea and in London would keep these writers from their mutually agreed upon and appointed task.

So there was a serious information problem with the MOD. It arose not through any Machiavellian desire to mislead the news media or the public constantly, but through sheer incompetence at times and most often through naiveté.

One must say—in defense of the PAO effort at sea, for instance—that, although it was not possible to respond to all of the demands of the journalists, during the course of the operation over 600 dispatches and 50 hours of broadcasting tapes were sent back home by the embarked correspondents. Written copy alone amounted to over half a million words. The five reporters in the *Invincible* alone provided between 25 and 30 percent of the daily workload for the ship's communications center. At one stage it had a backlog of over 1,000 messages for transmission, but the *Invincible* correspondents were still able to send over 4,000 words of copy a day.

News Media Reaction. The government and MOD fared pretty well in spite of themselves. The conservative press was uniformly supportive of the government throughout the war. Much of the independent press also generally supported the government, in spite of hard warnings to the Prime Minister to pursue every effort to secure a negotiated settlement and continued warnings of the costs of military action. Even the liberal press was surprisingly supportive of the need to back up negotiations with a show of force.

There are charges and countercharges of censorship and irresponsibility, jingoism and bias. The evidence reinforces many of the popular prejudices of both the military and the news media about each other, particularly in times of stress. For the most part, the news representatives felt that the Ministry of Defence had a terrible war as far as public information management was concerned. However, there were some who would disagree. They are the ones who made the best of a tough situation and were able to write good stories and get them home.

The British news people reporting this war, whether at sea or in England, were, for the most part, generally unhappy with the arrangements made by the MOD for information matters. Specific complaints ranged from the inadequacy of the number of places for journalists to accompany the task force and the allocation of those places that were available, to the inconsistent censoring procedures used and the irregularity of briefings in London about the progress of the campaign. It was also argued that the lack of briefings contributed to the flood of speculative stories in the news. The first points can be chalked off to lack of planning by both parties, and frequently to a juvenile attitude by reporters, publishers, and TV executives who are too often used to getting their way. But the latter point, regarding briefings, deserves some more discussion because it is a problem at sea and ashore, and is an everyday problem, or consideration, for those who need or want to explain their story.

One of the most obviously mistaken decisions of the Ministry of Defence was to cease background briefings between the time of departure of the task force and 11 May by which time the naval campaign was well along. It is essential that a government and its military branch give regular briefings to representatives of all news organizations, as practicable, in order to sustain a relationship of trust, to foster the flow of correct information, and to halt faulty speculation. That is basic and essential to the success of any public affairs activity.

Reporters and their bosses do not like to think of themselves, or be thought of, as simply mouthpieces of government, or any other organization for that matter, except on their editorial pages. Most of them believe that their main responsibility is to provide the public with as complete and accurate an account as possible of any conflict in both its military and political aspects. In order to do that, they take advantage of all possible sources of information, official and unofficial, from home and overseas. News organizations are also very competitive and that creates a demand for dramatic and immediate news, which can interfere with the requirements of balance and impartiality, as well as those of completeness and accuracy.

When the MOD wouldn't provide the information, it is not surprising then, that television and the papers began using retired military officers to help them report what was probably going on in the Falklands. Nor is it

surprising that, during the first half of the war, British media were reporting information supplied by the Argentines. The problem is, most news organizations are businesses, and without capital in-flow, they cease to exist. So it is their goal to maintain and nurture their audience or readership. In order to do that, they must have a story—a story that beats their competition. If a government, or a military organization, or any group for that matter, understands that line, then they will know why it is vital to tell their story first, before their competition or enemy tells his.

Reaction in the MOD. In a democracy where everybody may have his say, there are bound to be dissenting voices. Dissent did not dissipate the national will during Britain's fight to regain the Falkland Islands; but it was a war won without consistent, even-handed, professional information services of the Ministry of Defence. The evidence I've seen indicates overwhelmingly that the lack of an experienced professional public relations officer at the head of the MOD public relations chain was widely felt in the news management of this war. This crisis made it abundantly clear that the Royal Navy and the British MOD need a public affairs plan for contingencies or for anything other than routine operations. Since the war the MOD has contracted with University College Cardiff to review the public relations problems of the Falklands war and develop a plan for them. It would be foolish for plans, which incorporate the news media into the organization for war, to be too firmly tied to a particular environment, but it is clear that information matters are an intrinsic part of war and should, therefore, form part of the planning for war.

