

Opportunity Lost

Public Affairs, Information Operations, and the Air War against Serbia

MAJ GARY POUNDER, USAF

Editorial Abstract: The wartime communiqué—a government's version of how a conflict is progressing—is a feature almost as old as war itself. In this article, Major Pounder examines the control and release of military information to the public during the air war against Serbia. He concludes that, in spite of the increased attention we have placed on information operations, the United States and NATO were ill prepared to win the “media war” (the competition for press attention, credibility, and—ultimately—sympathy for one side’s views). These failures represented shortcomings in doctrine, organization, and training and, to a certain extent, a cultural gap between the public-affairs officer and the “information warrior.” He offers recommendations for fighting and winning the public-information campaign that is certain to accompany the next war.

BRUSSELS, 19 APRIL 1999—The auditorium at the headquarters of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was packed with reporters awaiting a press briefing. Representatives of virtually every major US and European news organization jockeyed for position and photo angles; crews representing cable and broadcast news networks prepared to beam the event around the world. The level of media interest and attendance seemed reminiscent of a summit meeting or a visit by a head of state. But there was no summit or visiting leader at Brussels that day; instead, the world press had gathered at Headquarters NATO to hear an official explanation of a bombing attack gone awry in Kosovo. Less than a month into NATO's landmark military campaign against Serbia, media attention had shifted from overarching political and military issues to a single tactical event that had seemingly acquired strategic importance.

Five days before the briefing in Brussels, US Air Force F-16s mistakenly attacked two civilian convoys near the Kosovo village of Djakovica, killing at least 12 refugees. NATO hoped the press conference would put the episode to rest, ending the banner headlines and nonstop TV coverage generated by the



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incident. "Civilians Are Slain in Military Attack on Kosovo Road," trumpeted a front-page article in the *New York Times*.¹ "Convoy Deaths May Undermine [NATO's] Moral Authority," wrote the *Los Angeles Times*.² Cable News Network (CNN), quoting a Serbian official, called the attack "a humanitarian catastrophe."³ CNN correspondent Alesso Vinci, escorted to the scene by Serb officials, filed graphic reports from Djakovica, featuring gruesome images of burned and bloodied corpses scattered among bombed-out vehicles. Video footage from the scene led evening newscasts in the United States and Western Europe; equally searing still photographs from the scene received prominent play in subsequent editions of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and hundreds of newspapers around the world.

Now, after almost a week of media speculation, coverage, and analysis, NATO would offer its own account of what happened on the road near Djakovica. The room fell silent as a NATO public affairs officer (PAO) moved to the podium and introduced the scheduled briefer, Brig Gen Dan Leaf of the US Air Force. Commander of the 31st Expeditionary Wing at Aviano Air Base, Italy, Leaf led NATO's official inquiry into the incident. His selection for the task seemed appropriate since the F-16s that dropped the errant bombs had been assigned to his command. Drawing from the results of his inquiry, General Leaf offered a highly detailed discussion of the event, outlining the chronology of the attack and offering insights on the difficulty pilots face in identifying ground targets at medium altitude. Leaf also conceded that "it is possible there were civilian casualties at both locations" bombed by the F-16 pilots.⁴

It was, by most accounts, a bravura performance; one public-affairs report claimed that General Leaf's "detailed and thorough briefing put the issue to rest."⁵ But the media seemed less inclined to let the event fade away, given NATO's earlier contradictory statements on the attack. The *Washington Post* noted that "Leaf's acknowledgement marked a sharp change of tack" for the alliance. *Post* reporter Dana Priest, who covered the

Djakovica incident, claimed that "NATO officials obfuscated about operations while evidence accumulated that NATO bombs accidentally killed civilians."⁶ Other broadcast

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and print outlets also compared Leaf's statement with earlier NATO statements. The alliance, according to *Newsweek*, "couldn't get its own story straight, contrasting General Leaf's comments to initial statements by Supreme Allied Commander General Wesley Clark (who blamed the attack on the Serbs), and later assertions from Pentagon spokesman Ken Bacon ("we only hit military vehicles"). In the end, *Newsweek* observed, NATO's varying pronouncements on the Djakovica tragedy "hurt its credibility far more than Milosevic did."⁷

Welcome to the media war.

Six months after the last bomb fell on Serbia, it seems increasingly apparent that Operation Allied Force represented a watershed in modern warfare. The first major conflict won through airpower alone, Allied Force may also be remembered as the first true "media war," in which the power of instantaneous coverage and dramatic visual images rendered strategic importance to a handful of tactical events and threatened to undermine political and military coalitions in the process. The power of public information—particularly television images—to influence and transform public opinion cannot be underestimated, even in an air war that lasted just 78 days. General Leaf, the wing commander who faced the press that day in Brussels, believes NATO's slow response to the



Media "army" camped outside Aviano Air Base during Operation Allied Force

Djakovica incident "could have cost us the war,"⁸ despite the fact that errant bombs represented less than one-tenth of one percent of those dropped in the Balkans.

Dr. Jamie Shea, NATO's chief spokesman during the war, offered similar views of the media's potential impact on military operations. Allied Force—viewed through the media prism—became a conflict in which "the individual incident is played up, and the general trend is played down . . . a series of individual newsworthy events, some of which are decisive to the outcome of the conflict, others of which are totally irrelevant."⁹ In this media environment, according to Dr. Shea, media preoccupation with a handful of collateral-damage incidents—what he termed "the 0.1% of failure"—became "the central drama of the conflict and the yardstick for judging NATO's military and moral effectiveness."¹⁰ Recognizing the media's ability to define and redefine conflicts virtually overnight, Shea observed that "winning the media campaign is just as important as winning the military campaign—the two are inseparable. You can't win one without the other."¹¹

Not surprisingly, the United States and its NATO partners attempted to do just that during Allied Force as part of a comprehensive information operations (IO) campaign. Well

before the first bombs fell in the Balkans, dedicated IO cells were organized at the command and joint task force levels, tasked to integrate—and employ—such diverse tools as civil affairs, electronic warfare, intelligence, and public information in an effort to control and dominate the "information battle space."

While NATO attempted to saturate the world's airwaves with near-constant briefings and interviews, the Serbs also succeeded in getting their own message out, forcing the alliance to react to a steady stream of public pronouncements, propaganda attempts, and media-manipulation efforts. Contrasting the NATO and Serb media campaigns, Adm James Ellis, commander of Allied Forces in Southern Europe during Allied Force, observed that "the enemy was much better at this [public information and public affairs (PA)] than we were . . . and far more nimble. The enemy deliberately and criminally killed innocents by the thousands, but no one saw it. . . . We accidentally killed innocents, sometimes by the dozens, and the world watched on the evening news. We were continuously reacting, investigating, and trying to answer 'how could this happen?'"¹²

As IO matures into the cornerstone of modern war fighting, questions regarding the employment of PA and public information in IO are timely, relevant, and require immediate consideration. In an era of relentless, real-time coverage, the media has an indelible impact on public opinion, long identified as a critical center of gravity for any US military campaign. Indeed, if information is "the currency of victory on the battlefield,"¹³ then PA—through its public information mission—can clearly supply some of the capital required for winning the media war (as part of the IO campaign) and can bolster public support for the overall military effort. However, successful integration of public information into IO remains problematic; although IO planners and PAOs clearly had designs for what they hoped to accomplish during Allied Force, the doctrinal foundation for incorporating public information into IO remained unprepared for the challenges at hand.

