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WAR IN THE AGE OF INFORMATION: THE MILITARY AND THE MEDIA

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Operations Department.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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This paper examines the ability of the military to conduct war in the age of information. It begins with an examination of how the media has changed the environment of the modern battlefield and the critical importance of the operational commander's understanding the implications of this change. This paper will argue that the future commander must possess two fundamental skills. First, he must possess the necessary skill as a war fighter to achieve a military victory on the battlefield. Second and equally important, he must be a communicator. Everything a manager does -- from motivating and influencing others, to controlling and modifying their behavior -- revolves around communications. He must possess an appreciation of the political foundation of war, the various audiences that constitute that political foundation, and the importance of very carefully presenting our case to these various audiences. The focus of this paper will be on the role of the media as a new driver in modern warfare, how it has changed the nature of warfare, and how it has further blurred the distinction between combatant and noncombatant. Military actions in Grenada and Panama demonstrated that otherwise successful operations are not considered total successes unless the media aspects are properly handled, an area generally given relatively little attention compared to other war fighting skills.

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Introduction

The essence of war is change,
and adaption to change.
Von Moltke

The Problem: During the last twenty years, modern warfare has experienced many revolutions (mobility, firepower, air, underwater, and space) in which the operational commander is well versed and capable of exploiting to his full advantage. Technology in many cases has been a liberator.

In other cases it has vastly increased the complexity of the modern battlefield in a way difficult for the operational commander to fully comprehend. In one area in particular -- the media revolution -- the operational commander in most cases is less prepared and less at ease in understanding the full impact of the media on war. The media has changed the battlefield in two dramatic ways. First, it has changed the environment of the battlefield and second, it has changed the rules of the game -- the way we conduct war in an open society. The astute commander must understand both the new environment and the new rules of the game. Simply put, he must adapt to these new changes or be consumed by them.

Chapter II

The Changing Environment: On the Home Front

The Power of the Press. Historically, when one thinks of the national security process, the three principle actors identified are: the President, the Congress, and the military. This three part partnership saw the addition of a new member -- the media -- in the early 1970s. By 1974, Vietnam had shattered public trust of the Presidency in foreign affairs, Watergate in domestic affairs. Watergate shook the established power structure of the American political system. Congress vigorously asserted its new found authority. The media (press and television) in the mean time, having played a dominate role in the coverage of both Vietnam and Watergate, became in its own right, a legitimate actor in this national security process.

In this new environment, policy decisions that were once debated in secrecy within a small inner circle of government officials are now debated in a more open forum by a much wider audience. The press, especially The New York Times and The Washington Post, serves as both a sounding board for new policies decisions and a bulletin board where government officials keep track of interna¹ battles by following leaks to the press.¹ Television is the other major ingredient of the new power mix.

¹ Hendrick Smith, The Power Game: How Washington Works. (New York: Random House, 1988), p. 81.

Recent polls indicate 70 percent of all Americans receive all their news from television (some even suggesting as high as 90 percent).²

Those that control the flow of information are among the most powerful persons in the nation. The claim often made by the media that they are merely a mirror is nonsense. A mirror makes no choices about what images it reflects, but television and press executives have the power to create some national issues and ignore others. The power of the media derives from the ability to "set the agenda." Conditions in society that are not defined as "crisis," or even "problems," by the mass media never become policy issues. They do not get on the agenda of political leaders.³

If one doubts the role of the media as an active participant in the national security process, consider the distribution of one of Washington's best-read and most influential newspapers, the Current News or "Early Bird." Besides daily distribution to Pentagon, copies are farmed out to the White House, State Department, Central Intelligence Agency, civilian secretaries of the Army, Navy, and Air Force, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Hendrick Smith, in his book The Power Game: How Washington Works, provides a brief description of the daily distribution of this well read paper:

² Stephen Aubin and Melanie Biks, "Television News Reporting: Journalism No Longer Matters," Defense Media Review, 31 December 1989.

³ Thomas R. Dye and L. Harmon Zeigler, The Irony of Democracy: An Uncommon Introduction to American Politics. (Monterey, CA: Duxbury Press, 1981), p. 173.

