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US WARS AND THE CNN FACTOR

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US WARS AND THE CNN FACTOR

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Introduction

The invention of the radio at the turn of the 19th century led to substantial changes in the conduct of war at the strategic, operational and tactical levels. Strategically, it allowed the concept of “strategic bombing” to emerge. Operationally, it offered new approaches to military navigation and electronic warfare. Tactically, it opened new horizons for command and control in the battlefield.

At the outset of the 21st century, uninterrupted, real-time global TV coverage is poised to carry out a similar function with even broader options and scenarios. The extensive engagement of international media in modern warfare has made it an influential component of armed conflicts, significantly affecting the conduct of US military campaigns. The news media today, equipped with the most sophisticated communications technology, is capable of performing even more powerful functions, and may well force dramatic changes at the national security, military strategy, and operational levels of war.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the implications of the CNN factor on US national security policy, national military and operational strategies and to highlight the requirement for policy makers and military strategists to accommodate the CNN factor in planning their future military campaigns. I will briefly trace the history of the military-media relations, examine the evolvement of media’s powerful technological capabilities in a fast-paced, information-intensive, wartime environment, and then address the CNN factor in relation to its ever-growing role in US wars.

A Historical Perspective of Military-Media Relationship

One of the most dramatic developments in contemporary warfare is the emergence of news media as a powerful element of war. Never before in the history of warfare has the world watched a military strategy being executed in a live transmission of combat. However, the media engagement in war coverage reached this point, only, after a long history of military-media conflict. Media coverage of US wars is a deep-rooted American socio-political phenomenon and could be traced back to the Mexican war. The US military-media relationship, a favorite theme for military and civilian writers, has long been perceived as a parallel US war. As far back as the Civil War, “*Generals threatened, with some effect, to kill war correspondents for their reporting from the front*”.¹ Much work has been done to define a working framework under which both institutions should operate in wartime. Two crucial factors have fundamentally shaped the military media relations. First, the First Amendment² protects freedom of the press as a distinct democratic right and thereby guarantees a unique and important role for the news media. Second, both institutions perform totally different functions and hold diverse values and interests. The media, viewing itself as a system of checks and balances and an independent source of history’s record, is consistent on its right to carry out its constitutional function. It also cites the right of the American public for a comprehensive and timely coverage of the conduct, drama, and outcome of US wars. The military, on the other hand, cites operational security reasons for restricting access of the media to the

¹ Hodding Carter, “*The Military and the Media: Facing the Future*”, The Cantigny Conference Series, Robert R. McCormick Tribune Foundation, Wheaton, Illinois.

² First Amendment, The Constitution of the United States.

battlefield, or, at least, preventing an early release of detailed information on current and future operations. These two factors have, influenced the functional performance of both institutions and, traditionally, placed their relations on a confrontational course.

American involvement in combat could be classified in two categories; wars and interventions. In general terms, wars, where US vital interests are usually well defined, have generated traditional public support. Vietnam was an exception. The media, in most of the US wars, operated under strict security control and were offered limited access to combat areas. Military strategies were designed and executed with little media impact. On the contrary to US wars, interventions have traditionally generated a great deal of ambiguity. The news media and US populace, by and large, are not in full harmony with the complex structure of threats, opportunities, costs, risks and intentions crafted in such cases. This creates the official's desperate need for public support and develops their motive to offer reporters a free access to the combat area, allowing them to perform real-time coverage under little security control. The media in return, shows no sympathy for the policy and offers little support for the military strategy.

In the First World War the media, operating under strict military control, performed half-support, half-opposition but never had substantial influence neither on the national security policy nor on the military strategy.

In the Second World War the news media performed under reduced restrictions. Reporting speed outpaced war events. Bombers' crews were able to listen to a live transmission of their mission before even landing back at their home base.³ The media offered extensive support for the national security policy and the military strategy, thus

³ Ernie Pyle, "*Last Chapter*," New York: Horny Holt and Company, 1991, p 39.

generating, unlimited popular support for the war efforts. The contacts between the two institutions during the war were usually amicable and cooperative.