The IO Revolution: Doctrine Leads, Procedures Lag

When they trace the evolution of IO in modern warfare, military historians may well regard 9 October 1998 as a minor milestone in the IO revolution. On that date, less than six months before the start of Allied Force, the US military published its first joint doctrine on information operations. Officially known as Joint Publication (Pub) 3-13, *Joint Doctrine for Information Operations*, this publication (in some respects) formalized the revolution by outlining theories, principles, and capabilities associated with IO.¹⁴

Joint Pub 3-13 also marked the culmination of a decade-long race to embrace and harness the tantalizing potential offered by IO. By the mid-1980s, theorists recognized that rapid advances in computer, communications, weapons, and guidance technologies would revolutionize warfare, an assertion affirmed by the stunning US victory in the Persian Gulf War. Writing shortly after that conflict, futurists Alvin and Heidi Toffler postulated that the world was witnessing a “third wave” of global change, based upon the control and exploitation of information and its associated technology. The Tofflers’ book *War and Anti-War: Survival at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century*, published in 1993, became required reading at service schools and war colleges, spawning a flood of student papers and military-journal articles that explored the Tofflers’ ideas and related them to new concepts in US military thought, including something called information warfare (IW).¹⁵

By the time *War and Anti-War* reached the bookstores, Air Force efforts to develop its own IW doctrine and organization were well under way. The service officially established IW as a priority in 1993, shortly after the Department of Defense developed its own IW policy. By 1993 the Air Force Information Warfare Center had opened its doors at Kelly Air Force Base, Texas, followed by the service’s first IW squadron (at Shaw AFB, South Carolina) two years later. Gen Ronald Fogle-

man, then the Air Force chief of staff, affirmed the commitment to IO in 1995, when he described it as “the fifth dimension of warfare . . . critical to military success in the future.”¹⁶ The Air Force subsequently defined information superiority as one of its “core competencies,” as “critical to conflict now as controlling air and space, or occupying land was in the past,”¹⁷ and implemented additional measures to realize its IO vision. Barely three years after General Fogleman’s speech, the Air Force had developed its own IO doctrine (Air Force Doctrine Document [AFDD] 2-5, *Information Operations*, published in August 1998) and created dedicated IO organizations at the numbered air force and major command levels. Staffed by IO experts and guided by the latest doctrine, the IO flights were expected to “lead the way in planning and executing warfighting IO.”¹⁸ Allied Force would provide the first major test for IO doctrine and organization; US Air Forces in Europe’s (USAFE) fledgling IO flight began preparing for potential operations in the Balkans just weeks after AFDD 2-5 was published.

As IO planning began to take shape, no one gave much thought to using public information as a pillar of the IO campaign—and with good reason. Since the early 1990s, the Air Force, along with the other services, had largely ignored the potential of public information to support and enhance IO. Although events in the Persian Gulf highlighted the ability of public information—delivered through the news media—to underscore national intent, influence military decision making, and sway public opinion at home, there was no real attempt to harness its potential for the IO effort.

Although the Gulf War underscored the potential benefits of a public-information campaign, the conflict also provided a cautionary tale on the power of public information and its potential impact on military operations. On 10 February 1991, barely three weeks after the air war began, a US Air Force F-117 attacked a suspected Iraqi leadership bunker in the Baghdad neighborhood of Al Firdos. Unknown to the pilot or coalition

planners, the Al Firdos complex was actually a civilian air-raid shelter. Hundreds of civilians died in the attack; the same CNN corre-

“Everyone—commanders, IO specialists, and public affairs officers—needs to understand public information is a battle space that must be contested and controlled like any other.”

spondents who had earlier described pinpoint strikes in glowing terms now highlighted the consequences of an attack gone astray—images of dead civilians being removed from the bunker became a staple of TV coverage. The impact on the air war was immediate; worried about potential political fallout, the US government essentially halted bombing against Baghdad for the next 10 days. Gen Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, directed the theater commander, Gen Norman Schwarzkopf, to personally scrub all target lists and transferred approval authority for Baghdad targets from the area of responsibility to Washington.¹⁹

Unfortunately, the lessons drawn from public-information efforts in the Persian Gulf appear to have been largely ignored as IO planning for Allied Force continued. Although some attempts were made to integrate public information into IO planning, these efforts eventually came to naught. One IO planner at Headquarters USAFE recalls that PA officers “seemed reluctant to participate in info ops,”²⁰ preventing the implementation of IO initiatives based on public information.

Analyzing the impasse over the potential role of public information in IO, Col (select) Jack Ivy, deputy director of the Air Force’s Public Affairs Center for Excellence at Maxwell AFB, Alabama, believes the problem stemmed from several factors, including a lack of education. “Everyone—commanders, IO specialists, and public affairs officers—needs to understand public information is a battle space that must be contested and con-

trolled like any other,” he observed.²¹ Within this context, Ivy believes, one can effectively employ public information as an IO tool—as long as those efforts are based on the truth, a principle endorsed by virtually all IO practitioners and PA officers. From Colonel Ivy’s perspective, truth-based public-information efforts represent the best of both worlds, allowing full integration of public information into the IO campaign without sacrificing the credibility and integrity of the PAO. According to Ivy, public information must be a part of IO in a media-driven world. The alternative, he observed, is “leaving the [public information] battlespace to either chance or the enemy.”²²

Interestingly, Ivy’s views on the public-information “battle space” have stimulated a healthy debate within the PA community. P. J. Crowley, a retired Air Force colonel who now serves as principal assistant secretary of defense for public affairs, believes that Ivy’s battle-space definition has “dreadful implications.” According to Crowley, establishing public information as a battle space establishes our own press as antagonists and the enemy media as possible targets. Such an environment, Crowley observes, sets the stage for an adversarial relationship with our own reporters and potential retaliatory action against Western journalists in enemy territory, complicating the overall public-information effort. “Public information should be a marketplace, not a battlespace,” he notes.²³

Although some members of the PA community have tried to define their element of IW, initial IO doctrine and training efforts have done little to identify the role of public information and PA in IO. Joint Pub 3-13 outlines the potential tasks for PA and public information in IO, but the Air Force’s own IO doctrine identifies PA as only a “temporary member” of the IW team, suggesting that public-information specialists would only “contribute special expertise as the need arises.”²⁴ Existing PA doctrine, guidance, and procedures have proven to be equally vague; the first Air Force PA doctrine document that addressed IO was published in October

1999—four months after the last bombs fell in the Balkans. These difficulties have been compounded by a lack of dedicated IO training for PA officers; even today, entry-level PAO training does not address IO, and PA personnel do not attend specialized IO courses, including the new “graduate-level” training program conducted at Hurlburt Field, Florida.²⁵

During Allied Force, the lack of definitive guidance for employing public information in IO resulted in an ad hoc approach to the integration issue. The IO campaign plan that eventually emerged made no mention of public information in the allied IW effort, effectively sheathing a potentially valuable weapon. PA (and public information) would eventually play a minor, reactive role in IO but only after the conflict was under way, when NATO found itself responding to Serbian claims and charges in the “new” media environment that enveloped Allied Force.

