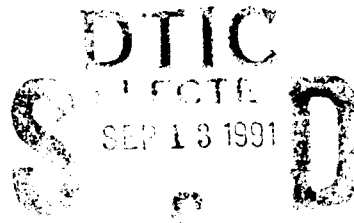


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The Military Press Pool -- Come On In, the Water's ... HOT

by

Drew Malcomb
Commander, United States Navy

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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The paper examines the relationship between the media and the military, pointing out the differences in goals and objectives between the two groups. The vehicle for the examination is the press pool. The pool system is explained and placed in context by reviewing its history and utilization during World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Grenada, and Panama. The pool utilization during those conflicts is juxtaposed with the press pool deployed to Operation Desert Storm (ODS). The findings indicate vast differences of opinion between the military and the media, of which each group's feelings on the press pool is but a single example. In closing, the paper suggests redefining the military-media relationship and offers guidance through recommended changes in the way each group views, and therefore deals with, the other.



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The Military Press Pool --
Come On In, the Water's . . . HOT

The relationship between the military and the media, one based in large measure on mutual distrust, healthy skepticism, lack of knowledge and occasional open hostility, took another step backwards during Operation Desert Storm (ODS).

This time the contention centered on the press pool system, not just how it was operationalized, but its very existence. One could understand the pool problem and perhaps even rationalize it by observing that the media and the military share little common ground and therefore rarely see eye-to-eye on any topic of significance. That is, after all, how each side views its role in the relationship.

As Bill Monroe, editor of the Washington Journalism Review wrote,

There is a gulf, to start with, between the military and the press -- the one dependent on authority, loyalty, secrecy, the other on debate, skepticism, and the spread of information.¹

But the military and the media do share certain commonalities; they both like to dominate, especially in relations with each other; and it's virtually a badge of honor in both groups to hold a negative connotation of the other. "They," after all, are "the enemy."

To further complicate the relationship, both groups see themselves as guardians -- the media as the guardians of truth and, the military as the guardians of freedom.

What links the two is a common audience -- the general public -- and that audience deserves better from both. But while the media continues to complain bitterly and ominously about the loss of press freedom at the military's hand, as codified in the press pool system in ODS, the general public for the most part has taken little notice of the fracas. The responsibility for finding a solution to the problem, if indeed that's possible, therefore rests with the two factions which caused it originally, i.e., the military and the media.

Given that the two groups share the thorny relationship noted earlier, is there any hope for a viable press pool system in the future? Not unless both camps make some fundamental changes to their institutional mindset and deal with their relationship, a contentious relationship based on negativity.

The military mindset to some degree is exemplified by John E. Murray, a retired Army major general and Vietnam veteran, who observed that "engaging the press while engaging the enemy is taking on one adversary too many."² While the general may be expressing a personal view, there are too many military officers who join him, either publicly or privately.

The media's mindset in ODS on the other hand rapidly and rabidly developed into yet another "conspiracy theory" overlapped by some righteous self-pity. Newsday early in the conflict, hauled out the timeworn and still unfounded theory that the military's problems with the media all began in Vietnam. The Pentagon in ODS was "paranoid," the author wrote, and "trying to black out the press." Worse yet, in his opinion, was the Pentagon's supposed concern for the safety of journalists in-theater. "What they really wanted was for the media to drown in the pool."³

Because of such predispositions, the press pool in ODS ran into trouble from the start. Gene Zipperlen, a Minneapolis Star-Tribune columnist, observed in early August 1990 that information about military action in the Middle East was being provided by the Pentagon rather than the journalists who were observing the region. He explained,

That's because the so-called Pentagon press pool had not been activated, and Saudi Arabia was not letting reporters in to cover whatever action was occurring.⁴

The Saudis' reluctance was widely reported and even announced by Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney.⁵ In fact, Saudi Arabia historically issues only a small number of visas for journalists, never more than 22 in a year. They simply weren't prepared for the onslaught of reporters.⁶

Zipperlen's statement, therefore, raises an interesting point. If the Saudis were blocking

access to the theater, why weren't the Saudis the focus of the reporter's ire? Specifically because of the military-media relationship and because the military made a convenient target for criticism. Even when media acknowledged the Saudi restrictions, they explained it by stating that, since the military was the benefactor, the Bush administration was loathe to persuade the Saudis otherwise.⁷ A convenient summation, but patently untrue.

