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A Perspectives of the Military and the Media

Carl J. Migdail

For the past 4 years the Naval War College has invited numerous representatives of the press and television to meet with the students in plenary sessions and in smaller informal groups. These frank and at times heated discussions have produced a greater awareness among the students of the role of the news media in a free society. As Mr. Migdail describes in some detail, it has also led to a greater understanding of the problems and feelings of the professional military officers.

A PERSPECTIVE OF THE MILITARY AND THE MEDIA

by

Carl J. Migdail

It should be apparent after these past 2 days that the characteristics of the media in our society are diversity and competition, not conformity. In our country, fortunately, there is no spokesman for the media. I, therefore, tonight speak only for myself as a member of the media. My comments and my conclusions are my own, drawn from my own experiences.

My personal reaction to the Military-Media Conferences is also useful, I believe, in providing a vantage point from which to comment on our discussions here, our respective roles in American society, our relationship to each other, and what I see ahead for our country.

When I attended last year's Military-Media Conference, it was an end for me of a period of almost 25 years without close contact with the military of my own country. The conference, therefore, was for me a revelation, a highly worthwhile learning experience. It enabled me to catch up, in a 2-day cram course, to what had happened to the military since 1950.

Even with only two Military-Media Conferences behind me, I note contrasts and changes in attitudes. This reflects the acceleration of movement throughout the world. Last year, when we met, the war in Vietnam was still on. Now the defeat is behind us.

In many respects, looking back over the years, I find that our two professions have moved on somewhat similar courses. We have both, obviously, matured with the years. We are both, as we should be, troubled about many things happening in our own country and abroad. Many of us, in the military and in the media, are groping for

answers to problems we see coming up in the future.

Individual officers I knew in the late 1940's at Command and General Staff College were as well educated as you are today. The difference now is that as a group you are far better educated academically than they were. You are concerned about, study, and question domestic and international decisions that either did not interest them or which they felt were outside their legitimate concern as professional military officers. They, however, felt totally secure in their vision of the future of the United States, at home and in the world.

In my own profession, in the period between then and now, there has also been a corresponding rise in education. The media is now made up, more and more, of highly trained specialists–in the law, government, medicine, economics, sociology, and foreign affairs. Simply reporting what has happened may now produce confusion instead of understanding. The media are now expected to provide a framework of historical, cultural, and political references to answer broader questions of meaning.

What has influenced both the military and the media, since the immediate post-World War II years, is an outgrowth not only of the increased standard of education of our people, generally, but also of the growing complexity of the world. For both professions, it is now far more difficult to carry out our missions.

The 1974 Military-Media Conference was held only a few months after the final, dramatic Watergate incident–the forced resignation of an American President.

We have, as a nation, been exceptionally fortunate. Our Constitution grants enormous power, specifically and by implication, to the Chief Executive. Some abuse is almost inevitable since the vast power of the White House is extremely difficult to restrain but, until Watergate, all Presidents had seen fit to deny themselves the full exercise of their authority. This time, however, a President covertly and systematically abused his authority, thereby jeopardizing our basic system of governmental checks and balances.

The media as a profession, I believe, despite flaws, rendered patriotic service to the Nation during Watergate. It helped alert the Nation to what was happening secretly within Government. It fulfilled its civic responsibility as an important element of our democratic society.

The behavior of the media during the period of Watergate seems a classic illustration of its watchdog function in our society. This is what Thomas Jefferson appears to have had in mind in a letter he wrote in 1787, "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I would not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter."

While the conduct of the media during Watergate merits an evaluation of "well done," it seems to me also to have been, professionally, a traumatic experience.

Watergate took the Nation and the media by surprise. As a profession, the Media was not prepared for it. We had for a long time before Watergate, I think, become too trusting, had given up part of our professional skepticism, and were not digging enough to find the truth behind public statements and official reports.

When Watergate was discovered all around us, many members of the media, it seems to me, were identifying themselves with their sources in Government, losing, as a result, the professional advantage of inquiry and healthy disbelief.

The trend now among the media to question and doubt to the point of abrasion is probably a reaction to a previous attitude of lowering professional vigilance.

When I walked into the first seminar at last year's conference, I was unprepared for what I heard since I had been away for so many years from a military atmosphere. After the first day of the conference, my reaction was that this was what the French officer corps must have sounded like after Dien Bien Phu.

With understandable, deep bitterness and anger, the feeling among the military at last year's conference was that they had been betrayed by their countrymen while they fought in Vietnam.