Public Information and the New Media Environment

By focusing the camera first on one crisis, then almost overnight on another, the media increasingly set the public agenda, and force politicians to deal with a constant flow of crises and controversies.

—Alvin and Heidi Toffler

One of the most important lessons of the Gulf War focused not on stealth aircraft or precision weapons, but on the impact of real-time news coverage of military operations. If Vietnam was the first “television war,” then Operation Desert Storm was the first “cable news conflict,” thanks to the ubiquitous presence of CNN and its legion of correspondents. During one memorable incident, General Schwarzkopf watched from his Riyadh command center as a TV news crew provided live coverage of an artillery duel between the 82d Airborne Division and Iraqi troops. Schwarzkopf’s amazement turned to shock when the correspondent named the US divi-

sion, giving Iraqi intelligence an opportunity to locate the 82d through communication with artillery units. More disturbingly, the report threatened to expose coalition war plans, since the 82d was already in a preassigned flanking position, just prior to the start of the ground war.²⁶ Fortunately, the Iraqis never discovered the division’s location, but the incident illustrated the potential hazards of live, unfiltered coverage from the battlefield.

As evidenced by the “live” artillery duel that General Schwarzkopf watched on TV, the dynamics of media coverage had clearly changed by the early 1990s. The same advances in computer and satellite technology that triggered the revolution in military affairs fueled similar, sweeping changes in mass communications. Satellite phones and portable, “flyaway” transmission dishes made it possible for CNN and its competitors to broadcast words and images from virtually any point on Earth, around-the-clock. The impact of this communications revolution on political, diplomatic, and military decision making was immediate and apparent. As Carl Builder noted in the mid-1990s, “Cable News Network now appears to be more pertinent than the CIA for current White House intelligence. The significance of CNN to the White House is that it represents information which is in the hands of the public, and must be reckoned with by the political elites. CNN can, by default, set the public agenda.”²⁷

Military leaders also wrestled with the consequences of the so-called CNN effect,²⁸ having experienced it firsthand during both the Gulf War and the ill-fated US military operation in Somalia. In fact, the Somalia campaign was something of a media creation, “a military operation launched by the evening news,” as *TV Guide* called it. Influenced by media reports from the scene, the Bush administration committed US troops to a humanitarian-relief mission in Somalia. Eventually, humanitarian operations would evolve into a security mission that resulted in conflict between US/United Nations (UN) forces and armed Somali clans.

Events in Somalia reached their zenith on 3 October 1993, when US Army Rangers launched a raid in Mogadishu to capture fugitive warlord Mohammed Farah Aidid. Isolated in the narrow streets and alleyways of the Somali capital, the Rangers fought a pitched, desperate battle with Aidid's soldiers while a UN relief column tried to reinforce American positions. When the battle was over, 18 Americans were dead, 77 wounded, and one had been captured. Aidid's troops celebrated by desecrating the body of a dead American, dragging it through the streets of Mogadishu. A reporter from the *Toronto Star* recorded the event with his 35-millimeter camera and a home video recorder. Ironically, US news organizations did not cover the incident; they had evacuated their personnel from Somalia two weeks earlier, fearing for their safety.

Reaction to the debacle in Mogadishu was swift and predictable. Congress and the American public expressed outrage, demanding an immediate end to the US military mission in Somalia. Sen. Robert Byrd of West Virginia sponsored an amendment to cut off funding for the operation, signaling that Congress would no longer support the Somali mission. Facing a firestorm of domestic criticism and dwindling public support, President Bill Clinton ordered US forces out of the war-torn African nation. The commanding power of the media—which (arguably) had led the United States into Somalia—now echoed the drumbeat for an American withdrawal. As Anthony Lake, former US national security advisor, later noted, “American foreign policy is increasingly driven by where CNN points its cameras.”²⁹

Noting the potential perils of live coverage and instant analysis, many commanders and PAOs began to view the press as a less reliable partner in keeping the public informed. As one senior PAO told James Kitfield of the *National Journal*, “With the explosion of 24-hour news outlets, there's greater pressure not only to report in real time, before facts can be evaluated and confirmed—but then those factually unreliable stories are instantly dissected,

analyzed, and commented upon the air. The irony is that this environment of 24-hour news coverage and ‘talking-heads’ programming is creating more heat, but less and less illumination.”³⁰

As the media environment became more competitive and interpretive, the number of reporters considered expert in military matters continued to decrease. Mark Thompson, defense correspondent for *Time* magazine, estimates that less than 50 percent of the reporters with Pentagon press credentials cover the military beat full-time. That number declines even further, he says, when one factors out reporters for newsletters and specialized, narrowly focused defense publications. The result is fewer journalists with the knowledge and experience required for reporting complex, military-related stories to a mass audience.

The trend toward less experienced journalists on the defense beat, coupled with the increase in punditry and instant analysis, has reinforced Pentagon perceptions that the press can't be trusted with sensitive information that could jeopardize operational security or the lives of US service members. Not surprisingly, most defense reporters refute that charge, noting that journalists knew in advance—and kept quiet about—the “left hook” maneuver against the Iraqi Republican Guard during Desert Storm. More recently, CNN anchor/reporter Bill Hemmer, who covered Allied Force from Aviano AB, Italy, stated that his network “went to great pains” to protect information (when required for security reasons) during the Balkans conflict.³¹ Bradley Graham, reporter for the *Washington Post*, believes that a “number of very reliable news organizations and journalists . . . cover the military in a responsible manner” and are willing to respect security concerns.³²

Most reporters would support Graham's assertion, but many also believe that the proliferation of cable-TV news channels has had a deleterious effect on coverage of the military. CNN's ratings—and financial success—during the Gulf War spawned a legion of imitators. By 1999, cable subscribers in many

American cities could choose from as many as nine different news and information channels, most of them controlled by a handful of media conglomerates. NBC, for example, had two cable outlets (CNBC and MSNBC), in addition to its long-standing broadcast network; CNN, the pioneer in cable news, had no fewer than six information channels on the air when Allied Force began. Not surprisingly, the rapid expansion of cable news outlets further fueled media competition, creating an enormous demand for content to fill round-the-clock news programming.

