

1949

The Armed Forces and Public Information in War and Peace

Erwin D. Canham

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

Recommended Citation

Canham, Erwin D. (1949) "The Armed Forces and Public Information in War and Peace," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 2 : No. 3 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol2/iss3/3>

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.

RESTRICTED

THE ARMED FORCES AND PUBLIC INFORMATION IN WAR AND PEACE

A lecture delivered by
Mr. Erwin D. Canham
at the Naval War College
May 6, 1948

It isn't really necessary to take much time to seek to prove the importance of public information and a sound public information program. I don't know that we Americans have learned the significance of public information as quickly or perhaps even as completely as some of our enemies. A good deal has come to light in the last decade about public information and its uses—a good deal that is revealing and very important. As an illustration, the diary of the notorious Dr. Goebbels, which has quite recently been published, is filled with revealing tips as to the power of propaganda.

I shall seek throughout everything I have to say to make clear and to emphasize the great and profound difference between a public relations program in a democracy and one in a dictatorship. In a democracy one responds to the right of the people to know certain things, and the attitude is one of opportunity between the official and the public—while in a dictatorship public information is used as an unscrupulous and ruthless tool of thought control. The fact that public information can be used as an extremely powerful weapon of thought control indicates that it is a subject which can no longer be safely ignored. Since dictatorships have always recognized and used public information as a frankly confessed weapon it behooves us to think it out more carefully and see

Mr. Canham is Editor of the "Christian Science Monitor," and Vice President of the American Society of Newspaper Editors.

RESTRICTED

wherein a sound program of public relations is an important asset and a valuable instrument in attaining definite objectives.

I mentioned Dr. Goebbels and his diary. Dr. Goebbels has an extreme sensitiveness to words. For example, shortly after Hitler came to power in Germany Dr. Goebbels saw to it that the word "assassination" never appeared in the German press. So finely drawn was this concept of propaganda and of thought control that Dr. Goebbels, as one of the great experts in the field, decided that the mere publication of the word "assassination" was contrary to the Nazi interest.

Perhaps the greatest illustration of the use of public information as a powerful weapon is the illustration of the Soviet Union today. It is quite obvious that the Russians are afraid of information; they are afraid of any ideas, any set of facts which may, to any degree, challenge their approved doctrine. The Iron Curtain around the Soviet Union is the result and it grows higher and higher with every passing week. The fear-inspired efforts to plug every possible loop-hole in that barrier get more intensive with every passing week.

I recently spent a month in Geneva in rather arduous negotiations with the Soviet Union and it was perfectly obvious to me that some of the best talent and most profound study in the Soviet Union is being devoted to the problem of thought control in the effort to isolate and insulate the Soviet Union from any sort of infiltration of ideas from the outside world. You probably know that right now a purge is going on in Moscow—a purge of all individuals who have had any contact whatsoever with the West. One by one, individuals who have had some contact with the West are being removed from positions of responsibility. They are being sent somewhere east of the Urals or to the salt mines or some such place where even their slight contact

with the West will not contaminate the remainder of the population with ideas which may be alien and somewhat challenging to the approved doctrine. That purge is going on. Our correspondent reports to us of the steady progress of this effort to weed out everybody who has been in contact with the West.

You may remember that at one time the Red Army took over a rest hotel in Karlsbad where general officers were permitted to go and enjoy the waters. It was decided some months ago that Karlsbad was too dangerous, too far west, for even a general officer to sojourn and so the rest hotel at Karlsbad was closed. This is just a further indication of the recognition which is being given to the field of public information. It should awaken us more fully than ever before to the importance of understanding the potentialities in this field.

This is not a field which Americans take to with any degree of satisfaction or ease. I doubt very much if many men in this room would greatly relish plunging into the task of handling publicity. I could be wrong, but it is my feeling that we are instinctively repelled by the effort to try to control people's thinking.