It would be interesting and even humorous to list the myriad similar examples of mistrust and misstatement, but that is not the focus of this paper. The goal, rather, is to identify the underlying conflicts between the media and the military using the press pool as the vehicle, and to explain them in order to generate understanding and accommodation between the two opposing factions of military "versus" media.

First, let's attempt to conceptualize the mindset of each group or subset thereof and then formulate opinions on how their inherent characteristics generate each side's reaction to the other.

Both have their faults and their achievements and, for that reason, some vast generalizations will be necessary. The reader should take note that both the military and the media have superb examples of professionalism in their midst, willing to accommodate, understand and accept the relationship between the two and even work to improve it.

Both also have their less cooperative characters and it is this faction which often shades the news coverage of the event in question.

The task is not an easy one nor will it be achieved by yet another attempt at elucidation. The conflict, after all, has existed at least since the Napoleonic Wars, when the Duke of Wellington complained bitterly about "the babbling of" the English newspapers from whose pages the enemy could easily obtain information about the strength and disposition of his forces.⁸

As noted earlier, some broad generalizations are necessary in categorizing the media and the military. For purposes of this paper, the divisions will be print media or television, and senior military officers. There are admittedly numerous relevant subdivisions but they cannot be accommodated here.

Print media, specifically daily newspapers, have always been at a time-based disadvantage to their electronic counterparts. As New York Post editor Jerry Nachman wrote, "In a CNN war, whither newspapers?"⁹ What print media lack in timeliness, however, they gain in their fully developed, in-depth treatment of the subject at hand.

The relationship between the two media segments, print and television, is naturally competitive yet symbiotic. Newspapers early in ODS were using photos shot from television video, while television frequently planned their

evening news around events in that morning's newspaper (a much more routine practice).

The print media's role in ODS activity, including the press pool, weighed heavily on their personnel and monetary resources, but they took advantage of the situation by producing "special edition" or "Extra" editions, a practice rarely seen since Pearl Harbor. A few papers, notably The Washington Times and USA Today published rare weekend editions.¹⁰ Such efforts were made in an attempt to boost readership with thoughts of "paying the piper" put to the side.

Television as well seized the opportunity to enlarge and solidify its audience but with more of a vengeance. With larger budgets and the fanatical impulse to "reach the air" before their electronic competitors, national television networks dumped everything they had on the ODS theater. This included network anchors with their expansive (and expensive) support staffs, computers, satellite dishes, Range Rovers, cellular phones, and a wealth of other electronic support along with the people to operate it.

ABC-TV alone, even before the ground war started, had ten television crews, eight correspondents, and a total of nearly 60 support staff personnel. That's one network! Their weekly expenditures reportedly averaged between

\$350,000 and \$450,000. The other two networks were rumored to be spending three times that amount each.¹¹

Yet with all that, former CBS News correspondent Bernard Kalb accused the electronic media of falling prey to the same, oft-repeated criticisms of their style of coverage, i.e., too jingoistic, (with) too much focus on the military, (and in a) rush to avoid complex issues.¹²

Print and electronic media in-theater just before the ground war started numbered nearly 1,400, having grown from 17 in the original DOD press pool.¹³ To place those figures in perspective, in World War II, only 461 reporters were registered to cover D-Day. Of that number, only 27 U.S. reporters actually went ashore with the first wave of troops.¹⁴

After the initial rush of reporters to the ODS theater or augmentation of staffs already there, however, the euphoria of "going to war" quickly became overshadowed by the supposed lack of news worthy of coverage. While the media began their crescendo of complaints about "the military won't show us anything," the reality was that the media had little interest in what was available for coverage. Military forces early on were involved in establishing their own logistics, setting up internal lines of communication, and reviewing strategies and tactics. In general, they were preparing for war, whether or not their daily activities supported the media's desire. But

coverage of such activity doesn't sell newspapers, increase Nielsen ratings or provide opportunities for glamour or sensationalism. Hence the media catcalls.

Yet during this same timeframe the media's requests for interviews and stories were quite numerous, and were being well accommodated by the personnel of the Joint Information Bureau (JIB). These were the same personnel that some media were referring to heatedly and publicly as indifferent, mean spirited, uncooperative censors.¹⁵ JIB staffers, according to Navy Captain Mike Sherman, JIB director, went to great lengths to help the media gather information.

