

The Fourth Estate in Fourth Generation Warfare

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The Fourth Estate in Fourth Generation Warfare
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Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld outlined the military's media policy for Operation Iraqi Freedom by stating "We need to tell the factual story - good or bad - before others seed the media with disinformation and distortion, as they most certainly will continue to do."¹ He saw the important role the media would play in impending operations and challenged his commanders to make certain that reporters were right up front with the troops. The policy was a resounding success. Once the first phase of the operation ended, however, the media/military relationship soured. The Stabilization and Security phase of the operation has been marked by constant, negative news features concerning the war. The dominant themes have been insurgent successes and the military's heavy-handedness. These themes have helped the cause of the insurgents engaging in what is known as fourth generation warfare. The U.S. is losing the media battle. In order to reverse this trend and counter the insurgents' advantages within the constructs of the fourth generation warfare in which it is currently engaged, the military must discard its inherent distrust of the media, fully embrace the media by re-implementing the embedded media program of Operation Iraqi Freedom and take full advantage of the alternative media

¹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Public Affairs Guidance (PAG) on Embedding Media During Possible Future Operations/Deployments in the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) Area of Responsibility (AOR)*, (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 101900Z February 2003).

outlets which have taken on an increasing role in shaping societal opinions.

Media Distrust

The current state of mutual distrust between the military and the media has not always existed. World War II offered an example of a relationship that was mutually beneficial. One can trace the underpinnings of today's adversarial relationship to the Vietnam War. The unprecedented access the U.S. military allowed the press put it in conflict with an agency that was not being forthright with the American people. The optimistic briefings the military and the administration provided in order to maintain public support for the war did not jibe very well with the graphic images being televised into America's living rooms.² The military lay the erosion of public support for the war at the feet of the press, which was thought of as unpatriotic and guilty of aiding and abetting the enemy - a charge that is again being leveled at it today. From the media's perspective, the military was being deliberately misleading, and it could not be trusted. This situation established a feeling of animosity.

The military engagements that followed the Vietnam War did little to assuage either side. The military tried varying levels

² Christopher Paul and James J. Kim, *Reporters on the Battlefield: The Embedded Press System in Historical Context* (Santa Monica: The Rand Corporation, 2004), 37, http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2004/RAND_MG200.pdf (accessed December 28, 2004).

of media accessibility, from a complete clamp down on the media during the invasion of Grenada to the press pools of the Gulf War. The media has expressed dissatisfaction with every measure and manifested that dissatisfaction with an increased anti-military slant to the reporting on the engagements. The military has attempted to limit what the media sees and can report on, filtering it when possible. For its own part, the media has attempted to evade the restrictions by either suing in court (claiming an infringement of their First Amendment rights) or by placing free-lance reporters in the area, outside the constraints of the press pools or embeds. The media used the latter effectively in Somalia and Haiti, where the Marine units coming ashore were greeted not by hostile fire but by hordes of reporters on the ground. The military needed to allow the media more access to ensure that its version of the story was at least considered.

Embedded Media

During Operation Iraqi Freedom, the military allowed the media unprecedented access and placed a preponderance of the embedded media down at the soldiers' level where they could witness the professionalism of our young men and women. Media sources embedded nearly eight hundred reporters with various units throughout the chain of command. At the height of the operation, the various news agencies filed over six thousand

stories a week.³ The embedded press lived, ate, and moved into combat with the unit to which they were attached. The embed process served as a revelation for the media. As one CBS correspondent said, "I just had no idea our army was filled with such quality people."⁴

The media saturation was also instrumental in ensuring the enemy propaganda machine was checked and that the media self-corrected its own missteps. Throughout the initial days of the war, Saddam Hussein tried to influence public opinion through the use of the Arab news agencies. He utilized images of himself walking about town and images of captured Americans to try to bolster his people. He also attempted to sway their opinions by lying to them about both the progress of the American attack and the atrocities the Americans were committing. The embedded media was at the forefront in dispelling these myths, particularly those dealing with the progress of the American attack. Contrary to what the talking pundits at home were saying, news from the embeds tended to be upbeat, portraying the halt and the attacks on the supply convoys favorably. During the advance on Baghdad, the military had to refuel and rearm. They chose to do this during the sandstorm-enforced halt. Initial media reports

³ Glenn T. Starnes, "Leveraging the Media: The Embedded Media Program in Operation Iraqi Freedom," (Student Issue Paper, Center for Strategic Leadership, July 2004), 3-5. <http://www.carlisle.army.mil/usacsl/Publications/S04-06.pdf> (accessed January 4, 2005).