Not only had they not been supported properly by Americans back in the United States, but their will to fight had been undercut by antiwar movements back home. There was a conviction that the military were unjustly being made scapegoats for policy failures of civilian leaders.

There was sharp resentment at:

- being jeered at by other Americans for serving the country well in Vietnam,
- knowing they were regarded by some of their fellow countrymen as "murderers" for doing their duty,
- and at being neglected and forgotten by their fellow citizens who went about their daily business as if Vietnam did not exist.

One officer recalled his pained reaction when, after a tour in Vietnam, he reported for work in Washington during a period of antiwar demonstrations and was instructed not to wear his uniform.

What a massive contrast to my own memory of the behavior of the American people toward men in uniform during the V-E, V-J months of 1945! How clear were the reasons why the military last year felt alienated from their own people!

The sharpest accusations for guilt for having let them down in Vietnam were directed against the media. As the military saw it, the media had been instrumental in turning the American people against them by not telling the truth, by telling only part of the truth, and by distorting accounts of what they had seen with their own eyes. A special place on the list of offenders was reserved for television journalism. Discussions at last year's conference were heated.

Speaking only for myself, as a member of the media, I took the position that, from a military point of view, their deep-felt criticism was justified: without proper preparation, they had been sent to Vietnam to do the fighting in an undeclared, political war, under constraints imposed far away in Washington, with as they described it, one hand tied behind their backs.

But, they were overlooking other valid considerations.

While there are no excuses for inaccurate reporting, there can be honest differences of opinion about what is happening, especially during an unpopular war.

Not only did the conduct of the war divide our country, but there were also conflicting conclusions over whether the military strength of the United States should ever have been committed directly to combat in Vietnam. Never before have Americans been so disunited in war.

The media reflected the divisions of the American people. Some in the media saw the war one way; others, another way.

Vietnam, however, revealed a new professional problem for the media, which is still unresolved. Many members of the media are troubled by the role of television journalism. The uneasiness about television is not meant as criticism of the competency and professional dedication of its journalists.

But we are clearly confronted with a comparatively new, complex form of communication which, in addition to its highly desirable capability for informing, contains also an important element of showmanship and an unusual facility, in itself, for altering the course of the events covered.

I left the 1974 conference with respect for the good judgment of everybody who had arranged the polite but frank, at times aggressive and even hostile, exchange of viewpoints between our two professions. The organizers of the conference understood that for the well-being of our country, it was essential that resentments be brought out into the open, discussed, understood, and then placed in perspective. It could do us great harm as a nation if feelings of alienation from their countrymen by the military were carried over into the future.

Last spring I came back to the Naval War College to do part of the reporting for a story on the attitudes of the military toward their profession and the country after Vietnam. I was here during the distressing week of the fall of Saigon.

In the half year since the Military-Media Conference, major shifts had taken place in attitudes. Officers were no longer looking backward. They were thinking of and planning for the future. Attitudes were now far more balanced.

The feeling of having been betrayed by the American people had given way to a belief that the folks back home had also been lied to about the war. Blame was now focused at the civilian leadership for having gotten the United States into an unpopular war.

Last May, as the military thought about their country, they were concerned about a possible withdrawal from the world to a "Fortress America" policy and slashed military budgets in reaction to Vietnam and because of a sensation among Americans that détente with the Soviet Union had made the world a safer place. There was worry too about a deterioration at home in morality, values, and purpose as a nation.

With Vietnam behind them, the military were now wrestling with their own professional problem, of profound importance to the entire country.

Stated in its simplest terms, officers were analyzing at what point the Joint Chiefs should resign and go public when they are convinced the President is wrong and is disregarding their advice on a major military question. Involved were fundamental beliefs such as loyalty to the President and duty, ethics, and responsibility to the country and the armed services.

Fully accepted, without modification, were the traditional principles of military subordination to civilian policy-making and the separation of the military from the active political life of the country. But there was a pressing desire to make the military voice heard and listened to more carefully on relevant matters of national security.

There was a ready awareness of the delicacy of the distinctions that were being made. The essence of loyalty was defined for me as never allowing a superior, through lack of one's own effort, to make a mistake. In a questionable situation, the responsibility of the military was defined as convincing the civilian superior that he is wrong.

But what if the civilian policymaker persisted in what his military advisers were certain were wrong decisions and the military consequences for the Nation were serious?

Then, I was told, "You have to disassociate yourself. You have to leave. You have to stand up and be counted."