The Falklands war drove the point home to military seniors that a far greater understanding of the nature of news work is necessary within the armed services. News media studies should form an integral part of higher defense training. To that end, the incorporation of a public affairs element in exercises would be of great value to the military, particularly the Royal Navy, and the news media.

The Ministry of Defence believed they had "got it about right" and were generally pleased with the outcome. That's the official line. Unofficially, the attitude is that they were very unhappy about having had to take so many journalists to sea, embarrassed about their own lack of planning and inability to manage the press, and displeased with the low priority the press was given in the operation—particularly as regards communications, transportation, and other simple logistics.

Perhaps the military commanders' most noteworthy objection to the flow of information to the public was over the release too soon or of too much operational information that could jeopardize both the lives of fighting men and the success of their efforts. It also bothered the relatives and friends of those sailors, marines, and soldiers who were fighting for the Falklands. The

Parachute Regiment was incensed over a premature BBC report which said they were attacking Goose Green, an attack that, when it took place shortly afterwards, cost many lives including the battalion commander's. But that was a fault of the government in releasing the information, not of the broadcaster who took its release at face value. One flag officer said that the Navy's biggest concern in this regard was the reports released back home that Argentine air-dropped bombs were not exploding on impact with the British ships. Though the problem of publicizing operational information was discussed with London, he said it wasn't corrected.

While the task force commanders had absolute control of the mechanics of the information flow from the South Atlantic, they had no control and little, if any, influence over the information flow back home. Probably never again will the Ministry of Defence, or the defense department of any other democratic nation, be able to control all means of transportation to the scene of fighting and the sole means of communications both for copy and pictures. Knowing that makes it all the more important that plans should include criteria for incorporating the news media into the organization for war. It would be prudent to base those plans on principles agreed to by both parties—the news media and the military—taking into account the variety of operational circumstances which might arise.

If the presence of the news media in a crisis or a war is accepted as inevitable, one consequence must be to inform those media about the facilities that will and will not, be available to them. The frustrations the correspondents suffered in their efforts to report this war were occasionally directed at the military men they worked with, whose highest priority and principal efforts were directed toward the successful prosecution of the war and who were often neglectful of the needs of the news correspondents. And so it will be in any conflict that the operators have their jobs to do, and with a narrow focus, see the news media as an obstruction. The wider focus, however, must never be forgotten, that the news media can be a useful tool, or even a weapon, in prosecuting a war psychologically, so that the operators don't have to use their more severe weapons.

In its concluding remarks, the House of Commons Defence Committee investigating information problems in this war, summed up the problem nicely. That report says operational commanders must have a determination to win, but those concerned with the higher direction of operations need a wider grasp of the political and psychological elements of national security policy. Pursuit of short-term military advantage without regard to world opinion could be fatal militarily, as well as politically.

The Argentine Performance

In Buenos Aires the problems of public information were handled somewhat differently than they were in London. The Argentine joint

staff (Estado Mayor Conjunto) had the exclusive responsibility for releasing information about the war to the news media. In some cases the joint staff tried to apply objectivity; however, in most of their official communiques it is clear that their intention was to influence public opinion. The junta, through the joint staff, used misinformation to the point of sophism, or disinformation.