⁴ James Lacey, "Who's Responsible for Losing the Media War in Iraq?" *Proceedings*, October 2004, 38.

portrayed this in a negative light. Those reporters embedded in the higher headquarters units knew this was a necessary halt, and if anything the attack was ahead of schedule. One reporter summed up the commanders' feeling as, "Isn't it nice of them to come out of hiding in the cities and attack across open desert to be slaughtered."⁵ None of this upbeat coverage would have been possible without the embeds.

More Embeds

However, the success of the embedded reporter program has not carried over into the current phase of operations. Just after major combat operations ended in Iraq, the number of embedded reporters dropped to less than fifty,⁶ and free-lance reporters replaced them. These reporters are not well versed in the military. Furthermore, the steady drive of the news cycle has had the consequence that the constant attacks on coalition forces are getting all the attention. The media deems these attacks more "newsworthy," while the feel-good feature stories, the hallmark of the reconstruction effort, are deemed "boring." They don't sell, and they are "all the same." Editors seek breaking news for their readership. At a time when the military needed embedded reporters to see the day-to-day triumphs of the individual soldier, there were none available. As one commander

⁵ Lacey, 39.

⁶ Starnes, 6.

noted, "Prematurely severing the embed linkage removed the opportunity to report on the reawakening country and the metamorphosis of an exclusively combat force into a reconstruction force."⁷

Increasing the number of embedded reporters and allowing them to once again become involved with all levels of our military operations places them in positions where they can report on both successes and failures. Instead of focusing on the misconduct perpetrated by a small minority of soldiers, the spotlight could be on the vast majority of military personnel who are doing a superb job under trying circumstances. The embedded reporters need to join their prospective units during the units' work-up phase while they are still in their home bases. This allows the reporters to get to know the troops and the chain of command on which they will be reporting. It facilitates the necessary training the reporters must follow in order to ensure that they know enough field craft not to pose a potential danger to the troops. This training also benefits the reporters by giving them a shared perspective of what life is like in the military as it trains for war. As the Third Infantry Division noted in its after action report, "Embedding media is a

⁷ Christopher C. Conlin, "What Do You Do for an Encore?" *Marine Corps Gazette*, September 2004, 78.

relationship of trust. Embedding at the earliest opportunity allows for sufficient time to build a trusting relationship.”⁸

An argument against embedding is that embedded reporters will become subject to a feeling of loyalty for the troops with whom they are sharing deprivations and on whom they are relying for their safety. Moreover, those left out of the embed process will view the additional access as favoritism that is doled out to only those who are reporting favorably on the military.⁹ In light of recent events in Fallujah, the former argument has no merit. Good or bad, the media will report what it sees. Media outlets are for profit organizations. They must feed the public the stories that sell or risk losing out on a story, and possible sales, to a rival outlet. The short attention span prevalent in today’s society coupled with its inane fascination with others’ misery ensures that the shocking, negative stories will always have a market. The latter argument is something against which commanders must guard. While it may be tempting to ignore those reporters who are hostile to the military by favoring others who are not, it can also invite a backlash which the military will be hard-pressed to overcome. It must be

⁸ Military Reports & Editors. “Embedded Media.” Third Infantry Division (Mechanized) After Action Report: Lessons Learned. http://www.militaryreporters.org/lessons_11-19-03.html, (accessed December 20, 2004).

⁹ Ellen Ratner, “Embed or in bed?” *World Net Daily*, April 4, 2003, http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=31878 (accessed January 2, 2005).

especially vigilant with what is regarded as non-traditional media.

Alternative Media

The advent of cable television began the process of the fragmentation of the media that is just reaching critical mass. For decades the television-viewing populace relied on the big three (NBC, ABC, CBS) to keep it informed. Today that is no longer the case. All-news-networks like FOXNEWS, MSNBC, and CNN HEADLINE NEWS now have a wider audience. Niche networks exist and cater to history buffs, closet scientists, and varied other interests. The internet has had the same effect on print journalism. A myriad of Web Logs now exist offering their readers twenty-four hour a day access to the latest news and opinions on every subject imaginable. Moreover, every corporation and organization has its own website and disseminates its version of the truth. This fragmenting of the media has created an environment rife with opportunity for the military.

