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# Should America Have A "War Press Act"?

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by

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**W**ould the American public support the enactment of a War Press Act; parallel legislation to the War Powers Act?

Or, a Protection of (military) Information Act; as a balance to the Freedom of Information Act, with scope similar to the British Official Secrets Act?

These questions are relevant against the backdrop of our recent military experience in Grenada. On 25 October 1983 US forces, acting on the orders of their Commander in Chief, occupied Grenada. The island was closed to nonmilitary air and sea traffic and journalists were excluded from reporting on-scene action. The reasons for excluding reporters, according to Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, were fear for the safety of reporters and the desire of military commanders to preserve the secrecy of ongoing military operations.

Experienced military officers recognized additional reasons for excluding the press. On-scene newsmen require three vital assets to report a battlefield story, assets that are in short supply during the initial phase of a military operation. They are transportation, communications, and the precious time and attention of knowledgeable personnel to explain strategy, tactics, successes, setbacks, and human interest facts.

Usually, modern military operations are fast moving, with jeeps, helicopters, and armored personnel carriers speeding forces to tactical battle points. Even pencil-and-paper newsmen, unencumbered with video and audio gear, cannot be given personal transport, or assignment to the transport of a combat crew, without disruption to the operational flow of combat and support personnel. Until a military operation has stabilized and lives are no longer at great risk can the assignment of transport to nonmilitary functions be considered without impinging on a force's mission.

Once a story is gathered it takes a communications circuit, or a courier using operational transportation, to deliver the manuscript or film to the editorial offices of the publishing or broadcast organization. Military communications circuits and personnel must be taken away from operational duties in order to facilitate the filing of news copy. Editors in the United States, in competition with one another, expect on-scene correspondents to

overcome the problems and fighting men's objections to having copy transmitted over military circuits. Often, this leads to acrimonious confrontations between the on-scene reporter and the on-scene commander who controls the priority of outgoing messages. When more than one reporter is competing for use of limited communications facilities, the result is almost always bitter feelings. News media discontent joins enemy opposition in the problem matrix of the theater commander.

Even if the difficulties of transport and communications were overcome, the third factor needed to compose a battle news report—perspective and quotes from the mouths of battle participants—is both trying and burdensome for an on-scene commander to accommodate. Many military officers and enlisted men are uncomfortable in media encounters. They may be cool in combat but self-conscious in front of a microphone. The morale of men and the efficiency of battlefield operations is, in the view of many combat-tested veterans, impeded by the intrusion of reporters seeking interviews and broadcast worthy footage. Better, they think, that participants in the battle be left unhampered by outside distractions until the shooting subsides.

*The New York Times* editorial on Friday, 28 October 1983, decried the absence of newsmen during the initial phase of the Grenada campaign. It cited news coverage of several events during World War II as examples of courageous and responsible media reporting. Those examples took place several years after the commencement of hostilities, not during the critical first days of the action. In any event, WWII was a war in which press censorship was accepted and, in which, all elements of American society—including the news media—were involved in the preservation of America as a nation against the military might of the Axis powers. The editorial also implied that the presence of newsmen in Grenada would ensure objective, public scrutiny of administration actions.

While it is certain that the political process of the American system will ensure that the military actions ordered by the administration will be subjected to public debate, the American public might agree with the retired British reporter who stated that in times of crisis, "objectivity can come back in fashion when the shooting is over." The apparent national approval for the successful, and seemingly necessary security operation in Grenada, and the relatively small casualty figures for the operation, would seem to justify the policies adopted for the conduct of the campaign—including the initial exclusion of reporters.

Some journalism schools teach the definition of "news" as any event that has the element of conflict, catastrophe, controversy, or uniqueness. Everything else is "information" or human interest. US and foreign news organizations are highly competitive; company against company, editor against editor, reporter against reporter, anchorman against anchorman.

They want to ferret out the news of a conflict, i.e., about equipment that does

not work or about poorly led units. Everyone wants to be first; with the announcement of the impending or unfolding news event and with follow-up facts, analysis and interpretation. Correspondents in a "hot," combat environment are no different. Their reputations, and livelihoods, and the prestige of their parent organizations, are at stake.

Unfortunately, to prevail in this highly charged environment, the press corps must intrude into the execution of military operations to gain, most importantly, the time and attention of personnel whose mindset should be exclusively devoted to achievement of tactical objectives and preservation of human life. The on-scene commander must expect his superiors to provide him with a combat environment that is devoid of distractions that might interfere with the swift execution of operations and lead to casualties. A reporter can follow a battle, gather material for his story, and withdraw while the marine or soldier must stay. The latter's attention should be riveted to the battle and covering his buddies on his flanks—not to how he will appear on 40 million television sets back home.

Military operations, and the news coverage of combat, have changed since Matthew Brady took his primitive camera onto Civil War battlefields, or since Walter Cronkite covered World War II action in Europe as a notebook-toting reporter for the United Press. The arrival of a CBS minicam team, either alone or headed by a modern day electronic Walter Cronkite, during any US combat operation, cannot help but cause disruption to the ongoing operations; no matter how much the celebrity newsman may wish differently. Multiply that hypothetical scene by the hundreds of correspondents who assembled to cover the Grenada operation and one can imagine the leadership problems facing NCOs and company commanders. Combat marines should have tunnel vision—they should focus solely on swift, victorious termination of hostilities with minimum casualties. Until the shooting subsides, political leaders, not men under fire, should be the center of media attention.

Is federal legislation needed to regulate news media access to the initial phase of a US military operation? Can American lives be saved, and the legitimate rights of a free press be protected, by tougher laws governing the dissemination of classified, military information? Has the time come to rethink the roles and responsibilities of the military and the media, during combat, in the electronic age? The author's responses are *yes, yes, yes*.

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Captain Wentz, a former newspaperman, will soon leave the Naval War College to become a research scholar at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