Voices of Government. The joint staff had its press releases organized in accordance with a still classified plan, according to a ranking governmental source in Argentina. Though the plan was designed to avoid any releases from nonofficial or nonjoint staff sources, spokesmen who were frequently perceived by the public to be officially sanctioned, committed gross acts of speculation and disinformation. These perceived government spokesmen were on the periphery of the junta in the form of unattributed "military sources." Most often they were government-owned and operated TV stations or government-influenced publications, which often profess government policies. The local publications sometimes created their own stories as if they were trying to outdo the government. An American television news producer who was in Argentina for the duration of the war described, in a recent interview with me, the reality of news organizations operating under an authoritarian regime. "It was remarkable for some of us who were a bit naive about how government-run media in other parts of the world can be part of the same ball game. It's as if they're out there with the flags in the first row, screaming and yelling the lies as much as anybody else would. And that's why they're there. That's how you become an editor or publisher of a big important newspaper or magazine in Argentina. It is because you know the party line better than the people who are the party."

Reporters for Argentina's leading publications regularly complained to their foreign peers during the war that their publishers told them how to orient their stories politically. During the war, *Gente*, a leading glossy weekly, ran a two-page interview with an Argentine commando allegedly contacted by radio behind the British lines on South Georgia Island. It was designed to spark public ardor for the war and for the boys at the front. As it turned out, the article was completely fabricated at the order of an editor.

Even though that sort of incident was not directed by the junta, it certainly worked nicely into their psychological efforts. Psychological action was one of the principles guiding the junta's domestic affairs. They started by preparing their public for war, not negotiations, and not just any war but a short one. The Argentine public affairs objectives were to whip up patriotic fervor for the war, to push for Latin American solidarity, and to show that Britain was the aggressor and Argentina the victim. Additionally, an Argentine government source says that yet another aim was to attempt to reduce animosity against the United States. It has been difficult to find evidence of that during the war.

Managing the Information. Unofficial sources of information were not the only origins of disinformation. One only need look at the official joint staff communiques to see an amazing level of sophism. While reportage and communique analysis is the subject of another detailed study, it is clear that the Argentines repeatedly understated their losses and overstated the damage inflicted on the British.

Some experts on Argentina might say that was the result of bureaucratic mistakes indicative of the regime there. A neophyte might not excuse a government for such repeated misstatements and simply call it lying. What I can say for sure is that before the end of May, the Argentine joint staff had claimed that their forces shot down more Harriers than the British owned. Moreover, if we are to believe central and peripheral Argentine government sources, the HMS *Invincible* was sunk five times during the war. Unfortunately, I could find no record of the Argentine public's response at the time to those misstatements. In spite of these examples and the Argentine public's negative postwar response to the junta's triumphalism, the joint staff claims that their public affairs and psychological action plans "worked fine, with some exceptions and lack of control."

Between 2 April and 21 June the joint staff released 170 communiques, a rate of more than two per day, regarding the government's policies and the situation in the battle zone. One communique assured the public that the information coming in to the staff for release would be "evaluated in volume as well as content to avoid inaccuracies and the creation of false expectations." If no information was released, according to their policy, then the public should rest assured that there was no important news to announce. Nonetheless there was a constant stream of information available from the Argentine side, particularly between the time of their invasion on 2 April, and the British buildup to the San Carlos landing on 21 May. There is no doubt that the speed with which Argentina released information was at times embarrassing to the British government. These embarrassments have been described by the BBC director, for example, as "a self inflicted wound."

The publicized governmental policy that guided news organizations reporting from Buenos Aires during this war was self-censorship, "so that press censorship and other restrictions would not be necessary." If there was a chance that reports "could damage the morale of the nation, then they should be avoided." The guidance to journalists said that "news agencies and/or correspondents accredited in the country will be responsible for the control of all information that originates in the country or coming from abroad which is transmitted or retransmitted either abroad or to national correspondents." Is this a policy we should admire? A recent Louis Harris poll shows that nine out of ten Americans feel that the news media in this country should follow that policy, although the poll was not taken in the context of the subject of Argentina or the Falklands war.

In addressing the problem of national security, the Argentine joint staff guidelines prohibited information that would “produce panic, is against national unity, detracts from the credibility of, or contradicts official information, upsets internal order, generates aggressive attitudes toward the country’s British community, affects the relationship with other countries, or coming from abroad, tends to facilitate the achievement of the opponent’s psychological goals.”