My major thesis is that we do not have to get into the position and the attitude of Dr. Goebbels or of any other totalitarian manipulator of public thinking; that there is a different basis, a different formula, and a different concept and relationship which can be worked out in a representative government which can be maintained and carried through with complete dignity, propriety and self respect; that this can be carried through in an atmosphere in which we are never seeking to soften up the other man's thinking or his right to think, but in which we are responsive to his need to know the largest possible area of fact, truth, and sound doctrine.

This is of course an age of publicity, not only in the totali-

RESTRICTED

tarian states but in our own. It is a brash new world of publicity and we have to find out how to live in it. We might as well conclude that the newspaper, the radio and the P. R. O., like the automobile, are here to stay. Instead of kicking against any irksome and irritating attributes of this weapon, we should learn better how to use it. I assure you that this is a study that will pay dividends as many have already discovered.

I should like to make it clear, near the outset, that newspaper men, people on our side of the fence so to speak, have a very great deal to learn. We have to accept new obligations of responsibility in these very troublesome days. There is (and every candid newspaper man will recognize it) far too much irresponsibility on the side of the press. We work for the most part under a considerable handicap, a handicap that goes all the way back to events which took place in the Garden of Eden. The human mind is more interested in conflict, in disaster, in sensation, and in scandal, than in constructive, sound, forward-looking and sometimes unexciting developments.

For the most part, publicity is built upon conflict and sensation and for this reason newspapers are more or less in a constant battle with their better selves. They are aware of the ways in which it is possible to cater to this human desire for sensation and scandal, conflict and disaster. At the same time every newspaper editor knows that he has a responsibility to the people—the responsibility to try to tell the truth. The acceptance of this responsibility and the setting of higher standards, I think, has made some progress within the American press. However the fact remains that in conducting public relations activities one must deal with an activity in which there is a premium on conflict, revelation of secrets, trash, scandal, and sensation. It is important to help newspapers rise above these imperatives which tend to drag them down. It is important to help newspapers

carry through the responsibility which they owe to the public, to the nation, to the well-being of all.

It is also true in many respects and with few exceptions that newspapers and radios live in abysmal ignorance of the Armed Forces. This means that the public is almost equally in such abysmal ignorance.

Ignorance is a constant danger; ignorance is the weapon of totalitarianism. Iron Curtains are always a greater danger to the power seeking to hide behind them than they are to anyone else. I believe Iron Curtains more often hide weakness than strength. Perhaps some of you can confirm this statement from personal observation.

About a little over a year ago when I was in Japan, I was taken by Capt. Decker down to Yokosuka to visit the former Japanese naval base there. Captain Decker and other officers made it very clear to me that the tremendous wall of secrecy which the Japanese built about that particular spot hid weakness rather than strength and that the stories which we had heard during the thirties of vast dreadnaughts and of other great developments being worked out in the Japanese shipyards were, to a large extent, myths which had been able to come into being, spawn and flourish behind walls of ignorance. Therefore, obviously, these Iron Curtains of ignorance are in a sense a greater danger to the person who is seeking to erect and maintain them than they are to the rest of us.

Of course it is necessary sometimes, in an emergency, to hide weakness. Everybody recognizes the necessity for the right forms of censorship in wartime and for the concealment of military secrets in peacetime. There is a tendency for censorship to become habit forming and for information which could break

RESTRICTED

down public ignorance to be held up long after the need for secrecy. There have been violations, gross and grave violations, of what should have been a patriotic obligation not to print. I think those violations will be fewer and the right relationship will be maintained if every responsible officer in the armed services is prepared to weigh the legitimate need for secrecy against the legitimate need of the public to know. More often than not, ignorance is the greatest danger of all. Public participation, public partnership, is a great good in itself which must be achieved in the largest possible degree.