Nowhere was the demand for content greater—or more apparent—than at NBC, where the news division supplied content for no fewer than three separate networks. Yet, as Howard Kurtz of the *Washington Post* points out, NBC viewed the prospect of military operations in the Balkans as something of an opportunity—a chance to showcase the “news machine” built by the network and its news division president, Andrew Lack. In particular, NBC hoped its war coverage would reverse a recent ratings slide at MSNBC, the three-year-old cable channel co-owned with Microsoft. To do that, MSNBC followed its familiar, “big story” approach, providing saturation coverage of the Balkans the same way it had covered the O. J. Simpson trial and the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal.³³

Using that strategy, MSNBC would (eventually) devote 97 percent of its programming to the Balkans conflict. Not surprisingly, NBC’s wall-to-wall approach to war coverage quickly paid big dividends; barely three weeks into the conflict, MSNBC’s ratings had more than doubled. Audiences for other cable news channels—including CNN—also showed a substantial increase, as each outlet tried to outdistance its rivals in covering the war. Although some analysts worried that ever-increasing competition had reduced reporters to little more than “speed bumps on the information superhighway,” there was little room for introspection as long as war raged in the Balkans.³⁴

But hypercompetition, saturation coverage, and decreased objectivity weren’t the

only changes shaping the new media environment. As the 1990s drew to a close, traditional broadcast, print, and cable outlets faced a threat from a new source for news

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and information—the Internet. In 1998, one in five Americans visited the World Wide Web for news and information during any given week, a threefold increase over usage levels in 1996.³⁵ To satisfy this demand, hundreds of news-related web sites sprang up, some literally overnight. Many of the sites were established and maintained by mainstream media organizations, but a few upstart operations managed to claw their way to the front of the Internet news pack. Matt Drudge, a former gift shop manager with no previous journalism experience, created one of the web’s most popular news sites from his Hollywood apartment. By early 1999, more than a million people a day were accessing the *Drudge Report* for breaking news and information.³⁶

Globally, Internet use remained relatively low (only about 90 million people around the world had access in 1998), but studies indicated that web-based news sites attracted a premium audience. In America (and elsewhere) Internet news and information services reached consumers who were—on the whole—younger, better educated, and more affluent than traditional media audiences.³⁷ More importantly, as global governments moved on-line, the Internet also demonstrated an ability to reach the power elite, bypassing traditional communications channels. When Matt Drudge first revealed the existence of Monica Lewinsky, his web site received more than twenty-six hundred “visits” from the White House computer users in less than 12 hours.³⁸ It was, essentially, the same

effect demonstrated by CNN in the Gulf War, when world leaders used the cable outlet for breaking news and even intelligence data. However, in the Internet age, the power of instant information was multiplied again and again through the explosion of web sites, bulletin boards, and chat rooms.

Unfortunately, the advent of web-based news only exacerbated existing trends in journalism. More outlets meant even greater competition, accelerating the rush to get stories out first or to provide a new twist on those already reported. Additionally, the explosion of Internet reporting did little to improve journalistic accuracy. Drudge, who claims that "the reports on my web gossip sheet are 80% accurate," reported (erroneously) that a White House aide beat his wife, prompting a \$300 million libel suit.³⁹ Web sites operated by mainstream media outlets had their problems as well; during Allied Force, a *Washington Post* headline announced that NATO had softened its demands on Serbia—despite the fact that alliance communiqués showed no change in the negotiating stance. The *Post*'s inaccurate headline was subsequently echoed on various web sites (including its own), prompting additional, inaccurate reporting on the matter. As *Brill's Content* later noted, "In the age of the new media machine, where the story of the day gets the full 'Monica' treatment, once a negative scoop gets out there, there's no stopping it."⁴⁰

As the media environment evolved, IO practitioners and PAOs continued to neglect the public-information element of their battle space, setting the stage for Allied Force. Although both disciplines would provide unique contributions to the NATO war effort, the resulting IO campaign (ultimately) lacked the synergy that could have been achieved by linking PA and IO through a robust, fact-based public-information effort. The seeds of NATO's public-information problems—including the infamous incidents of collateral damage—were sown long before the first bombs fell on Belgrade.

Public Information Operations during Allied Force: A Winning Hand or Pyrrhic Victory?

Despite doctrine limitations, a lack of concrete procedures, and little regard for a changing media environment, IO planners and PAOs still made an effort to integrate public information into the IO campaign for Allied Force. When USAFE's IO cell began active planning for the air campaign in December 1998, the command's PA staff was invited to participate; senior PAOs attended several IO planning meetings, but these sessions produced little in the way of specific public-information objectives for the planned IO campaign.

Part of the problem apparently stemmed from differing perspectives on the role of PA in IO. A former USAFE PA officer claims that IO planners appeared more interested in "media manipulation" than dissemination of factual information, a perception that prompted the PA staff to limit its participation in IO. However, Capt John Shaw of USAFE's IO Flight believes that PAOs carried away the wrong impression: "There was never an intention to involve PA to participate in a distortion of truth or threaten their credibility," he recalls.⁴¹ Another IO planner claims that the IO staff approached PA about the possibility of public information as a "deterrent factor" in January 1999—almost two months before the operation began. According to that IO specialist, PA appeared "uninterested in the idea," and the proposal quickly died.⁴²

Debate over PA's exact role in IO also reignited a controversy within the PA community. Although most PAOs acknowledged that they could play a key role in IO, many worried that their participation would damage their credibility with the press and the public—audiences that demanded truthful, credible information. Lt Col Barbara Carr, USAFE's deputy director of public affairs during Allied Force, said it best: "A PAO's credibility is essential. Once lost—in reality or perception—word spreads through the media in



Later in the war, NATO eased its restrictions on media interviews with flag officers. Here, General Leaf discusses the air campaign with Ted Koppel of ABC News.

record time. And that PAO (and sometimes other PAOs in the vicinity who get painted with the same brush) can no longer function effectively in his mission. We need to be very careful on how our role in IO is articulated. I wouldn't say participating in IO puts us on a 'slippery slope,' but the potential is there."⁴³

P. J. Crowley echoes Carr's views on the integration issue for PA. He believes that full incorporation of PA into the IO effort would damage the credibility of PAOs. According to Crowley, PA needs to "cooperate more fully" with the IO community, while "avoiding integration into IO cells and other specialized units."⁴⁴

However, Colonel Ivy believes it is possible for PA to play an active role in IO without sacrificing its credibility. As an example, he cites press coverage of US amphibious training in the Persian Gulf in late 1990, before the start of Desert Storm. PA officers encouraged reporters to cover the event, which highlighted potential US capabilities against Iraqi forces in Kuwait. When the amphibious-landing op-

tion was later scrapped, members of the press corps accused PAOs of deceiving them. But, as Colonel Ivy points out, amphibious landings were still a military option when the press corps covered the training event. From his perspective, reporters were not deceived, and PA succeeded in its goal of communicating allied intent and capabilities through public information.⁴⁵

Lt Col Virginia Sullivan, US Air Force, Retired, a former PA officer now on the journalism faculty at Arkansas State University, agrees with Ivy's assessment: "When you are dealing with factual information or the mission of the campaign, PA and IO can work together without compromising the mission or ethics." As a PAO during initial US ground operations in Bosnia in 1995, she recalls that messages regarding the alliance's intent were developed and communicated through public information channels as part of the overall IO effort. One most notable success in this area, according to Professor Sullivan, was communicating the intent of the Implemen-

tation Force (IFOR) "to deal evenhandedly with all three factions to maintain the peace."⁴⁶ Sullivan believes that these efforts were instrumental in building confidence in both IFOR and the peace process.