This professional problem cuts right to the core of the status of the military in our society. It bears on the basic role of the military as both professional and citizen.

In an increasingly complex world, especially after a long, undeclared war, it is clearly necessary for the military to evaluate for themselves concepts of loyalty and ethics—and what action should be taken when they no longer overlap. The implications of this very personal as well as professional evaluation are far-reaching for all of us, civilians as well as military.

It is a professional problem that cannot be resolved by simple, easy answers. It may turn out now to be a permanent dilemma for the military, rising and falling in importance with different situations.

Now, another half year later, at this conference, consideration of questions of loyalty and ethics are no longer an uppermost priority in the minds of the military. The need to have immediate answers to the potential dilemma of a conflict between loyalty and ethics has fallen since Vietnam is no longer a daily reminder of the problem.

The strident tone of, at times, confrontation of last year's Military-Media Conference has given way to frank discussions these past 2 days of what's ahead for our country and for us as members of either the military or the media.

There is even more intensive interest now, compared with last May, in the meaning of détente and its impact upon the capability of the military to fulfill their mission of national security. There is also an evident desire among the military to find out more about the media—how do we operate, how do we make our decisions, and what is our true effect upon the Nation?

With Watergate now history—and the fact reemphasized for all Americans that even the President is subject to regulation by the law—accusations are being made of arrogance of power by the media. Sharp, profound questions are being asked, here and elsewhere, about the role of the media in our society.

Who regulates the media? Who elected the media to become guardians of our society? What happens when the media commit abuses?

Here are my answers to these questions.

The media have watchdog, or gadfly, responsibility because that is the way the role of the press grew in our society—and the system, on balance, works very well.

Editors, competition, the reactions of the reading, listening, and viewing public all regulate the media, but basic control over the conduct of the media comes from the sense of public service that most of its members, in one way or another and very personally, develop about their work. There is an implied dedication to civic mission in a media job that is unrelated to salary and work description.

Obviously, there are offenders, and a number are found in important positions. But experience has shown that the media, as a profession, is increasingly more competent, more conscious of its responsibilities, and is subject to its own process of self-regulation. Attempts to regulate the behavior of the media through legal restrictions, as a way of correcting abuses, are certain to cause far more harm than good to a traditional process of relatively free interaction in our society.

Former Senator J. William Fulbright, in a recently published article, wrote the following about the conduct of the press after Watergate: "I commend to the press, in conclusion, a renewed awareness of its great power and commensurate responsibility—a responsibility which is all the greater for the fact that there is no one to restrain the press, except the press itself, nor should there be."

This is a viewpoint I share.

The complex relationship that exists between the media and the rest of our society is paralleled by the relationship between the military and the rest of society. The normal byproducts of the exchange, for both media and military, are tension, criticism, and periodic frustration.

Even without Vietnam, the military are certain regularly to be unhappy and concerned about the conduct of our national security. The reasons for this anxiety are also built into our system.

The military are the institution directly responsible for national

security, but in the determination of policies and budgets--even when the military viewpoint is given all the weight it merits--other opinions are, and should be, taken into consideration. Final decisions are made by civilians.

The decisionmaking system, essential to a democracy, always makes heavy demands upon the military but, correctly, denies them the power to decide national policy on solely military analysis.

Without the strain of Vietnam, relations between the military and the media are improving, but it is naive to think an end has come to our role as adversaries.

Our missions at times differ. What honestly may appear to the military as information that should be withheld for reasons of security may, equally as honestly, appear to the media as information which the American people have every right to know.

This tug-of-war element to our relationship is a normal, healthy part of our way of life. We come from the same society. We are equally as patriotic, but sometimes our missions may lead us to differing conclusions on how best to serve our country.

However, as long as we remember that we belong together, to the same free society, and continue to have the opportunity to talk things over as we have these past 2 days, our differences should be the basis of mutual respect which our country will need as it confronts new problems in a world now in an advanced stage of transition.

Changes, many of them inevitable, now come at home and in the world at an ever faster rate. One set of problems solved now, far more quickly than ever before, gives way to another group of problems that must be faced.

Another Watergate or Vietnam is highly unlikely. The Congress is now on guard against abuse of internal power and potential drifts into undeclared wars by the Executive.

But now the outcry is against a pendulum of power that has swung away from the White House to lodge in the Congress. Criticism is heard that the Congress is too deeply involved in the conduct of foreign policy which, as a legislative body, it is unable to do competently. The Congress is also accused of overzealous behavior which results in the hobbling of operations of Government departments and of excessive investigations into past activities of intelligence agencies which compromise their activities.