Thousands of requests for interviews and visits to the units in the desert were filled in the first week. . . . The JIB personnel daily processed hundreds of queries for routine media visits, coordinated responses to issue-oriented stories, acted as spokespersons for the military -- appearing on talk and news shows, as well as issuing press releases on the ongoing build-up of troops and their day-to-day activities.¹⁶

And so we find ourselves once again at the timeless impasse concerning the military and the media. The military's idea of full cooperation was, to the media, woefully inadequate. The media's desire to cover daily visual drama was, to the military, inappropriate and unnecessary.

The reader could surmise at this point that the ODS press pool was doomed to failure. If that's the case, is it logical to assume that the press pool concept is an

unwieldy contraption, one which affects everyone yet pleases no one?

A brief review of the press pool's history will shed some light. In World War II reporters had free access to the battlefield but were subject to strict censorship. The reporter handed his script, article or photograph to the military censor who then edited it if necessary to remove sensitive or classified information. The censor then forwarded the item to the reporter's organization stateside, without the reporter having ever seen any deletions or alterations. Occasionally, articles were stopped outright when they reached Washington, D.C. Chief of Naval Operations during that time, Admiral Ernest J. King, had an intense distrust of the media, and successfully delayed stories far beyond any requirement for security.¹⁷

The reverse was true for ODS -- the media from the start knew they would be restricted to press pools and, despite their complaints that military censorship was withholding the truth from the American public, only five pool-generated stories were referred to the Pentagon for resolution of possible conflicts of interest or breaches of security. Only five, and of those, four were cleared and printed or broadcast. The fifth, which detailed intelligence gathering methods in the field, was altered by

the reporter's editor-in-chief after a call from the Pentagon.¹⁸

In fact, the "censorship" issue in ODS revolved around the following scenario: a reporter drafted a story, passed it to a military escort who either cleared it immediately or cautioned the reporter that a certain fact or statement was problematic. After the cautioning, the decision to print or broadcast the item was then left up to the media, not the military.

ODS battlefield photography was also subject to the charges of censorship, but in reality photo and video images underwent the same screening process described above for printed information. The media's supposed appetite for gore and "visual impact" has changed markedly since World War II, when the first photos of American dead were not published until 1943, and rarely again after that. It is doubtful that today's media would be so understanding and compassionate, especially in the "first to air/print" frenzy that pervades modern media techniques, as evidenced in the airing by some media of U.S. hostages held by Iraq.

The Korean War brought the advent of "voluntary censorship" which proved unworkable. Military censorship was soon reinstated at the media's request. In Korea and World War II, media who violated security or censorship boundaries met with "few drastic steps."¹⁹ Also in the Korean War, long predating the laptop computers and

satellite uplinks of today, a revolution was spawned courtesy of long-distance telephone communication. Media reports in the Korean War made extensive use of the "color" story, which provided the reader with a feeling and flavor of the battlefield. Today's media are more likely to dismiss such information as "fluff."

Vietnam was a different story altogether. Perhaps no other conflict since the Civil War engendered more military hostility towards the media.²⁰ And certainly no other landmark event has caused the media to reflect more critically upon itself, shortcomings and all. As the Navy's Chief of Information, Rear Admiral Brent Baker recently told a group of Michigan state newspaper editors,

You guys still wear Vietnam like a bad coat. It hangs all over everything you write and think about. . . . The military learned a lot from that war. A lot of the media folks did not.²¹

The press pool system was not in operation during Vietnam. The media were, in large measure, allowed to roam freely but had access to daily military briefings in Saigon. Since the briefings were lampooned as "the Five O'Clock Follies," it's obvious how the media viewed them. Yet ironically, the media were better treated by the military during Vietnam than in any previous conflict, primarily in the realm of access, logistical support, personal comfort and amenities. What's more, ground and air transportation was made available to the media on a large scale. Of note, the number of accredited media in

theater at the height of the Vietnam conflict, 417, was far below those in ODS, and the majority were from non-U.S. outlets.²²

Interesting, however, given the poor relationship between the military and the media, was that publication of security related and sensitive information still was rarely met with official sanctions.