The armed services are part of the public services of the nation which means that an officer in the armed services is a public servant and like other public servants he must accept as a part of his public obligation the duty of giving an account of himself to the public. This is done through proper channels, in a proper way and through such media of ultimate expression as the press, the radio and so on. The more accurately and the more fully the public understands the goal and the performance of the armed services, the more whole heartedly will the public support those services. Particularly in these precarious times, it is desperately important for the public to understand the precise role of the armed services. All this means that today, more than ever before in peacetime, it is necessary for the armed services to study the *duty*, the *opportunity* and the *technique* of public relations.

More than once during the recent war, several of these three qualities were not adequately recognized. We did see an enormous expansion of technique during the war. Public relations officers blossomed everywhere but their mere existence is far from enough. Some of the worst crimes against public information, some of the greatest damage to the armed services themselves and to individual officers was done by public relations officers who

misunderstood and misapplied their energies. Conversely, some of the best public information work was done not by public relations officers but by professional officers who had grasped the duty and opportunity of a public relations program.

We have come a very long way from the exasperated officer, early in the last war, who once declared at a Washington cocktail party, speaking of war correspondents, "I wouldn't tell them anything until the war was over and then I'd tell them who won." This is a natural enough feeling and one can sympathize with it, particularly if one has known some war correspondents. Nevertheless strength comes from the people and the ultimate strength of the Armed Services will rest upon the degree of public support. Public relations technique can be stymied if there is not a recognition, from the top on down, of the duty of keeping the public informed. I wish to quote an eloquent paragraph recognizing this duty and put into excellent words by Lt. General Collins, now Deputy Chief of Staff. This paragraph says what I think we all agree on; forgive me if it is covered in terms of the Army:

"Responsibility of the Army is to make sure that the public has real information on which to base sound evaluation of it's Army. The Army has nothing to hide and nothing to fear if it recognizes the public as a partner, as well as a boss; if it ignores the captious critic and assumes that public confidence is there for the making. But it cannot expect that confidence unless it is deserved. The individual soldier, commissioned and enlisted, is responsible for seeing that it is deserved. It is the responsibility of the Commander to see to it that his officers and men conduct themselves in the manner that will win the public esteem and that the military establishment has the high professional standards expected of it by the public. It is the job of the public relations officer to assist the Commander in cementing this partnership with the

RESTRICTED

public by providing accurate, full, and unbiased information and by interpreting the profession of arms to a nation which is eager to be proud of its armed services.”

That is the basic relationship which needs to be understood and carried out.

I had personal contact with a good deal of public relations work in the last war and it is my impression that the very best public relations work was done at the top. I had the opportunity during the war of sitting in on informal conferences with Admiral King and General Marshall. Both of these men did a superb job of discussing with our group (which was representative of the nation's editors) the state of affairs, the problems which arose, difficulties and so on. To my knowledge there was no instance of any violation of their confidence.

The best public relations work can be done at the top and the tone can be set which will permeate the entire service. If it is continuously recognized that the greatest possible achievement is to get close to the people, then the public relations program will be on a sound basis. I don't know whether it is worthwhile to go into any post-mortems of some of the public relations work of the last war. In preparation for this talk I asked half a dozen of the members of our staff who were themselves either public relations officers, several of them in the Navy, or who were war correspondents, to give me memoranda analyzing the problem as they had seen it in action during the second World War. They gave me some very hard-hitting and candid answers.

They support the point that I have been making, that the main thing is to get underneath the psychology which would naturally prefer to fight a war in private. Secrecy is an important part of war. You deal properly here, day in and day out, with classified documents and information, confidential and secret material. In the nature of things you may be more ac-

customed and more indoctrinated with concealing than with revealing. That point of view, which is entirely proper and sound, has to be reconsidered in relationship to the problem of public information. You are trained to think accurately, precisely and scientifically. The average newspaper writer is not necessarily trained to think in quite that same way. He is trained to interest the public. Hence there is not a natural meeting of minds between men trained as you are and men who are trained as newspaper men. That gulf has to be bridged. It can be bridged if it is realized that along side this duty of secrecy, which should never be breached, is the positive advantage of letting the public know everything that it can know safely. The advantage of an informed public has to be weighed against the precaution taken by not giving out information. It is a little bit like the relationship of sins of commission and omission. There is a natural inhibition against letting information out unless there is some positive reason for it or unless the information is perfectly innocuous. That attitude must be studied and re-examined in the light of the importance of an informed public.