Now we wait for the system of checks and balances to adjust the congressional and executive branches of our Government to a more rational equilibrium.

Predictions last May of disaster for U.S. foreign policy as the Governments of South Vietnam and Cambodia were routed, were not justified. The credibility of the United States in foreign affairs survived the defeat in Southeast Asia without noticeable damage.

The Soviet Union never deluded itself into believing that U.S. military power had eroded because of the withdrawal in Southeast Asia. The leaders of Communist China may be uneasy, in terms of their own security, about a U.S. policy of détente they consider appeasement of Moscow, but they are not likely to fool themselves into really judging the United States, militarily, as a paper tiger.

With the United States out of the way, now committed militarily, on the ground, in only a few places in Asia, Communist China and the Communist Soviet Union compete openly against each other throughout Southeast Asia and the subcontinent. In the Middle East, the United States has improved its positions while the Russians have suffered losses.

It can be argued that the United States now finds itself in a better position in the world than when it was fighting an unpopular war in Vietnam.

But not everything, however, is going our way. There is no basis for complacency.

Recognition recently by the United States of the permanence in the Western Hemisphere of Communist Cuba is the acceptance by Washington of a major penetration of American military, political, and economic interests by an ally of the Soviet Union. Both the Monroe Doctrine and the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance have already been seriously weakened. Other negative consequences are certain to come.

In the Middle East, United States gains at Soviet expense are by no means secure. Around the perimeter of the Mediterranean–in Turkey, Cyprus, and Greece–there have been setbacks for the United States. Portugal has moved leftward, Spain is likely to follow, although probably at a slower pace; and what happens in the Iberian Peninsula will, eventually, also influence events in Italy and France. The outcome, in terms of the interests of the United States, may remain in doubt a long time.

Strategic arms negotiations, the touchstone of détente with the Soviet Union, now appear deadlocked, and reports indicate that, with a change of leadership approaching in Moscow, the Soviet military are hardening their attitude.

At home, different assessments are heard about the future of détente and, therefore, the size and compositon of defense budgets.

Much of the world depends on American food for year-to-year survival, but our own requirements for oil imports continue to grow when, in our vital interests, we should be decreasing our dependence on foreign suppliers.

The underdeveloped countries, the self-styled nonaligned nations, the so-called "Third World" consider us the chief cause of their poverty and backwardness. They insist upon their version of a new international order which would redress the balance between the "haves" and the "have-nots" of the world.

Our policymakers have not as yet succeeded in either neutralizing their anti-American behavior, winning members of their coalitions over to our side, or identifying their hopes with our own national goals.

What is sorely needed now by us, as Americans and for much of the rest of the world that still looks to the United States for guidance, is unusually gifted, perceptive, and daring leadership that extends far beyond capable daily problem-solving. We now need broad, conceptual–even visionary–leadership to foresee where we, and the rest of the world, should be by the year 2,000 and then take the specific steps to get us there, still as citizens of a free and prosperous society.

There is no doubt whatsoever in my mind that in this age of increasingly varied, national political systems, the issue of human rights, individual liberty, will become a dominant international theme. Contentions that the issue of human rights does not fit properly into the framework of international relations lose their little remaining validity in a

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

Carl J. Migdail is a graduate of the City College of New York. He holds an advanced degree in journalism from Columbia University, and he has studied international relations as a doctoral candidate at both the National University of Mexico and George Washington University. During World War II he served as an infantry officer with the 41st Division in the Southwest Pacific. After recovering from wounds, he was assigned to the Army News Service, Armed Forces Press Service, and the Command and General Staff College. He was retired for combat disability in 1950. He has covered Central America, Venezuela, and the Caribbean. He is now a writer on military and world affairs.

highly interdependent world, knit ever tighter together by instantaneous global communications.

The Soviet dissidents—Solzhenitsyn, Sakharov, and Amalrik—warn us, correctly, that détente can bring us a safer world only if there is respect for the rights of human beings in the Soviet Union and elsewhere. The implications are not crusades, interventions, or future wars for human rights but clear, firm goals and active, consistent policies for ourselves as Americans, in our negotiations with other nations and in international forums, based on the conviction that governments exist to serve people not to repress them.

When the United States builds its policies upon the principle of human rights, it builds upon its own native strength. The new international order that is now evolving will be an improvement over the old order only if it is based upon the principle of individual liberty that made the founding of the United States a step forward in history.

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