The military must engage in a form of distributed network operations for the political will of the population. The majority of operations currently underway in Iraq are not the type of stories that appeal to the mainstream media. Stories about bridges, schools, and hospitals being built, water and sewage treatment plants being brought back on-line, and the

reconstitution of the police and national guard forces are just not front page news. They are not stories that will draw many viewers. These stories do hold an appeal to the niche outlets. Documentaries concerning some of the aforementioned subjects would find a natural audience on The Discovery Channel, National Geographic, or the History Channel. Matching the right feature with the appropriate market would be key. Subsidizing the creation of these documentaries could be but one way the military gets the true story out. By attacking these niches eventually the mass of the population has the message.

The military has yet to exploit one of the greatest assets of the information age. Unit web sites, if established, contain little more than contact and chain of command information. Deploying units should use these sites to keep the local communities from which they have deployed as well as hometowns of their members abreast of what the units are doing. Daily multimedia updates should be the goal. Operational security must take precedence, but whatever can be used should be. It is amazing that with a few mouse clicks the Berg beheading video is easily attainable, but the public would be hard-pressed to find any video content of Iraqi civilians working side by side with the U.S. military. These small day-to-day triumphs are the norm in Iraq. Yet, they are mostly unknown. The military must do a better job of getting the media to carry that story.

Fourth Generation Warfare

The greatest argument against the increased access of the media in general and to embeds in particular has always been that the negative stories which tend to dominate the coverage aid and abet the enemy. This has never been more relevant than now, when the face of war has changed with the advent of the information age. Fourth generation warfare is an attack on the public conscience and its will to fight. "Fourth generation adversaries will be adept at manipulating the media to alter domestic and world opinion... A major target will be the enemy population's support of the government and the war. Television news may become a more powerful operational weapon than armored divisions."¹⁰ Incidents such as the Abu Ghraib prison scandal and the shooting of the wounded insurgent in Fallujah have brought calls from all sides to limit what reporters are allowed to see and report on. As one conservative pundit has remarked, "The presence of reporters and camera crews sooner or later creates video footage for the enemy's recruitment and propaganda machine. A free society shoots itself in the foot and emboldens and encourages the enemy by allowing such scenes, taken out of

¹⁰ William S. Lind and others, "The Changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation." *Marine Corps Gazette*, October 1989, 26.

context, to be broadcast."¹¹ These attempts at curtailing media access are misguided at best.

By stripping the embedded media from the military, it is in effect giving up the field of battle. Critics of the embedded media fail to see that the nature of the warfare we are fighting has shifted. LtCol Hammes, a noted expert on fourth generation warfare, encapsulates it as such, "...insurgent leaders understand and apply the techniques of fourth generation war to manipulate Western democracies...a direct message delivered via international media is an exceptionally effective strategic approach."¹² The embedded media provides a lens through which the American public can view events transpiring in a world that is alien to them. Without the embedded media, agencies such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, agencies which are not friendly to the United States, remain to fill the void and broadcast the insurgents' message all over the world, directly from the battlefield. The most effective tool to counter that message, an unhindered media, would be constrained by having to negotiate its stories without the military's assistance.

Conclusion

¹¹ David M. Huntwork, "Embedded Reporters a Bad Idea," *Conservative Monitor*, December 8, 2004, <http://www.conservativemonitor.com/opinion04/151.shtml> (accessed January 2, 2005).

¹² Hammes, 40.

The U.S. military has an opportunity to ensure that the hard work and sacrifices of its members do not go unnoticed and that the American public hears the true about the military effort in Iraq. The military must disregard its distrust of the media and expand the embedded media program allowing it unfettered access to all levels of training, exercises, and deployments. It must embrace the alternative media outlets that are the hallmark of the information age. The military must let the media reveal the good and the bad, for it will be overwhelmingly good. As Secretary Rumsfeld stated so aptly while speaking about the war on terrorism, "But in this war, the first victory must be to tell the truth."¹³

¹³ Donald H. Rumsfeld, "A New Kind of War," The New York Times, September 27, 2001, sec A.

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