Before noon, a full print-run of six thousand copies is dispatched, five hundred to key congressional committees, seventy to the senior White House staff, sixty to the State Department, eighty for the Defense Intelligence Agency, fifty for the National Security Agency, thousands for the military hierarchy and scores more for the reporters who cover the Pentagon. The Early Bird is also transmitted around the world by Wirephoto daily to fourteen American military-theater commanders. It gets into the bloodstream of the national security community.⁴

The Early Bird's ability to set the agenda is a powerful influence within the Department of Defense. According to one close aide of Casper Weinberger during his tenure as Secretary of Defense, "Weinberger tends to manage the department by reading the Early Bird and asking his staff about it."⁵ Another regular at Weinberger's staff sessions said outsiders would be surprised how much the agenda was dominated by items plucked by Early bird from deep inside the major newspapers. "Cap's management control system was the newspaper."⁶ This new found power of the media demands respect; it demands attention both at the national level and at the operational commander's level of concern.

⁴ Smith, p. 161.

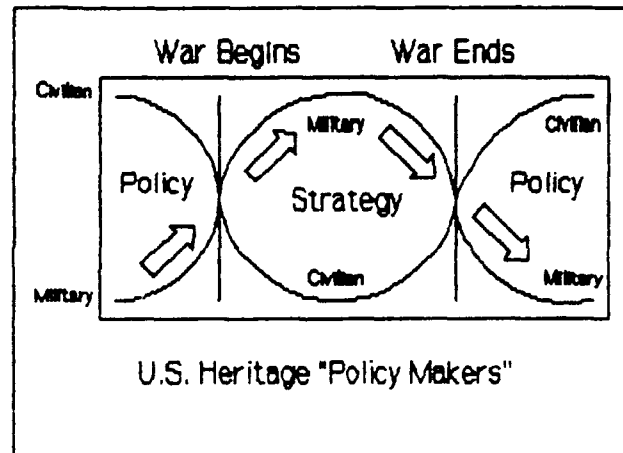
⁵ Smith, p. 162.

⁶ Smith, p. 162.

Chapter III

The Changing Battlefield

During peacetime the media tends to focus on those principle actors that set the national security agenda and establish policy, the President and Congress. Other than the annual scrutiny of the defense budget or periodic weapons scandal, the military (at least at the operational commander's level) is, in contrast, allowed to operate in relative isolation. This relative isolation allows the military commander to devote the lion's share of his time, in peace, to the task of net assessment, focusing on the external environment -- his enemy. The traditional net assessment is a relatively straightforward task of comparing one's own forces with that of the enemy. This net assessment is the critical first step in achieving military victory on the battlefield.



As the nation transitions to war, several important events take place. E. E. Schattschneider makes several insightful observations in his book The Semisovereign People. In his discussion of modern democracy, he makes several observations of democracy that are equally valid for a discussion of democracy at war. The first

is that: "Nothing attracts a crowd as quickly as a fight." ⁷ As troops are committed to action, the media will over time shift more and more of its media focus from the civilian policy makers to the military strategist. Case in point is the recent 48 hour media blitz during the first two days of Desert Storm.

The second point that E. E. Schattschneider makes is that:

every fight consists of two parts: (1) the few individuals who are actively engaged at the center and (2) the audience that is irresistibly attracted to the scene. The spectators are as much a part of the overall situation as are the overt combatants. The spectators are an integral part of the situation, for as likely as not, the audience determines the outcome of the fight. Like all other chain reactions, a fight is difficult to contain. To understand any conflict it is necessary, therefore, to keep constantly in mind the relations between the combatants and the audience because the audience is likely to do the kinds of things that determine the outcome of the fight.⁸

The moral of the story is: If a fight starts, watch the crowd, because the crowd plays the decisive role.⁹

In the event of war, the operational commander will find himself pulled in two opposite directions at once. On one hand he must deal with the immediate situation at hand and the demands of the battlefield. Yet, a major portion of his time must now be devoted to watching the home front. The astute commander will in addition to the traditional net assessment (own forces vs. enemy

⁷. E. E. Schattschneider, The Semisovereign People. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 1.

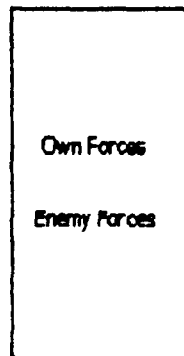
⁸. Schattschneider, p. 2.

⁹. Schattschneider, p. 3.