There was a revolution in public relations during the last war. Our men who were both public relations officers and war correspondents agree that in late '44 and '45 the expansion of public relations in the Pacific was on the whole a very healthy and important decision. The gratitude of the press to the men who were responsible for that expansion and revolution in policy is great. It was, however, an uphill job.

I want to outline the elements of a constructive public relations program. First, establish a general concept, from the Naval Academy on up, that it is important for the public to understand that information is a precious asset to be used constructively and advantageously. It is important to have the at-

RESTRICTED

titude, not of constant desire to hold everything back, but of responsiveness to the opportunity of public relations which produces an instinctively right public relations program. We have to get back to fundamental thinking in a responsible government and to realize that the support of the public is, as I have said so often, the most precious and valuable asset that can be had.

The second element is to establish clearly the distinction between information and propaganda. I think one of the worst curses which ran through our public relations program, particularly during the war, was a sort of shame-faced feeling on the part of responsible officers that they were really being called upon to become propagandists and they didn't like being propagandists. This instinctive American abhorrence for propaganda, and an out-and-out dislike for the word is sound and right. No one should be called upon to become a propagandist and no one engaged in public relations work should shoulder the inferiority complex of thinking that he is a propagandist. There doesn't have to be any propaganda to it. The problem is simply one of an open channel of information between the services and the people. I think the curse, the feeling that one is a propagandist, came into being especially when adverse and disagreeable news had to be handled. That need not be the case at all. Responsiveness is the keynote. A relationship, a bond, a link, a channel, between the services and the public is the keynote. *Responsibility*, not promotion or propaganda is the basic word.

Don't worry too much about adverse publicity on stories which are technically incorrect or seem to be undesirable. It wouldn't do much harm if officers who are forced in this maelstrom of public relations could get some of the psychological attitude of the politician. The successful politician, as you all know, has a hide as thick as an elephant and only starts worrying when

he doesn't get into the headlines. An adverse headline is regarded as just as much of an asset as a favorable headline. The important thing is that the politician has to be talked about, to be in the news—not forgotten. You remember the advertising campaign which went on for a good many years warning people of the horrors of pink tooth-brush. The campaign was finally abandoned partly because so many people kept going into drug stores and asking to buy a pink toothbrush.

This really proves the point that confused public concepts do build up but in spite of this it is important to have the public aware of the Navy and of its basic problems. The public will not always be as wrong as the pink toothbrush people were. I have, and I think probably you all have, a rather profound belief in the fact that public opinion balances up; that while any number of individuals may be wrong, there is a certain fundamental rightness in the general will and in the general direction of the popular opinion when at least a minimum of information gets to the people. So I say it is important not to be too sensitive, too meticulous, or too fussy about the things one gets into in this public relations business, but emulate the hard-boiled old politicians. I have never heard Mayor Curley of Boston complain although nine-tenths of his publicity in the last 25 years has been seemingly adverse. The old scoundrel knows that any publicity has a certain value. This is a pretty cynical view I know, gentlemen, but you are up against a profession which has to deal with popularization.

It is necessary to study the techniques of public relations and to be in touch with experts in the profession as the situation requires. There is a wide diversity of opinion as to the techniques of public relations. It is not a scientific profession with everything worked out on a slide rule basis but at the same time there are experts. Newspaper men are not, by any means, always

RESTRICTED

the best experts in the field; there is a difference between the role of the reporter and the role of the public relations officer. One of the most successful public relations officers in the service of the American government, Mike McDermott, of the State Department, has been at the business for over a quarter century. He was never a newspaper man. As a matter of fact, Mike started out as a stenographer and began to absorb, by some kind of osmosis, the necessary relationship between the press and the government service.