Ironically, USAFE conducted similar PA efforts in the months leading up to Allied Force, although they remained outside the umbrella of an IO campaign. In June 1998, for example, the command's PA staff helped coordinate extensive media coverage of a major NATO air exercise over the Balkans. The operation was essentially a show of force for the Belgrade regime, but Colonel Carr recalls that PAOs "pulled out all the stops" in making the event visible to the press. A similar effort was mounted in October 1998 during the deployment of US bombers to Great Britain. According to Carr, both media events "sent a clear message to Milosevic," and "while they did not prevent the eventual bombing campaign, it may have postponed it."⁴⁷

Despite their potential deterrent value, not everyone in the allied chain of command supported these public-information initiatives. For example, USAFE's operations-security staff initially opposed publicizing the bomber deployment, claiming that media coverage would jeopardize potential operations. USAFE's PA staff faced similar criticism when it established a "Kosovo home page" on the Internet in September 1998, responding to media queries about the types of forces being arrayed against Serbia. Intelligence officers asked PA to shut down the web site, claiming that it revealed sensitive information to the Serbs. Intel later rescinded its request, however, when the deterrent value of the home page became apparent. Along with press inquiries, the web site received thousands of "hits" from Eastern Europe, including many from Serb government locations.⁴⁸

Unfortunately, these types of public-information initiatives were never integrated into the IO campaign against Serbia, something Colonel Carr attributes to a lack of understanding on both sides: "I got the sense they [IO planners] were not sure just how much

information to share with us. Likewise, I don't think we were sure how much we needed or should know." On a couple of occasions, according to Carr, PAOs were barred from portions of IO meetings or planning sessions and were told, "It's not something PA needs to know."⁴⁹ Colonel Ivy disagrees with that approach. For PAOs to be full members of the IO team, he observed, "they need to be completely in the loop." He noted that PAOs who remain outside or only partially in the IO loop will have a much harder time doing their job, particularly when something goes wrong.

Managing the public-information campaign was further compounded by challenges associated with a coalition effort. The PA staff at Headquarters NATO faced a daunting challenge: developing, coordinating, and managing PA policy for a 19-member alliance whose members often had sharply different views on releasing information and dealing with the press. Balancing political sensitivities and security concerns against the need to tell the "NATO story," the alliance (in concert with the Pentagon) eventually adopted restrictive policies on the release of information. The Pentagon's official media ground rules for Kosovo operations noted that "specific information on friendly force troop movements, tactical deployments, and dispositions could jeopardize operations and endanger lives. Therefore, release of some information will be denied or embargoed."⁵⁰

The limited-release policy enjoyed strong support from some NATO commanders who worried that real-time reporting would tip off the Serbs about planned military operations; however, other military leaders favored a more open approach. General Leaf, for example, believes that the military "could have been more accessible without giving away the farm."⁵¹

Not surprisingly, the allied decision to limit information triggered complaints from the press. But Pentagon and NATO officials stood their ground, citing a *Washington Post* article that identified targets in downtown Belgrade—before they were bombed—as proof

that the press placed “getting the story” ahead of operational security.⁵² Bradley Graham, who wrote the story, refutes that accusation, claiming that the Belgrade targets “were common knowledge” in the Pentagon. Mark Thompson of *Time* agreed: “Those targets were well known before the war began. It was no surprise that they were on the target list.”⁵³

As another key element of its information strategy, NATO also elected to limit media contact among its senior officers. By barring its wing commanders, component commanders, and joint task force commanders from speaking with the press, NATO thought that this would allow them to focus on their wartime duties while still maintaining a “unified” alliance message. When Allied Force kicked off in late March, the only flag officer authorized to conduct media interviews in the area of responsibility was General Clark, the supreme allied commander.

In theory, the concept made sense, but in execution it left much to be desired. The requirements of running the war and holding the NATO coalition together quickly consumed General Clark’s attention, leaving him little time to talk to the press. With General Clark (and other senior officers) largely unavailable, the media renewed their complaints about the dearth of information and the lack of access to military leaders.

Despite limits on the amount and type of information that could be released, NATO still tried to saturate the media with its message. In his remarkably candid postwar speech in London, Jamie Shea observed that “our credo at NATO was just to be on the air the whole time, crowd out the opposition, give every interview, do every briefing.”⁵⁴ In practice, this strategy consisted of a series of daily press conferences designed to shape and dominate television coverage of the war. As Shea recalls, “We had an MOD [Ministry of Defence] briefing from London late in the morning, and just as the audience was switching off from that, on came the 3 P.M. briefing (from NATO), and as soon as the 3 P.M. briefing was off the air, up jumped the Pentagon, the State Department, and the White House.

We occupied the whole day with our information. And the more we did, the less the media put on talking heads and others who could be nullifying our effort.”⁵⁵

In retrospect, according to Shea, “the one thing we did well in the Kosovo crisis was to occupy the media space. We created a situation in which nobody in the world who was a regular TV watcher could escape the NATO message.” Dr. Shea also noted that the allied briefings satisfied a key requirement for cable television news outlets: “It suits CNN or BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] World Service to have a daily show. . . . They have a lot of space to fill, and they want to do it cheaply. The best way of filling an hour virtually cost-free is to put NATO’s daily briefing on the box.”⁵⁶ Even NATO’s daily briefing time (3 P.M. in Brussels) was aimed at the TV audience; at that hour, viewers in Australia, Asia, Europe, and North America were awake and able to watch the “daily show” live. P. J. Crowley, who assisted with the PA effort in Brussels, believes that the saturation strategy worked: “Between our three daily briefings, we were able to command 18 hours of the 24-hour news day. The media dwelt more on our information than they did on Belgrade’s.”⁵⁷

From the other side of the briefing room, NATO’s media campaign received less-than-rave reviews from many of the reporters and columnists who covered the war. Lt Gen Bernard Trainor, US Marine Corps, Retired, a military analyst for the *New York Times*, stated bluntly that “the media manipulation got so transparent that I didn’t believe anything Jamie Shea and Ken Bacon had to say.” Because the military controlled the cockpit video, General Trainor commented, “We couldn’t prove when they were wrong.”⁵⁸ Trainor believes that the tight control of information represents payback time for what the military still believes the media did to it in Vietnam. He claims that, increasingly, the military’s attitude toward the press is, “We’ll tell you what you need to know.