Although the issue of censorship was reviewed at DOD's request midway through Vietnam, it was deemed inappropriate for several reasons, not the least of which was the reporter's access to communication facilities outside the theater where no censor would be present. The military in-country, moreover, had limited equipment with which to review videotape productions of the television media. And it was televised coverage of the war which provided the crux of contention between the military and the media. Military officials, including General William C. Westmoreland, U.S. commander in Vietnam (1964-68), complained that television coverage by its very nature was time-compressed and required visual drama, therefore the audience was provided only with exclusively violent, miserable or controversial material.²³

CBS correspondent Morley Safer, responded with what was to become the immortal myth, that television coverage in Vietnam was to be feared by the military, in that it was

the ultimate truth-teller with power that neared omnipotence.

The (television) camera can describe in excruciating, harrowing detail what war is all about (emphasis in original). . . . When the U.S.²⁴ blunders, television leaves little doubt.

The Vietnam war, still cited erroneously as the genesis of all military-media problems was, in fact, influenced heavily by a third variable, that of civilian leadership and how they influenced the military's dealings with the media. Although many of the military-media strains in Vietnam were the result of a broad array of rising tensions at home, the fundamental problem lay in the policy contradictions of the Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon administrations.²⁵ As author Peter Braestrup notes,

What Vietnam makes so clear is that, ultimately, the President is the key figure in military-media relations. . . . The relationship between senior military and journalists in Vietnam was soured by White House demands for 'positive' information to the press by the military showing 'progress.'²⁶

The next significant military-media interaction in wartime occurred in Grenada. Although the Falkland/Malvinas gave perfect examples of overt military censorship, U.S. troops were not directly involved, and for that reason, the conflict will not be addressed here.

The Grenada operation, termed "Operation Urgent Fury" had, as its original mission, the rescue of U.S. medical students. Press relations got off to a bad start when

Presidential spokesman Larry Speakes categorically denied the operation only a day before it took place.

In fact, information about the operation was intentionally withheld from Speakes, although his counterpart at the State Department was briefed. Indeed Speakes was told that it simply was not going to happen, information which he dutifully passed to the media. When he then gathered the media the next day to announce the event, it set off a furor that lasted longer than the operation itself. This set the tone for media coverage and ensured it would be overly critical and disbelieving of any information provided officially.

Worse yet was the military's decision, at least in the initial hours, to deny media access to Grenada. That timeframe stretched to two and a half days, during which the media vented their anger. In fact, no plans were made to deal with the press at any level or at any phase of the operation. They were simply excluded, even from the Urgent Fury plan, which had no public affairs annex. Vice Admiral Joseph W. Metcalf, III, commander of the U.S. Second Fleet and task force commander for the Grenada operation took full responsibility for denying media access to the theater.

Afterwards he stated that had a press pool been suggested by the Pentagon, he would have agreed.²⁷ That's an interesting thought, given that most military commanders

at his level shouldn't expect direct guidance of that nature from the Pentagon; they are expected to make those decisions themselves in theater.

The military did, however, make arrangements for public affairs coverage "for historical purposes" by Navy and Marine Corps video teams.²⁸ This act gained the military even wider charges of manipulation and insensitivity.

A multi-service JIB was established in Barbados, but not until two days later. In the intervening hours hundreds of media had made their way to the island ahead of the public affairs team and were vocal in their displeasure. First they were ignored and now they were denied access to Grenada. Worse yet, even when the JIB was finally established, it had no direct communications with Admiral Metcalf or the ground troops in Grenada.

The media's anger was matched by their sheer numbers. Upwards of 360 in size, the media group was larger than those accredited to General Douglas MacArthur's headquarters in Tokyo during the Korean War and considerably larger than the numbers of American journalists accredited during the Communist Tet offensive in Vietnam.²⁹ There were even more reporters who had made their way unilaterally to Grenada, bypassing the military's system.

It should come as no surprise then, that the media's exclusion from the scene became the focus of their coverage. Their attitude ensured that the operation would receive less than favorable treatment in reportage.

But Operation Urgent Fury did, albeit in a backhanded manner, advance the discussion regarding military-media relations. The media's exclusion from the theater in the early hours and the military's lack of planning for their support when and if they reached the theater proved unsettling, to say the least. To explore the problem, General John W. Vessey, Jr., Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), convened the Media-Military Relations Panel, known as the Sidle panel after its chairman, retired Army Major General Winant Sidle. The panel consisted of military and DOD public affairs professionals and retired civilian media members. The active media declined to participate as they felt it would be inappropriate for the working media to serve on a government panel.