As I said, many other newspaper reporters who have tried to do the same thing have failed because of the difference between the public relations relationship and the reporter's relationship with the press. However, there is a technique and it is being studied and developed to a degree. Progress is being made in reducing this to terms which may be studied and comprehended by people coming in from the outside.

But this technique is tremendously subordinate to attitudes. One basic attitude is the value of maintaining contacts, of getting close to newspaper men and keeping close to them. I emphasize that it is valuable to maintain this contact at the highest level possible and to add plenty of follow-through at lower levels. If you do have contact with the newspaper men, friendships and relationships, social and informal contacts, then I think you will begin to understand more clearly the viewpoint of the newspaper man. You will understand that his job is the task of popularizing things, of getting into people's thinking, and you may soften up some of your quite natural indignation at the over-simplification of problems. It is a very difficult thing to convert a technical subject to terms the public can readily understand. There are bound to be errors, lack of precise and explicit qualifying remarks, in every popularized account but it is a problem we cannot get around and have to

accept. A lot of this publicity will be repulsive to the expert but, nevertheless, it does serve a useful purpose in getting through to public thinking.

I strongly recommend the habit of press conferences whenever there is any need and opportunity. It is even possible to come to enjoy press conferences after a certain amount of experience with them.

I have already referred to the importance of understanding the viewpoint of newspapers. Newspapers cannot escape the obligation of popularizing material, the duty of holding public interest. This need for popularizing is terribly overdone and abused but we are dealing with the people who will decide the pattern of national defense in the United States. We must inform and educate them. We cannot ignore them; we cannot permit them to remain in the shadow of ignorance which has frequently surrounded them. This goes pretty deep. The difference between ourselves and our enemies in this world is probably best defined as the difference between a nation which respects the individual as the most important element and value within the nation and one which declares the individual to be valueless and the state to be all important and all powerful.

The only way totalitarian states can maintain their hold on the people, can make their force actually operative, is to control, to destroy the independent thinking of their people. By allowing public expression there is bound to be conflict and diversity of thinking. This was the primary issue at our conference on Freedom of Information at Geneva. The great cleavage between the Eastern Bloc and ourselves was this: they believe in one single set of ideas, imposed by force, which is infiltrated into the people's thinking by artful devices, subtle techniques and ruthless repressions—in short, by complete thought control; while to us

RESTRICTED

strength comes from diversity and a belief that all progress comes from the conflict of ideas.

This basic principle of diversity, of conflict, of growth through the stress or strain of ideas meeting in healthy conflict, we believe will produce strength. I think that by taking a long historic viewpoint the germs of weakness contained within the totalitarian system are those which have wiped out genuine self-criticism; whereas with us, self-criticism and conflict of ideas produce a healthy organism which goes forward, revises its ideas, improves its ideas, and carries them ahead.

The relationship of that principle with the press is this: You will encounter a diversity in publications and a diversity of treatments in the press. It will be apparent that the viewpoint and technique of one newspaper will be very different from another, but if you appreciate that the vagaries, the irresponsibilities, the over-simplifications of the press go back to the idea of free and diverse opinions, you will be more tolerant and will see that any effort to generalize or to standardize the press will be a technique pointed in the totalitarian direction and would lead us away from our greatest source of strength which is our cantankerousness and our unwillingness to accept standardized concepts. I am deeply confident that techniques of study and of working out problems here, as in every other well conducted American institution, will be based on constant reexamination of ideas. That is part and parcel of our public information system.

Freedom of the American press depends upon diversity. Your relationship to the press will depend upon the recognition of its importance to the public and of its value to you. There is no chance of a meeting of minds between the East and the West on so fundamental a matter of principle as this matter of public information, but we in the West must not be victims to totalitar-

ian thinking to such an extent that we will deny the people the diversity of information which will enable them to go forward, which will enable them constantly to reexamine, to criticize and to grow strong through self-examination and self-criticism.