Other members of the press corps were more charitable in their assessment of military motivations behind the information pol-

icy. Bradley Graham noted that "Secretary Cohen, General Shelton, General Clark, and other allied officials were genuinely concerned about security, and they made a judgement call—but they swung too far in the direction of security over the public's right to know."⁵⁹ Mark Thompson believes that oft-stated security concerns may have actually been a smoke screen for the political sensitivities of NATO members, who worried about the release of military information in the mass media: "A lot of the missing data was the result of political restrictions. NATO countries had veto power [over military operations], so the US was far more accommodating in restricting information than with its coalition partners during the Gulf War."⁶⁰

The military's information policy exasperated reporters, who vainly pressed for any new information on the air campaign against Serbia. *Time* likened Pentagon press briefings to "jousting sessions," in which journalists tried vainly to "divine the most banal battlefield data."⁶¹ During one particularly frustrating press conference, reporters asked Vice Adm Scott Fry of the Joint Staff how many allied sorties had been aborted due to bad weather. "I'm afraid I can't get into that level of detail off the top of my head," he replied. "How about an approximation?" a correspondent inquired. "I'd prefer not to even approximate it," stated Admiral Fry. "A ballpark figure?" asked another reporter? "I don't have that information available," said the admiral.⁶²

As one result of the media "gray out," according to James Kitfield, the press "badly misrepresented the size and scope of the air campaign in its first weeks." Early headlines in US and European newspapers implied a massive attack; the *New York Times* described initial air strikes as a "broad barrage," and a *Washington Post* headline reported "Bombing Spreads" just a few days later. With little amplifying or qualifying data, most journalists simply accepted the official line of an ever-intensifying war. When it became apparent that Allied Force was a much more modest effort—at least initially—the press accused NATO and the Pentagon of deception and

secrecy, prompting executives from major news organizations to ask Defense Secretary William Cohen for greater cooperation with the media.⁶³ Although reporters (eventually) received more information on the numbers of sorties flown and targets attacked, they still complained that the military was less forthcoming than in the past. "We were starving for information," recalls Mark Thompson.⁶⁴

Predictably, the perceived lack of information created a further rift over the oft-tense relationship between the military and the press. Some Pentagon correspondents claimed that senior Department of Defense officials and military officers misled them during Allied Force—a serious accusation. But other observers put at least part of the blame on the media. "It's easy to feel misled if you simply listen to what's being said without serious examination," observed Bradley Graham, who believes that defense reporters need to "listen more carefully and read between the lines."⁶⁵ Mark Thompson faulted some of his colleagues for "not doing their research in advance" and asking "dumb" questions, suggesting (from his perspective), that some reporters "wanted to be spoon-fed."⁶⁶

Reporters who covered the war in Europe voiced similar complaints about the lack of information. CNN's Bill Hemmer, who reported from Aviano AB and Headquarters NATO, said reporters at those locations felt "half fooled" because they could not gain critical information, including the numbers of sorties flown, the types of tactics employed, and the exact scope of the US military contribution. Hemmer believes that interviews with commanders could have filled in important details of the air campaign, offering context and perspective that the American public wanted. Hemmer noted, ironically, that he spent two weeks covering the air war at Aviano but never met—or interviewed—the wing commander (General Leaf) until his press conference in Brussels.⁶⁷

The allied media strategy also spurred internal critiques. Jamie Shea, P. J. Crowley, and others noted that NATO entered Allied Force with a PA staff that was undersized and lack-



Outside Aviano AB, the World Media observed and reported NATO flight operations.

ing in expertise. Crowley recalls that the headquarters PA staff had only three media specialists when the war began, necessitating the deployment of additional personnel—including Crowley himself—to deal with the horde of reporters that descended on Brussels.⁶⁸ Jamie Shea concedes that the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe/NATO public-information system “was not functioning optimally”⁶⁹ during the first month of the air war, a period that coincided with some of the alliance’s most embarrassing media episodes, including the Djakovica convoy bombing. Dr. Shea believes that NATO’s press and media organization should be strengthened “from the moment NATO’s involvement in a crisis or conflict appears inevitable.”

Crowley observes that NATO is already making changes in that area, “institutionalizing” an expanded media-relations cell to be better prepared to deal with the press during future crises.⁷⁰

Another weakness in NATO’s media strategy, according to Dr. Shea, was a lack of expertise on NATO’s opponent. During Allied Force, he observed, “It took several weeks before we had people knowledgeable about Yugoslavia in the MOC [Media Operations Center] or started to monitor the Yugoslav press or TV closely.”⁷¹ Lacking that expertise, NATO’s media managers sometimes found it difficult to respond to Serb statements and propaganda attempts. “If we had had this expertise from the beginning,” Shea believes, “we could have an-

ticipated some of Milosevic's moves, and learned to counter them better."⁷²

Outside Headquarters NATO, PA personnel at other levels faced their own challenges. Aviano AB, Italy, became "ground zero" for press coverage of Allied Force, when an army of six hundred media representatives descended on the installation. Capt Edward Thomas, chief of the 31st Fighter Wing's Public Affairs Office at Aviano, recalls that "our workload went [up] 600 percent at the beginning of Operation Allied Force; the first few days of the war, we were just not manned to deal with the mass numbers of the media."⁷³ However, even with limited augmentation from deployed units, the Aviano wing's PA shop never had more than 15 assigned personnel, complicating efforts to handle the media horde on its doorstep. Capt John Haynes, deputy public affairs officer for the 31st Fighter Wing, notes that "limited manning was truly killing us. Our staff routinely worked 15- and 16-hour days, seven days a week."⁷⁴ Haynes recalls that he once literally began dozing in the middle of a live interview on BBC radio, after a series of marathon workdays. Despite the demands of handling a huge press contingent, the Aviano PA office never asked for additional manning, and senior PAOs insist that combat units had enough PA specialists to meet their mission requirements.⁷⁵

With limited PA manning, Aviano (and other operational bases) quickly implemented media pool systems to deal with the media-coverage issue. Under the pool system, military representatives provided information to a small number of reporters who, in turn, shared the data with their colleagues. The press, predictably, griped about the pool arrangements and access to the base, but, as Captain Thomas remembers, "There was no way around the pool system." Eventually, he believes, reporters understood the need for a media pool, although complaints persisted until the end of the war.⁷⁶

Despite these difficulties, US and NATO PA organizations produced more than a few success stories during Allied Force. Many

PAOs and reporters believe that the alliance was ultimately successful in getting its message across, thanks (in part) to timely pronouncements by national leaders and Jamie Shea's saturation strategy. At the operational level, PA officers also claimed success in communicating the effectiveness of airpower, an assessment supported by some journalists as well. Bradley Graham believes that one of the lasting lessons of Allied Force is that "airpower can win a war," a theme echoed through public-information channels during the war. NATO's media managers also succeeded, on occasion, in providing a firsthand view of the air war by placing reporters on allied bombers and support aircraft. More than 250 journalists flew on US and NATO aircraft during Allied Force, generating hundreds of stories that illustrated the complexity of executing a major air campaign.⁷⁷ Unit-level PAOs also claimed success in showing the personal side of the war by providing media access to pilots, support personnel, and their families.