The Korean War was a transition case in respect to the power of the news media and its influence over policy. In the early 1960's the TV emerged as a tool of media coverage of war but was not utilized to full extension due to technical difficulties. The media initially supported the military strategy and was successful in generating home public support, but proved incapable of forcing its own agenda.

Vietnam was a different story. It was the first war to feature extensive TV coverage of combat using high-tech tools of communication. The US media enjoyed unlimited access to the combat zone and operated under relaxed ground rules. In the early years of the war, the media were supportive of the military strategy. As the war expanded, the US policy became more obscured and the public opinion grew sensitive to the war. The news media played a central role, not only in reporting the war news, but also in facilitating the national debate about the poorly held, ill-communicated national security policy and under-considered military strategy. As the war witnessed a complete erosion of public support, it was apparent to all observers that a wide gap of mistrust, with respect to military media relations, had occurred. The conclusions drawn from Vietnam by both institutions laid the grounds for future relations and had a definite and profound impact over US strategic thinking in designing and executing future military strategies. For the next three decades the media would question all US military engagements and the US public opinion would demand for shorter wars with less casualties and a distinct exit.

Vietnam syndrome was brought to Grenada in 1983 and Panama in 1989. “Urgent Fury”, the US military operation in Grenada, was the first US conflict where the media were completely excluded from the initial stages of the operation before they were later allowed to operate, only, under strict military control. The military introduced the “pool” system where reporters were officially escorted and their reports were reviewed. For the media, the system was not the right answer to their demands of a free coverage.

In “Desert Storm” the US policy makers realized the wide public support the military option enjoyed and successfully utilized the CNN factor to their advantage. The news media were used, at the national level, as a tool of great power to shape the crisis, to mobilize the public support, and to strengthen the growing nationalism trend. At the military strategy level, the picture was different. The DOD had reactivated the pool system to ensure initial coverage of the US buildup and released ground rules under which the media could operate to cover the war.⁴ Ground rules included pool reporting, military escorts, and pre-publish security review. HQ CENTCOM expanded the initial DOD ground rules and maintained extremely tight security throughout the operations and established a copy review system, which ignited immediate opposition from reporters. At the operational level, field commanders imposed further limitations and some military leaders believed that media’s field presence was unnecessary and counterproductive.

In their analysis on war coverage, analysts have been divided into two camps. One believes that the media, despite severe military restrictions, performed an independent coverage of the war. Pete Williams, Former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs stated, “ *The press gave the American people the best war coverage*

⁴ Williams, Pete, “ *A Gulf War Military-Media Review*” Defense Issue, Vol. 6, No 12 March 14, 1991.

they ever had.”⁵ The other view is that, while the media’s performance was far from being ideal, the Pentagon’s restrictions rendered the journalists powerless to combat the generals.⁶ The Gulf War did not ease the tension that, for years, has colored the military media relationship. The media’s suspicious view of the military was not relaxed and the question of a free, unfettered and uncensored reporting remained unanswered.

High-Tech Media in the Military Environment

As the military-media relationship evolved, so did their technical capabilities. The US military today, unlike the Vietnam era, is capable of performing swift, precise, large-scale and decisive military operations. The media with its sophisticated communications equipment are also in a technically stronger position and even more motivated to pursue more aggressive coverage policies. This implies a significant impact on military operations and the military strategists will have to adjust to this new environment.

Technological advances have allowed the media to catch up with the military capabilities and turned them into a direct and influential factor in future military operations. Computers, information networks, multi-media technology, cellular phones and satellite transmission equipment are now available for reporters operating in the field, providing them with the capability of a direct connection for immediate and extensive coverage without the need to resort to the military communication systems. The CNN displayed this capability with its dramatic description of attacks on Baghdad. Despite the disruption of the Iraqi international telephone exchange, during the initial air attack, the CNN was able to connect its portable satellite in a few minutes for a live broadcast. This

⁵ Williams, Pete, “*Let’s Face it, This is the Best War Coverage We’ve ever had,*” Washington Post, March 17, 1991.