In two wars, the two greatest and most tragic wars of history, the United States Navy was headed by newspaper publishers—Secretary Daniels and Secretary Knox. After the First World War the Navy became involved in the most extensive disarmament program in our national experience. After the Second World War the Navy ran into an economy wave which had for a time very grave consequences. These two experiences would seem to indicate that there is still a very large unsolved problem about the public's information concerning its armed services despite enormous efforts and real progress. It is fair to conclude that that problem has not yet been adequately solved. I repeat, take seriously the opportunity of getting closer to the public through the media of public information. I believe that every officer should be conscious of the significance of this task, not as an onerous chore, not as an undignified and unworthy type of dissemination of propaganda, but rather as an enormous opportunity to be responsive to the need and the right of people to know everything which will not be a positive danger.

Now as I said before, I think you have to work primarily against a viewpoint which rightly and almost instinctively holds that it is safer not to talk too much. One has to be aware and conscious at all times that along side of this important obligation must go the requirement to do a better job of breaking down the barriers of ignorance by giving the American people more information with which to grow through conflict and diversity, criticism and reexamination; to grow into an appreciation of the world responsibilities which have become ours. This relationship of pub-

RESTRICTED

lic information to the future of peace or war in the world is simple to understand. It is simple but the people of the United States must understand the importance of a strong national defense of arms adequate to maintain our duty and obligation in this storm-tossed world. Unless the American people do adequately understand these necessities the dangers of war are doubled and trebled. If the American people do understand the necessity of strength at this time, if instead of some vague and ignorant concept based largely on fear they understand that our rearmament program of today is not a war program but a peace program, then, indeed, there is a possibility of maintaining peace in the world.

At Geneva in our small way we ran the gamut of relationships with the Eastern Bloc. American diplomacy since the war has not been very shrewd or successful in its relationship with the Eastern Bloc but certain fundamentals had managed to seep through. As we prepared our tactics for the Geneva conference we decided that the basic thing was to take a very strong, almost a provocative, position at the outset, to maintain it throughout and to get the jump on every single point where we could get our proposals, our ideas and our policies in first. The chief American delegate at the opening session of that conference made an extremely strong and provocative speech which completely changed the tone of the conference. The Russians immediately turned conciliatory, placating and appeasing. They sought to weedle around the middle group nations to support an appeasing attitude. Every time we came in strong the air cleared, and the Eastern delegates had to appeal for some form of conciliation, some form of compromise. We maintained to the end a refusal to compromise, saying it was impossible to compromise in a field of basic principles.

Now that teaches us a lesson that the American people ought to understand. The American people are being appealed to today by various individuals who know that the American people

want peace. It is perfectly obvious that the American people want peace but not at any price. We want to insure peace but our experience at Geneva proved to us again that the way to insure peace is through strength, vigor and capacity; to lay down a position and to maintain it.

The American people have not altogether understood that. To the American people a rearmament program sometimes seems a war-like program. I believe that the undeviating informational line of the armed services should be: that our rearmament program is a peace program, not a war program; that it is the only basis on which we can hope, at this stage of human and world experience, to insure peace; that the sacrifice and expenditures which the American people are being called upon to make are not expenditures in the interests of war but rather expenditures in the interests of preserving the peace and that the program of appeasement which Mr. Henry Wallace, for example, is presenting to the American people and to which he is getting a response, is due to the basic craving of the American people to avoid a Third World War, a craving which is perfectly sound and right but based upon ignorance.

The whole problem of peace comes down to this problem of dispelling fears by letting the American public see that the necessity for supporting a rearmament program is not because we are afraid of the Russians or of anyone else, but because it is the way to achieve peace at this time. Public interest on this subject will not be dispelled through silence but will be dispelled through a responsive attitude toward the need of the public to know everything that it possibly can. If any chances are taken they must be taken on the side of knowledge rather than on the side of ignorance.

RESTRICTED

I believe that this opportunity can be seized and that we do have a chance to achieve a stable world. It is a necessity to carry through this kind of information program if the armed forces are to preserve their rightful place as pillars in the temple of peace.