The Sidle panel's coherent suggestions led to the formalization and reinstitution of the press pool concept. It was first tested in Operation Just Cause, 1989, when U.S. forces invaded Panama with the mission to remove General Manuel Noriega from power. But the pool arrangement didn't work well at all. The media's complaints were broad but centered on: logistics, which were inadequate; support from senior military officers,

which was half-hearted; and military operational personnel, who were not accommodating of the media's stated desires.

In truth, the pool arrived in country well after fighting had started and in some cases after important operations had been concluded. Worse yet, in the media's estimation, was the military's refusal to allow them into active combat areas.³⁰ In retrospect, Just Cause was an inappropriate theater for activation of the pool which is, after all, designed to facilitate access to geographic areas where media are not in place. There were significant numbers of media already stationed in Panama, so one is left to question if the pool was activated simply to silence the media's complaints and test the Sidle panel's recommendations.

Although now overshadowed by ODS, the media's complaints about Operation Just Cause and their lack of access have been reduced to the lowest common denominator. As reporter Joseph L. Galloway wrote,

Panama, the information managers say, was a stunning success without the media. Some success. Americans today have only a blurred memory of Panama, impressions of a swift, almost bloodless strike. . . . Never mind that the average American can't name one hero or one good commander who emerged from the Panama campaign.³¹

If that's how the media views its role in war coverage, then something is terribly wrong, and it's not the pool concept. It's the relationship between the

military and the media and how each group sees their service to or their guardianship of the American public.

The media to a large degree has always held itself up as the true source of information; objective, unbiased, and without its own agenda. That's rubbish and the sooner the media step down from their pedestal, the better. The American public, the very audience the media purport to represent, removed them from their lofty standing long ago.

As an example of their shortcomings, the media in recent weeks, ever aggressive in their pursuit of truth, blatantly violated one of its most basic ethical tenets -- that the identity of a rape victim was to be withheld at all costs out of concern for the victim's privacy. Not only has the media violated that standard in the William Kennedy Smith case, they've done so with quite a splash.

First, The Globe, a supermarket tabloid, rushed the woman's name into print, and was followed quickly by the venerable New York Times. When confronted by a group of angry staffers, Times editors defended their actions by saying that another media outlet, "NBC Nightly News," had done it first.³² NBC, as it turns out, was under fire for exactly the same reason. Later, NBC was profiled in Entertainment Weekly as embracing "a far more lurid -- and, some charge, far shoddier -- news style."³³ The charge is hard to ignore.

Howard Rosenberg, Los Angeles Times reporter, takes the scenario further. According to Rosenberg, NBC Pentagon correspondent Fred Francis deduced the battle plan of the U.S. land forces against Iraq, but kept it to himself. In a hypothetical and yet frighteningly plausible extension, Rosenberg asks his readers "[what if] The Globe itself had done the irresponsible thing and disclosed the battle plans in advance? What then?" Was Francis then justified in using it on evening network news simply because a colleague has already broke the story?³⁴

Are these the people the American public wants to decide what is, or isn't, classified in a battlefield scenario? Absolutely not, yet the media see themselves as totally capable of fulfilling that role "in the interest of the American public." Their performance in this latest episode simply adds credence to the military's hesitancy to allow the media free rein on the battlefield.

But the military is not above criticism or without room for improvement either. Censoring, rendering classified or withholding information simply because it is unflattering to the military is strictly prohibited, yet the practice continued on a limited scale in ODS. The military needs to grow beyond its unnatural fear and loathing of the media. To assist in this admittedly herculean feat, the military needs to more objectively assess the media's role.

Even the commander who has deep and hostile feelings towards the media expects them to publish his press release on something as routine as a change of command ceremony. Yet when something untoward or negative crops up within his command, he's the first to try and "keep it out of the press." The media are too savvy to play that game for more than a couple of rounds and, when they then decline to participate, the commander rationalizes yet another example of the media's lack of support. In the wrong hands, it's a vicious circle, and we've been circling too long.