⁶ Gottschalk, Marie, “*Operation Desert Cloud: The Media and the Gulf War,*” World Policy Journal, Summer 1992, Vol.9, pp 450.

was the first time in the history of warfare that a live transmission was carried out from a capital under air attack. Technology will make media coverage even more impressive and influential. Today, mobile satellite disks provide real-time video coverage of the war. Electronic mail, digital transmission of photographs and the facsimile have further improved reporting capabilities.⁷

New communication systems have been introduced during the past five years that enable worldwide connections at a higher speed and accuracy. Networks of low earth orbiting satellites provide voice, data, fax, and paging services everywhere in the world and radically improve the speed and flexibility of the media. The lightly equipped reporters are now better connected and less dependent on the military systems and will grow more capable of operating in the most isolated areas of operations.

CNN Factor and National Security Policy

US policy options are typically tied to political, economic, strategic and geo-strategic considerations and require a cool strategic thinking at the policy-making level. The US news media offers no time for such a deliberate and quiet process. The recent China-US standoff represents a typical model of the news media shaping the policy-making environment and acting as a driving force for policy options. The main feature associated with this crisis was the media's focus on the way the administration has managed its first international crisis, putting the policy makers under tremendous pressure. The China-US standoff has, again, proved two principles. First, the environment in which the national security decisions are taken is no longer private or free of the CNN factor. Second, US policy options could have been different had there been sufficient

⁷ Everette, E. Dennis, “*The Media at War: The Press and The Persian Gulf Conflict*,” New York: Gannett Foundation Media Center, 1991, 39.

“free” time to respond to an international crisis. This crisis reflected the historic fundamental influence the media have had on US policy decisions in respect to wars, interventions and crisis management. John Shattuck, the former US Assistant Secretary of State had noted; “ *The media got us into Somalia and then got us out.* ”

Richard Nixon, the former US President, raised a highly controversial issue concerning the impact of the news media at the National Security level. He stated: “*Whatever the intention behind such relentless and literal reporting of war, the result was a serious demoralization of the combat front, raising the question whether America would ever again be able to fight an enemy abroad with unity and strength of purpose at home.*” ⁸ Most observers disagree. They argue that the media, referred to as the “Fourth Estate”, ⁹ did not break America’s will in Vietnam. It, rather, challenged the policy and filled the government-people credibility gap by publishing the un-communicated Vietnam policy, leading the public to question the US national interests as opposed to the purpose of war. The Gulf War set the standard for debates over US wars. Countless number of war experts and analysts offered the US public an opportunity to debate policy, strategy, operations and even tactics of war. The CNN factor allowed an open examination of the national interests, cost, risks and values and offered the US public an informal review of the international geo-strategic environment in which the military strategy is likely to function. It also brought about the most fundamental factor the American nation values in wartime, a national consensus on the purpose of the war. A national debate over military strategy has never been the favorite approach for policy makers, as it portrays the media as determining the policy and forcing its own agenda on

⁸ Nixon, Richard, “ *The Memories of Richard Nixon*, ” New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978.

⁹ Marc D. Felman, “*The Military-Media Clash and the New Principle of War: Media Spin*,” Maxwell AFB, Ala, Air University, School of Advanced Airpower Studies, 1995.

the national security process. However, such an overwhelming analysis influx is too difficult to predict, control or censor, particularly with a highly competitive and diverse media in a wartime environment.

So far there is no evidence that the news media, by themselves, are capable of forcing policy makers to drastically change their policies, especially those related to war and peace. However, under the right conditions, the news media can demonstrate a powerful effect in shaping the national environment under which crucial policies and war decisions have to be made.

CNN Factor and Military Strategy

Since Vietnam War, the US military strategy has been doomed to be precise, swift, and decisive with minimal US casualties and collateral damage. This, to all military strategists who prefer a wider set of options, is a very narrow scope to craft a military strategy. A prolonged war with the potential of mass casualties and a vague exit is no strategic choice for the US military strategists. It is neither acceptable to nor supported by the US public opinion. Within this framework, the CNN factor has played a central role in the evolvement of the US military strategies. In other words, the news media has, since Vietnam, determined the nature, scope, and the evolvement of the US military strategies and the conduct of US wars in the 4th quarter of the 20th century and may well force further changes in the coming decades.