Regardless of that stiff policy for news correspondents, the point should not be overlooked that, indeed, the Argentine junta allowed British correspondents to stay on in Buenos Aires. And as one might expect of a democratic nation, Great Britain had no aversion to allowing Argentine correspondents to continue their work in England. It is worth recalling, however, speaking of democratic societies, that the United States was not as open-minded about Japanese correspondents between 1942 and 1945.

The Argentines did not have the infrastructure necessary to conduct formal censorship as the British tried to do. What they tried to do with the foreign press was what reportedly they do ordinarily with their own news media. That situation has been described by correspondents who were in Argentina during the war as a veiled semicensorship, backed up with at least harassment, if not violence. The possibility of government dissatisfaction and retaliation was not lost on the approximately 700 foreign correspondents reporting the war from Buenos Aires. An American TV news producer stationed in Buenos Aires for the war admitted that all the news organizations there “were virtually mouthpieces (for the government) in many cases. Our coverage was a bit contrived and a bit controlled.” He added that the government effectively sent a message that “you’d better watch yourself, you’d better watch the kind of stories you’re doing, you’d better watch who you intimidate and who you are going to insult, because we’re very sensitive.”

Is it the proper role of the press to intimidate or to insult? Many newsmen would say yes, if it is necessary to put a news subject off-balance in order that he might provide more information. My personal and professional attitude as a potential interviewee is that, I wouldn’t stand for it and don’t think any news interviewee should have to.

The Road to War. The task of preparing the Argentine public for a Malvinas invasion began late in December 1981, according to correspondents from *The Times* of London in their book *War in the Falklands*. That was after the takeover by the new president, General Leopoldo Galtieri. His foreign secretary, Nicanor Costa Mendez, met with a select group of Argentine journalists and discussed the government’s intentions. According to *The Times* writers, Galtieri was determined to regain the Falklands—by diplomacy if possible, by force if necessary. Several weeks later, Argentina’s premier newspaper,

La Prensa, printed a column that addressed the problem of the defense of the South Atlantic and said that taking the Malvinas by force was an option "which would enjoy an international consensus." A week later the same columnist who, it may be surmised, was speaking for his government, added in this regard that "the United States . . . would support all acts leading to restitution (of the Malvinas), including military ones" That kind of public preparation for this war continued until the invasion on 2 April 1982.

Triumphalism. The view the Argentine government gave to its citizens and the world from the time of the invasion until the last days of this short war was reflective of its psychological action plan. It was a view of extreme triumphalism, even though the joint staff said that they were trying to avoid that. Starting with the approach of the British task force, through at least the Bluff Cove engagement in June, the Argentines were saying that their forces were invincible and the British would be sent home with a bloody nose. The vast majority of the Argentine public felt that their case was right and just and therefore were predisposed to accept a lot of the triumphalism.

During the course of the war, the Argentine public was perhaps more predisposed to believe the triumphalism espoused by the junta than they would have been to support the triumphalism of, say, a given economic or agricultural policy. Nothing can take the people's minds off a collapsing economy like a popular war. When the Ministry of Economy says the rate of inflation will be kept down to 100 percent this year and the people know it is going to be at least 300 percent, they make their own judgment on the ministry's information. The public was ready for a national victory of sorts, something upbeat for a change, having struggled with a brutally inflated economy for so long. So, when they kept hearing reports of their military forces triumphant in battle, they believed them, besides the general feeling that their case in the Malvinas crisis was right. But after the war, and here is a key point, there was a widespread revulsion and questioning of the triumphalism that was peddled by the junta via the Argentine press. The Argentines are understandably cynical and disillusioned. What little faith they had in the nation's institutions dissipated when, at the end of the war, they learned that they had been deceived by the military and the news media into thinking they were winning. A national television news show that bills itself as "The Hour of Truth" is now popularly called "The Hour of Lies."