Yet, many observers also believe that the allied "war story" lacked critical elements or created false impressions, largely because of restrictive public-information policies. Colonel Ivy worries that the media reports during the first month of the war (when bad weather limited bombing effectiveness), followed by pictures of a largely intact Serb army leaving Kosovo, "made airpower look less effective than it really was."⁷⁸ Colonel Sullivan agrees: "The NATO 'story' failed to stress the successes of the air component, and the focus of the media became more on collateral damage." Sullivan also believes that war coverage also lacked a necessary human element, despite allied efforts to highlight the contributions of its members and their military personnel. "Where were the successes—who were the heroes, the soldier, sailor, or airman who helped a family or a refugee?" she asked.⁷⁹

In sharp contrast, P. J. Crowley offers a completely different analysis of the relative success of NATO's public-information campaign against Serbia. He believes that the alliance

won the public-information war “by a large margin,” comparing NATO’s open admission of collateral damage to the steady stream of propaganda from Belgrade. By the end of the war, Crowley observed, “NATO had credibility with the press—Milosevic didn’t.”⁸⁰

From a political perspective, some observers worried that NATO’s information policies may have indirectly exposed minor fissures within the alliance—even inside member governments. With little information available on the progress of the air campaign, some reporters began to suggest that the war was not going according to plan, prompting criticism of the allied strategy. According to the *Washington Post*, “Pentagon planners” and “intelligence sources” claimed they had warned the administration of potential problems in the NATO approach, predicting that Milosevic might respond to air strikes “by accelerating his campaign of ethnic cleansing.”⁸¹ Noting the sudden rash of anonymous criticism, Howard Kurtz observed that “the moment it became obvious that the NATO attacks on Yugoslavia were in trouble was when unnamed American officials began using the media to distance themselves from the policy.”⁸²

Beyond the “blame game,” other reporters viewed Allied Force in terms of missed opportunities for the press, public, and the military. *Post* Pentagon reporter Bradley Graham summed it up well: “Overall, my feeling is that the military lost something important because of the Pentagon-NATO media strategy. By staying quiet, they denied those involved their due for their heroism and bravery. We saw few of the individual faces and missed their particular stories. So much of the nitty-gritty of Operation Allied Force was lost on the press and the American public. Consequently, the public was much less engaged—essentially not invited into the war.”⁸³

Like other reporters on the defense beat, Graham also believes that the Balkans war represents another serious blow in the military-media relationship. “Unfortunately, I do think Kosovo represented a serious setback for relations between the military and the

media,” he told James Kitfield. “The Pentagon’s whole approach left a lot of unnecessary ill feelings among reporters, particularly among those of us who have worked hard to understand the military.”⁸⁴ Mark Thompson of *Time* echoes that sentiment: “Things were getting brittle [in the military-media relationship] by the end of the war.” Yet, Thompson believes that the military may use a similar media strategy in future conflicts: “The Pentagon knew what they could get by with, in terms of information release. As long as the public supports a tight hold on information, then military and public sentiment can trump the press. The public feels like we won the war and doesn’t take kindly to the press whining about information restrictions.”⁸⁵

However, Thompson believes that the military’s media strategy may ultimately backfire. Had the United States and NATO suffered significant casualties during Allied Force, he observed, the public would have demanded more information and accountability, limiting the military’s ability to control information. The Pentagon may also find it more difficult to generate media interest when it offers more substantial information, as illustrated by another incident that occurred during Allied Force. After almost two months of limited data and information delays during collateral-damage incidents, the Pentagon announced (on 22 May 1999) the “most active night of strikes so far . . . hitting 40–50 targets and virtually shutting down the entire Yugoslav electric grid.” Pentagon Spokesman Ken Bacon believes the raids may have been “the turning point in the war.”⁸⁶ Yet, when Bacon picked up the *New York Times* to see how the big story had played, he was aghast, according to James Kitfield. The *Times*’s editors, perhaps weary of the Pentagon’s information game, had given the air strikes exactly one sentence in a picture caption.⁸⁷ In that context, allied “victories” in controlling the press and public information during the Kosovo war may have been nothing more than illusory.

Public Information, IO, and the Next War: What Lies Ahead?

Regrettably, many reasons exist for allied shortcomings in the public-information campaign against Serbia. In terms of IO doctrine alone, the failure to address public information as a key battle space set the stage for many of the problems that emerged during Allied Force. Focusing on technical aspects of IO (cyber attack, network defense, etc.), theorists and planners ignored the fact that much of the information war will be fought openly, through the mass media. Yet, allied public-information efforts remained largely defensive in nature, particularly when things went wrong. The alliance took five days to respond to the convoy attack and three days to respond to the bombing of the Chinese Embassy—an eternity in an era of instant, on-air punditry and 24-hour news cycles—raising suspicions that NATO had something to hide.

Another major problem was Belgrade's ability to set the tone for much of the media war. Using their own media and the Western press, the Serbs had little difficulty disseminating their message, accusing NATO of "deliberate attacks on civilians" and placing the alliance squarely on the defensive. Even Jamie Shea admits that "Milosevic's propaganda sometimes caught us by surprise."⁸⁸ In fact, the Serb propaganda and media campaign became such a concern that NATO eventually began bombing the facilities of RTS, the Yugoslav state-owned radio and television service. Results from these attacks were decidedly mixed; RTS usually returned to the air in a matter of hours, and NATO received sharp criticism for targeting journalists. Robert Leavitt, associate director of New York University's Center for War, Peace, and the News Media, said the attacks "created a dangerous precedent with regard to freedom of the press. Once we start defining journalists as legitimate targets, it becomes very hard for us to criticize any other attacks on media, including those by Milosevic."⁸⁹ Colonel Ivy offered a more succinct military analysis: "If we have to bomb the enemy's TV stations, then

we've failed in our public-information campaign plan."⁹⁰

If the allied public-information strategy failed to generate media trust, it also did little to boost public confidence in the war effort. In the United States, for example, public-opinion surveys showed that fewer Americans supported attacks on Yugoslavia (50 percent) than had supported the 1991 air campaign against Iraq (79 percent). A Gallup survey conducted in June 1999—just days after the war ended—indicated that 51 percent of Americans believe that "the United States sometimes goes too far in using air strikes for purposes that are less than vital,"⁹¹ suggesting a measure of doubt about Allied Force and the motives behind it.

Outside the United States, support for the air war in other NATO countries was decidedly mixed; public opinion surveys in Great Britain, France, and Germany essentially mirrored those in the United States, with decreasing support noted in nations closest to the fighting (Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Greece). Jamie Shea believes that NATO should have done a better job in tracking public opinion in countries where support wavered and should have devised press strategies to assist national authorities. Shea's observation highlights the need for better integration of public information in IO. With public support constituting a strategic center of gravity for Western democracies, a more direct, aggressive, and systematic approach in public information might have bolstered public support for the air campaign and eased any lingering doubts.

Given these realities, it seems hardly surprising that NATO's public-information efforts were often reactive in nature. By limiting the release of public information, alliance officials gave themselves—and their PAOs—fewer options in advancing the NATO message or rebutting Serb propaganda efforts. An integrated public-information/IO campaign—highlighting NATO themes and countering the enemy's information efforts—would have clearly helped in this regard, but the lack of definitive doctrine and procedures dashed any hopes for a

successful public-information campaign under the IO umbrella. Divorced from the IO effort, the alliance's public-information efforts lacked the synergy that would have resulted through coordination and deconfliction with other IO initiatives. The result was a sometimes-muddled NATO message. Mark Thompson recalls that Pentagon reporters tried to zero in on "inconsistencies" between the "dueling briefings" from Brussels, London, and Washington.⁹² One example of a mixed alliance message occurred during the first month of the air war. While spokesmen in Europe touted the widespread use of cruise missiles and other PGMs, senior defense officials in the United States expressed concern that stockpiles of these weapons would soon be exhausted, suggesting that NATO might not be able to sustain key elements of its air campaign.