The conduct of war has been sharply affected in the CNN age. The powerful camera has brought war to the public. Every military act will be exposed to the whole world. Future execution of the military strategy will bring a whole set of issues in regard to International Law. The media will be fully prepared to pursue such issues to the

extreme end. Military commanders have to be fully equipped with political and legal responses to a variety of questions in relation to violations of International Law like excessive use of force, indiscriminate destruction, internationally banned weaponry and munitions, illegal use of land, air, sea and space, violation of bilateral and international instruments, the legitimacy of targets, civilian casualties, unnecessary military measures and destruction of cultural and religious structures. The news media will, certainly, be the central tool in bringing “Just War, Just Cause” debate under spotlights. This entails the probability of undermining not only the domestic public support for the US military strategy, but also the way the international public opinion perceive the legitimacy and credibility of US wars. Historically, much of European military violations escaped such a criticism until official documents were released several decades later. In the CNN age, where the real-time war coverage is the norm, the whole world will be vigilant, as the ends will no longer justify the means.

The real time reporting will fundamentally alter the strategic decision-making cycles. Policy makers and military strategists should be prepared to squash their decision timeframes to match the speed of media’s penetration into public opinion. It is a dynamic competition in which strategists have to ensure that their strategies remain ahead and that they remain at the top of the events, proactively, not responsively. This entails that they have to fight at two fronts simultaneously; the battlefield and the home front.

Recent US military engagements, in the Gulf, Bosnia and Kosovo, have revealed the emergence of a new pattern of military decision-making. In response to media reports of civilian casualties and collateral damage, political authorities and high military commands stepped into the tactical level. Decisions on targets selection and fire control,

traditionally made by tactical and operational commands, were, collectively, made in London, Paris and Washington. The spectacle of watching the bodies of dead civilians, in the Gulf War, caused the Pentagon and CENTCOM to spend an enormous amount of time explaining to the US public opinion the rationale behind target selection. The incredible power of the camera has increased the pressure on military strategists and theater commanders and proved capable of producing mixed results at the strategic and operational levels. In the incident of the “Highway of Death,” the news media, focusing on the number of dead bodies and the scope of destruction, complained of unnecessary killings. Schwarzkoph wrote: *“Powell informed me that the White House was getting nervous, the reports make it look like wanton killing.”*¹⁰ The coalition allies, also, became nervous about the “Highway of Death.” Gen. Schwarzkoph recalled: *“In Washington, the controversery over wanton killing had become uncomfortably intense, even the French and the British had begun asking how long we intended to continue the war.”*¹¹ The Highway incident had revealed the potential for tremendous political pressure on the military strategists and theater commanders to end the war even prior to the accomplishment of their strategic objectives.

Wars and military campaigns will definitely bring their horrors. Every bomb dropped will be politically sensitive and could very well be broadcast around the world with tremendous impact on the way operations are executed. The military commanders in the 21st century can be assured that horrors, with or without their wish, will be shown on the screens. Horror management, not media management, should be a crucial ingredient of their military strategies. Military strategy has to incorporate the

¹⁰ Schwarzkoph, Norman, General, USA Ret., *“It doesn’t Take a Hero,”* Linda Grey Bantam Books, New York, NY.

¹¹ Ibid

impact of the news media and to ensure that the horror occurring in the field, and that portrayed on the screens, do not undermine the domestic and international support.

In the CNN age, the engagement of the political and strategic authorities in tactical planning and execution remains an open question. It would have a long-range negative impact on the military strategy and will, definitely, lead to a gradual decline in the functional significance of the operational level of war. This is a perfect recipe to lose the war. To win future wars, the decision making cycle has to be reversed to its natural course. This cannot be done unless the media is integrated at the early stages of military campaign planning. Inevitably, the news media will have a greater role in modern warfare and, thus, will become an integral part of the military strategy. Futurists Alvin and Heidi Toffler, the authors of *War and Anti War*, offer strong argument on the media role in wartime; “*Some of the most important combat of tomorrow will take place on the media battlefield.*”¹²

Future US military strategies may have to function within an international context in a sensitive, highly complex, and cross-cultural operational environment. Such an environment will naturally invite controversial situations, favorable for the media to operate. It is of paramount importance that the planning phase takes this factor into account in order to maintain the political will and operational capabilities of the coalition members during the operations. If strategists fail to take this into account, the CNN factor will, definitely grow wider and become more influential.