Argentina's handling of war news demonstrates that lying to your people costs more in the long run than it gains in the short run. The country was bound up in a state of, as the *Christian Science Monitor* put it, national self-deception. A hungry public was quick to swallow the junta's triumphalism. The misstatements of war information were readily believed when the public read them as official communiques from the joint staff. Conversely, when anything was going badly for the Argentines, the British reports to the

contrary were laughed off as propaganda or psychological warfare. It is not surprising, then, that the public and many in the military were at first stunned when news came of the British landings. The public and many members of the armed forces thought they were winning until the last moment when they lost. The Argentine psychological action plan would not even allow reports of the 250 dead at Goose Green and 1,400 taken prisoner, even as the British troops were taking Port Stanley.

While there is no credit due the Galtieri junta for trusting its public with good and bad news of the war, the Thatcher government can be accused of the same shortcoming. But, as can be seen from the experience of the Galtieri regime, the government that blatantly lies to its people cannot ultimately endure. Thus we can end this chapter with a bit of morality and philosophy from Sissela Bok: "The language of enmity and rivalry is not suited to moral inquiry. If we want to produce excuses for lying to someone, these excuses should be capable of persuading reasonable persons, not merely some particular public locked in hostility to a particular group. Entering into hostilities is, in a sense, to give up the ability to shift perspectives. But even those who give up the language of morality during a period of hostility and adopt that of strategy instead, may do well to remember Mark Twain's words: 'When in doubt, tell the truth. It will confound your enemies and astound your friends.'"⁶

A Better Route, A Better Destination

The conflict in the South Atlantic in mid-1982 between Argentina and Great Britain offers us the opportunity to examine news management and its effects on public opinion in a crisis situation.

Some of the conclusions I've developed as a result of this study of the public affairs aspects of the Falklands war are:

- To maintain popular support for a war, your side must not be seen as ruthless barbarians;
- If you don't want to erode the public's confidence in the government's war aims, then you cannot allow that public's sons to be wounded or maimed right in front of them via their TV sets at home;
- You must, therefore, control correspondents' access to the fighting;
- You must invoke censorship in order to halt aid to both the known and the suspected enemies;
- You must rally aid in the form of patriotism at home and in the battle zone but not to the extent of repeated triumphalism;
- You must tell your side of the story first, at least for psychological advantage, causing the enemy to play catch-up politically, with resultant strategic effect;
- To generate aid, and confuse at least the domestic detractors, report the

⁶*Lying—A Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), p. 145.

truth about the enemy and let the enemy defectors tell their horror story.

- Finally, in order to affect or help assure “favorable objectivity,” you must be able to exclude certain correspondents from the battle zone.

Now that the first South Atlantic crisis of the century has been through “Hot Washup,” the PAO armchair quarterbacks can conclude all of those things that I have just said, knowing there will be flak damage to repair domestically in a free-information society. But, “objectivity can come back into fashion when the shooting is over.”

Though the conclusions I’ve presented are derived from the strategies and tactics of both South Atlantic belligerents, there were some marked differences in their approaches.

- The disinformation from the British was intended to deceive the Argentines;

- The disinformation from the Argentine junta was intended to deceive the Argentine public;

- Both countries facilitated their disinformation through censorship but in different forms:

The British controlled their news largely by control of journalists’ copy from the battle zone and by allowing speculation at home,

Whereas the Argentine junta controlled their news at the source of information, and that source was in Buenos Aires.

- The Argentines had a public information plan and a psychological action plan for this war;

- The British, like their operational efforts, were ad hoc in their approach to public affairs;

- The British particularly lacked technique and, therefore, training in their censorship program.

The war in the South Atlantic last year serves to remind us that information matters are an intrinsic part of war and should, therefore, form part of the planning for war.

War is something we train for with the hope of never having to do it. Public affairs in crises is something we often do but rarely, if ever, train for. Public affairs elements must be incorporated in military exercises in such a way that every level of command has to deal with the problem.

The field commander knows that he will be allowed less flexibility in decision-making the shorter the crisis is. That same decision-making process will have a vital impact on public affairs matters. We can read postmortems, but they will do us little good unless we train and prepare in every warfare specialty, including public affairs.

Lieutenant Commander Humphries, a public affairs specialist, is a student at the Naval War College and a member of the College’s Falkland Islands study group.