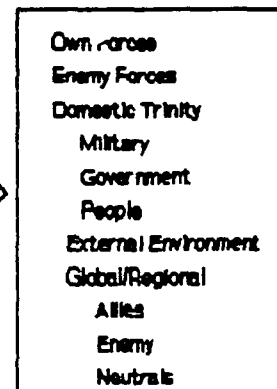
forces), conduct a thorough assessment of the international environment.

In his assessment of the international environment and the domestic front, the operational commander has essentially two choices. His first

Traditional Net Assessment



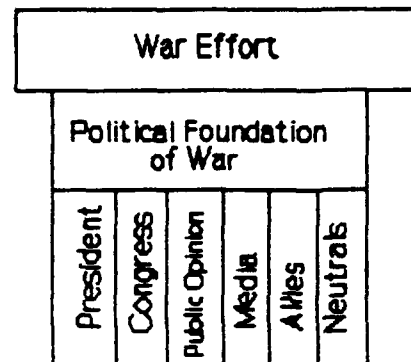
Information Age Net Assessment



choice is that he can assume a passive role and play the part of the politician who always reads the environment and then adapts himself to that environment. His second option is to assume a more pro-active role and play the part of the statesman who with vision and foresight forces his ideas upon the environment.

Why is this choice necessary? For one, modern communications, television and the wired battlefield has expanded the scope of the battlefield and blurred the distinction between combatant and non-combatant. Television has in effect, shifted the battlefield decision from the front to the rear or home front. Television has become a defacto diplomatic channel (in some cases the only channel of communications) where a war of words and images is as important as achieving military victory on the battlefield. Victory is now a two part problem. The commander's task of convincing one's own population is even more arduous today with TV access to the battlefield and images of war.

The second and most fundamental reason the commander must conduct a more thorough assessment of the international environment is that in the final analysis, the politicians and military leadership have nothing to support them but public opinion.



One of North Vietnam's General Giap's principle contributions to the doctrine of revolutionary warfare was his understanding of the psychological shortcomings of a democratic state when faced with inconclusive military operations. According to Giap, public opinion in a democracy, when faced with a dilemma will ask to end the "useless bloodshed" or the legislature will become impatient and begin efforts to curtail the war effort.¹⁰ The need to maintain a consensus at home demonstrates that the domestic scene has become as important as the international one.

Television has changed both political and military reality. In early 1968, President Johnson's favorite television reporter, Walter Cronkite, became increasingly skeptical about the stream of official statements from Washington and Saigon that claimed we were winning the war. So Cronkite decided to go to Vietnam and see for himself. When he returned, he broadcast a special report to the nation, which Lyndon Johnson watched. Cronkite reported that the

¹⁰ Colonel Casey Brower. "American Strategy in Vietnam," Lecture, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI: 17 November 1990.

war had become a bloody stalemate and that military victory was not in the cards. He concluded: "It is increasingly clear to this reporter that the only rational way out ... will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy, and did the best they could." On hearing Cronkite's verdict, the president turned to his aides and said, "It's all over."¹¹

President Johnson's aide Bill Moyers put it later, "We always knew ... that Cronkite had more authority with the American people than anyone else. It was Johnson's instinct that Cronkite was it." So if Walter Cronkite thought the war was hopeless, the American people would think so too, and the only thing left was to wind it down.¹²

During World War II, logistics was the principle controlling factor that complicated strategy. Logistics was the link between strategic possibilities and tactical realities. Logistics will always be a controlling factor in war. Today however, home front politics, public opinion, and the media's role in both -- plays a much more dominant role in framing strategy options than in times past. Part of the reason is due to the media's new found power, and part is due to the ability to provide instant global communications. Television and the manner in which we conduct public diplomacy via the television have increased the trend toward "war

¹¹ Austin Ranney, Channels of Power: The Impact of Television on American politics, (New York: Basic Book, Inc., Publishers, 1983), p. 5.

¹² Ranney, p. 5.

by consensus" or "democratization of war."