¹² Toffler, Alvin and Heidi, “*War and Anti-War: Survival at the Dawn of the 21st Century*,” Little, Brown and company, Boston, MA, 1993.

CNN Factor at the Operational Level

As a result of the growing power of the “Fourth Estate” and its influence over the US national security policy and military strategy, it may be safe to assume that the operational environment will, also, experience substantial changes. CNN today is an integral part of the operation centers and situation rooms found throughout the US national security institutions, military HQs and foreign policy agencies. The CNN factor, at this level, performs two basic operational functions: communications and intelligence.

Live exchange of direct and indirect messages between opponents in the Gulf War has created an un-precedented pre-hostility, strategic dialogue through which each military commander attempted to penetrate the mind of his opponent and the will of the opposing fighting force. Schwarzkoph’s live communications to Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War, and the latter’s endeavor to manipulate the US public opinion, have turned the TV screens into operational communication channels adding, therefore, additional layers to the war’s fog and friction.

The media’s function in the area of operational intelligence has grown wider and became a very serious concern for theater commanders and their staff. Military operation rooms today, equipped with TV screens, provide operational and tactical intelligence even before the traditional intelligence channels report in. The media has become an important source of intelligence. In fact, it could become the sole source available, capable of providing real-time input for a whole set of operational considerations like: deployment, equipment, weapon systems, training, morale, will to fight, combat readiness, assessment of maneuver effectiveness and the impact of fire support. At less than five-meter resolution, troop formations and aircraft placement will be distinctly

visible on commercial TV screens. Troop movement will be monitored, not only by US opponents, but also by the dispassionate observers and military analysts. The large flanking movements planned under strict secrecy, similar to that occurred in the Gulf War, would be exposed to viewers around the world. The CNN physical presence in the operation rooms, combined with its ability to display images of extremely high accuracy, could provide the grounds for field intelligence assessment. Military experts predict the time might come when the military commanders will seek the media's forecast as a planning factor to serve future operations. Alvin and Heidi Toffler support this argument; *“ Commercial reconnaissance satellite will make it almost impossible for combatants to hide from the media, and with all sides watching the video screen, instant broadcasts from the battle zone threaten to alter the actual dynamics and strategies in war. ”*¹³

The commanders and their staff must assume that it will be very difficult to keep out of the media, or to conduct military operations in isolation from the pressure that the media bring to their Area of Operation or even to their own operation rooms. They will have little means to control the impact of the media in the name of operational security. The planning process cannot escape the impact of the CNN factor. The staff would not be totally free to pursue their operational objectives without considering time and resources, not only to respond to every crisis that the media portray, but also to participate proactively in shaping the military-media environment.

Conclusion

Live coverage of US wars has reinforced the informational dimension of modern warfare. The media today has the capability to outpace the military operations. This has,

¹³ Ibid

traditionally, been perceived by the military as a threat to operational security and was countered through physical censorship of media products; a historic security measure that constituted the foundation of the military media tension, mistrust, and mutual misperception. As Arthur Lubows notes: “ *Mutual mistrust is part of the shared heritage of soldiers and journalists in time of war. So is mutual accommodation.*”¹⁴

A new working framework for military media relationship has to be developed based on mutual understanding of each other’s functions, capabilities, limitations and professional considerations. Under no circumstances should the military deny the media its constitutional right of a free access to America’s wars. The media should continue to directly address the US and international public, to communicate consistent and credible information and to function as an independent record for history. On the other hand, the media should demonstrate a responsible attitude by honoring the military requirements for operational security. However, the traditional criteria of operational security may be revisited. Future warfare will operate under completely different set of security rules. The traditional criteria of operational security will not be valid in future operations. Location of troops and equipment do not necessarily point to the commanders’ intentions. Highly mobile satellite uplinks and high-resolution satellite images will definitely change the standards of field security. Operating under modified security rules would, definitely, eliminate the need for military censorship and security review requirements. This would give cooperation different dimension beyond the traditional logistic support and transportation provided to reporters in the field. Within this context, the US military strategy should have nothing to fear.

¹⁴ Quoted in Alan D. Campen, “*The First Information War*,” Fairfax, VA, AFCEA International Press, 1992.

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