What's to be done? Can the military and the media ever come to terms with each other's existence? I think they can, but some basic, tentative steps have to be taken first. They are most applicable on the local level. Military commanders, once made sensitive to the environment of media relations, could thus directly influence their own local media. Media outlets in homeports or near military bases can bridge the gap locally, but only if they change their stripes.

The transition will not be easy nor will it be quick. But these efforts would be a beginning -- one which could lead to a broader acceptance of one group for the other, at ever escalating levels, and preclude, through basic education, each group's automatic distrust of the other.

If the thought process sounds simplistic, it is because the solution could be so simple. To that end, the last section of the paper will address each group, the military and the media, and offer suggestions for improvements.

For military members, especially at the Commander or Commanding Officer level, some thoughts:

-- don't assume that the media will write every story from a negative angle. They don't. Most often, they write it from the proper perspective if they understand the big picture. If you withhold the story and make the media fight to get it, you are simply guaranteeing a negative treatment.

-- overcome your fear of dealing with reporters. The best way is to acquaint yourself with them before you have to. If your base is found to be leaking fuel into the city's water system, or an onbase chemical dump is discovered, it would not be the time to invite the media in for tea. They'll come to the base, no doubt, but it won't be for tea.

-- analyze your target audience and realize that the media is a necessary filter between you and that audience. If the reporter doesn't understand your communication points, you can't expect the

resulting article to support your objective . . .
and it won't be the reporter's fault.

-- realize that if the media wants a story bad enough, they're going to get it with or without your help. It's in your best interest to frame the argument and take charge of it, so you can manage it. If you want to "win," you have to go proactive, even if it's a negative story. If you instead play ostrich and then get broadsided by a horror story that just won't go away, it's no one's fault but your own. You had your chance.

-- as a follow-on to that point, remember that if you're faced with the prospect of a negative story, it's better to have it on page one and then have it go away -- because you managed it effectively -- rather than resisting and seeing the same story stay on page one for a week, then move to page two, then to page three, etc.

-- use your PAO. If you don't have a designated PAO, get one before you need his or her help because by then, it's too late. Wherever you find yourself, there's a PAO in reach who would much rather help you before the fact than play "clean up" afterwards.

-- understand your obligation to the media.
Yes, you do have that obligation. The media

informs the public, and the public influences the Congress. But more importantly, the public gives you its sons and daughters as your charges. That same public has a right to know what you're doing with them. It's only fair.

-- perhaps most significant, treat the media as you expect to be treated -- not with kid gloves but not as the enemy. They are, for the most part, professionals who have a job to do the same as you.

For the media, some suggestions for dealing with military personnel and topics:

-- come to grips with the fact that there isn't always a "smoking gun," a "hidden agenda," or a "cover up." A large number of stories are exactly what they appear to be, nothing more and nothing less.

-- take time to do your homework. Get the whole story, not just a sound byte or a headline. A little effort in this area will gain you a lot of respect among military circles, convince them of your professionalism and open them up to your efforts.

-- understand that your desire to be "where the action is" necessarily places you at risk in

scenarios like ODS. Simply stating that you can "fend for yourself" won't sway the military from its moral obligation to protect you in potentially dangerous areas. Your argument, furthermore, is seriously undermined when, as in Panama, you demand that the military delay its own objectives to rescue reporters being held hostage in a downtown hotel or, as in Iraq, demand that no military be withdrawn from the area until certain missing reporters are located (the same reporters who refused to cooperate with the press pool, and then strayed into hostile territory).

-- while you're holding the spotlight of truth on the military, take time occasionally to shine it on your own organization. Hold yourself to the same high standards you demand of the military.

-- sublimate reporters' egos to the audience's need to receive timely information, regardless of who gets the by-line. That is, after all, a major reason that media dislike the pool concept; you would be airing or publicizing someone else's work rather than your own.

The list of suggestions in both categories could certainly be expanded, but the main thrust is evident. It's time the media and the military looked more carefully

at their "guardian" role and the relationship they share.
The American public deserves our best efforts and we should
rise to the occasion.

Changing attitudes isn't difficult; it just takes
time, education, cooperation and -- relearning the whole
system.

ENDNOTES

1. Bill Monroe, "How the Generals Outdid the Journalists," Washington Journalism Review, April 6, 1991, p. 6.
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