Wars fought by consensus create other than ideal conditions for the operational commander. In wars not decided by a single decisive blow, the tendency is to deteriorate into prolonged wars of attrition. The lesson of democracy in war from Athens to present day is that, it is hard for democracy to fight prolonged wars of attrition. In this regard, our most recent lessons from Korea and Vietnam are worth repeating:

* First, democracy fights on a much narrower cost-versus-benefit front than totalitarian governments. Democracy is easily shaken, hard to control and citizens of democracy demand early returns on their investment. (Television news in this role feeds the public appetite to treat events as binary -- good or bad, up or down, progress or setback, winners or losers -- and push aside the more complex layers of reality.¹³) In order to sustain public support over any length of time, the public needs to be shown some incremental gain on its investment, some sign of progress toward a political goal.¹⁴

* Second, strategy and campaign plans must deliver results within a time frame that the American public can support.

¹³ Smith, p. 10.

¹⁴ Colonel Casey Brower, "American Strategy in Vietnam," Lecture, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI: 17 November 1990.

* Third, victory is now a two part concept. One part is played out on the battlefield and one part is played out on the home front via the media. The key to winning in the long run is not necessarily found on the battlefield, but on the home front.

The general negative military-media experience of the U.S. in Vietnam had a powerful influence on the British government's decision to restrict media coverage of the Falklands War. The Falklands War is also a good example of how the demands of the home front may divert operational objectives on the battlefield. The British Parliament perceived that public sentiment required a quick victory in the land war to justify the mounting ship losses in the Falklands Islands conflict. This perception eventually forced the political decision to attack the Argentine garrison at Goose Green. the attack on Goose Green was keyed to the political imperative to engage and defeat the Argentines somewhere or anywhere as soon as possible.¹⁵

David Gergen, serving as Assistant for Communications to President Reagan, has cited television for creating a special situation regarding national security. In comments after Grenada he said: "I don't think we as a society ... have really faced up to what it means to carry out limited war on television. When you have cameras involved, do you begin to cut off options for limited conflict which in the past governments, both Democratic and Republican, have often felt as a preferred means of preventing

¹⁵ Harry Train, "An Analysis of the Falklands/Malvinas Islands Campaign," Naval War College Review, Winter 1988, pp. 46-47.

wider conflict?"¹⁶

The introduction of a battlefield media capable of broadcasting the war realtime, has infinitely complicated the way in which we conduct war. We have not yet defined the public's right to know in war in terms of how much and at what time. The media will in trying to write history with a deadline, demand NOW and AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE. Dwight D. Eisenhower in his book Crusade in Europe, stated that: "Complete wartime co-ordination and perfect co-operation can never be achieved between the press and military authorities. For the commander secrecy is a defensive weapon; to the press is anathema. The task is to develop a procedure that takes into an understanding of both viewpoints."¹⁷

The press has become the growth industry of the last twenty years. During World War II, the total number of reporters in the entire European theater was 943.¹⁸ In Washington DC alone, 1,522 reporters were accredited to congressional press galleries in 1961 and 5,250 in 1987; the 1980 census showed 12,612 journalists citywide.¹⁹ The accredited media in Dhahran alone (as of 31 January 1991) during the present Desert Storm consists of 737. This number does not include reporters at sea aboard U.S. Navy ships, reporters

¹⁶ Keith S. Collins, ed., Responsibility and Freedom in the Press: Are They in Conflict (Washington, DC: Citizens Choice, Inc., 1985), p. 38.

¹⁷ Dwight D. Eisenhower. Crusade in Europe. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1986), p. 299.

¹⁸ Eisenhower, p. 299.

¹⁹ Smith, pp. 29-30.

In other Saudi Arabian cities, or independent reporters outside Dhahran who have obtained a visa through the Saudi government.²⁰

Unlike the bolt out of the blue Pearl Harbor variety attack where the threat to the U.S. was clearly understood, this may not be the case in future low intensity or limited wars scenarios where the threat to the U.S. is ambiguous.²¹ The scenario of future wars will in most likelihood be modeled after the recent Persian Gulf "Earnest Will" or "Operation Just Cause" operations. This will present the operational commander with an additional military-media challenge beyond just trying to conduct crowd control in his theater.

With an understanding of the importance of public opinion and political foundation of war to sustain the war effort, the operational commander's task becomes a problem of very carefully presenting our case to these various audiences. Eisenhower clearly understood this in saying:

Press conferences were obligatory, since the problem of morale, both at home and in England, was never far from our minds.²²

...In modern war, [it is important] for a commander to concern himself with the

²⁰ Telephone conversation with Capt Lopresti, USA. CENTCOM Public Affairs Officer, 31 January 1991.

²¹ Alberto Coll, "The Military-Media Conference," U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI: 16 March 1990.

²² Eisenhower, p. 90.

appearance of things in the public eye as well as the actual accomplishments.²³

Civilians are entitled to know everything about the war that need not remain secret through the overriding requirement of military security. Indeed, the commander in the field must never forget that it is his duty to cooperate with the heads of his government in the task of maintaining a civilian morale that will be equal to every purpose.²⁴

In the process of fighting this image game and managing perceptions, military-media relations becomes critical. As a mediator between the press and the commander, the Public Affairs Officer must play a key role on the planning staff. This will call for a new relationship between the commander, his PAO, and the role of the PAO on the staff.

²³ Dwight D. Eisenhower, Crusade in Europe. (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1986) p. 298.

²⁴ Eisenhower, p. 299

Conclusion

The PAD and the Commander: Toward a new relationship.

Now more than ever, the operational commander must develop a capacity for public relations, in order to explain the rationale and objectives behind U.S. involvement. He must develop a capacity to read and communicate with the various domestic and international audiences that may influence the battlefield. In this effort, on both the domestic front and international scene, military media relations become critical. Several recommendations are offered.

First, it calls for quality people with strong operational backgrounds having the operational credibility and political sophistication to deal with the press. He must be more than what has become merely an escort officer to close advisor and forward thinker on a battle staff. According to Eisenhower and his experience with the press in World War II:

...the friendly relationship between the press and the military was strengthened by the presence of Brigadier General Frank A. Allen, Jr., as my public relations officer. He had been a successful leader of an armored combat command in North Africa and France and I believed that his ability to maintain military security and at the same time to assure the public the information it wanted and needed would prove most valuable to the war effort. By his assignment to headquarters duty, although I lost a proved combat commander thereby, I was relieved of many worrisome problems.²⁸

²⁸ Eisenhower, p. 301.

RADM Harold Bersen, former Commander Middle East Force, complained that whenever he needed a PAOs assistance, he was always out escorting the press. His recommendation was to have a second PAO officer (preferably a Captain/O-6) assigned to theater CINCs who would be able to shuttle back and forth to Washington providing the "party line."²⁶

Second, it calls for a change in our thinking about the press. Both have been thrown together in a life raft and whatever their relationship before entering the raft, each needs the other to survive. Eisenhower's attitude was:

I believed that the proper attitude of the commander toward representatives of the press was to regard them as quasi staff officers; to recognize their mission in the war and to assist them in carrying it out. ²⁷

...need for an effective Public Relations Section of the headquarters. Our concern was emphasized by the necessity for keeping the two populations, the American and the British, informed on a variety of subjects. I began the practice of holding short, informal conferences with the press, for the purpose of discussing our mutual problems and finding common solutions for them. I insisted that they occupy positions as quasi-staff officers on my staff, and I respected their collective responsibilities in the war as they did mine.²⁸

²⁶ RADM Harold Bersen, "The Military-Media Conference Summary," Lecture, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI: 16 March 1990.

²⁷ Eisenhower, p. 300.

²⁸ Eisenhower, p. 58.

Third, we need to rethink our education of military officers in dealing with the press. In our discussion of the hierarchy of warfare at the Naval War College, great stress is placed on understanding the supporting functions of warfare (environment, logistics, electronic warfare, intelligence, and communications). In the discussion of communications, the focus is on battlefield communications and interoperability, not on the importance of communication to the various audiences at home and abroad or a useful discussion of how to coopt the press in this effort. It becomes a time consuming task and like most things in war, it is those things you don't prepare for and don't anticipate in peacetime that surprise you in war. In the age of information, effective military-media relations and the capacity for conducting public relations becomes critical, equally important as any other war fighting skill in the age of information. It has become another pillar in the hierarchy of warfare.

Finally, if the astute commander has been perceptive enough to notice the importance of public affairs in maintaining the political foundation of war, he will realize that public affairs is far too important to be left to the public affairs officer alone. It calls for a more pro-active role on the part of the commander. It calls for a change in the traditional role of the public affairs officer from what has been crisis manager and crowd control to forward thinker and close advisor on a battle staff.

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