Analyzing results of the allied public-information campaign during Allied Force raises an obvious question: How can public information be used more effectively in future conflicts? Actually, the answer to that question entails a five-step process. Optimal employment of public information will require changes in perception, training, planning, and procedures, creating a paradigm shift for both IO specialists and the PA community. IO practitioners, who have often cast their discipline in technical terms, must recognize that much of the information war will be waged in the public media, necessitating the need for PA participation. PA specialists, on the other hand, need to become full partners in the IO planning and execution process, developing the skills and expertise required to win the media war. Key steps in this process include the following:

1. *Recognizing the importance of public information as an IO tool.*

As we have seen, the lack of an effective public-information strategy caused problems for the United States and NATO during Allied Force. Avoiding these difficulties during future conflicts requires recognition that public information is, in fact, a battle space that must be dominated like any other. Ac-

cepting that fact will compel commanders, IO specialists, and PAOs to address public-information strategy and planning issues, creating viable approaches for winning the media war. In today's media spotlight, where battlefield events are analyzed and dissected as they occur, ceding the public-information battle space to happenstance or luck is simply not a viable option.

2. *Strengthening doctrine.*

The recent release of joint and Air Force IO publications represented an important step in the formulation of IO doctrine, but both documents are already in need of revision. The Air Force publication, for example, fails to address the potential role of public information in the IO campaign and assigns a temporary, supporting role to PA in the IO effort. Joint Pub 3-13 addresses some of these concerns but fails to provide an effective structure for IO planning and execution. Capt John Shaw, a member of USAFE's IO cell during Allied Force, described the problem well: "With each player in the IO cell working for a different boss, the IO cell is really nothing more than a round table for discussion and deconfliction. . . . This 'loose confederation,' while bringing the necessary IO players to the table, does not have the authority to perform formal, integrated IO planning and task the necessary organizations, assets, and personnel to create an effective IO campaign."⁹³ To replace the IO cell, Shaw suggests a major revision of the IO structure outlined in Joint Pub 3-13, replacing the IO cell with a joint information operations task force (JIOTF), an organization he believes would be better equipped to plan and execute an IO campaign. Manning for the JIOTF should include a permanently assigned PAO, providing needed expertise for the new IO organization.

3. *Understanding the evolving media environment.*

Clearly, the global media environment changed dramatically between the end of the Persian Gulf War and the start of Allied Force. The explosion of cable TV news, hypercompetition between rival media outlets, and the advent of Internet-based "new media" altered not only the way audiences receive their news but also the amount of information available. This evolving media environment dictates changes in public-information doctrine and procedures as well as new definitions for such key concepts as "audience," "journalist," and "media." In the Internet age, when anyone with a computer and modem can become a "war correspondent," methods must be developed for winning the public-information campaign in both traditional media and cyberspace.

Unfortunately, the techniques and procedures for conducting a cyber public-information campaign have yet to be developed. Allied IO planners admit that they "never had a game plan for new media"⁹⁴ during Allied Force, and some even concede that the Serbs "won the cyber war." Although the United States and NATO had a clear technological edge over their adversary, the Serbs still succeeded in placing their message on the Internet, using servers in Europe, the United States, and Canada. When USAFE's IO staff attempted to monitor Serb-influenced web traffic, they counted dozens of web pages, chat rooms, and bulletin boards used to advance Belgrade's message. TSgt Marilee Philen, a USAFE IO planner during Allied Force, says, "To this day, NATO has no idea how many Internet forums were being used by the Serbs to support their cause."⁹⁵ The rapid proliferation of these sites—and NATO's difficulty in countering them—underscores the requirement for an effective public-information strategy on the digital frontier.

Understanding the new media environment also requires an appreciation for the primacy of visual images. In a popular culture dominated by television, "the instantaneous image," as Jamie Shea observes, "becomes the reality of the day. . . . Pictures are believed, even if they are untypical or distorting; words are distrusted even if they are true."⁹⁶ While the press focused on the Djakovica convoy attack, Shea recalls, the Serbs expelled over two hundred thousand ethnic Albanians from Kosovo. Yet, the forced exodus received little media attention, at least initially. The reason? No pictures. Influencing the public-information battle space requires a steady supply of compelling visual images, but NATO's record in this area during Allied Force appears spotty at best. Although the US Air Force and other military organizations supplied thousands of still pictures and reams of video footage to media organizations, critical images were often lacking. Shea, for example, urged the Pentagon to provide satellite images of mass graves, burned villages, or displaced persons for use in the daily NATO press briefings. Without those pictures, he observed, "No one was going to believe me."⁹⁷ Providing such images in a timely manner will require the intelligence, IO, and public-affairs communities to develop new rules for releasing overhead imagery, video, and other products in support of the information campaign.

4. *Building a Public Affairs Corps for the twenty-first century.*

Virtually all of the PAOs who participated in Allied Force lacked formal training in IO, leaving them poorly prepared to support the planning and execution of the IO campaign. For PA to become a full-fledged participant in IO, its members must be trained in IO doctrine, tactics, and procedures.

To facilitate the training process, IO instruction blocks should be added to courses for entry-level PA personnel attending the Defense Information School at Fort Meade, Maryland. Beyond that, the PA community needs to develop its own cadre of IO experts, functioning as members of IO organizations at the numbered air force, joint task force, and component levels. Colonel Ivy suggests that selected PA noncommissioned officer billets—currently assigned to recruiting squadrons—be transferred to IO flights, ensuring PA representation and expertise at the planning and execution levels. PA personnel assigned to these billets would be required to attend the graduate-level IO course at Hurlburt Field, Florida. Colonel Ivy also recommends that numbered air force PAOs be trained as IO specialists, creating a two-member PA team to assist the numbered air force commander and IO flight in developing public-information options as part of the overall IO campaign.⁹⁸ The education effort should also extend to IO specialists to improve their understanding of what PA can—and cannot—do in support of the information war.

On a related note, NATO would also be well served in strengthening its own PA organization. As Jamie Shea and others have observed, NATO's PA organization in Brussels was not prepared for wartime operations, forcing an emergency infusion of personnel and resources to deal with the media crush. Dr. Shea advocates creation of a unit that can respond rapidly to controversial incidents and answer requests for information from NATO. Shea noted that "when we were unable to explain an incident, the story would play for days; when we were able to give information quickly, the story disappeared almost immediately."⁹⁹ Strengthening NATO's PA organization will require a significant commitment from alliance mem-

bers for personnel training and support. Currently, only three (United States, Canada, and Belgium) of NATO's 19 members have "career" PA officers; the rest use officers from other career fields who return to their primary vocation at the end of their PA tour. American PAOs have long cited NATO's lack of a "professional" PA staff as one of the organization's greatest weaknesses.

5. *Planning and executing public-information efforts more effectively.*

By following the steps listed in the preceding paragraphs—recognizing the importance of the public-information battle space, strengthening IO doctrine, understanding the changing media environment, and improving personnel training—the IO community should prove more effective in its planning and execution efforts. However, building and executing a successful IO plan also requires more training for both commanders and planners. IO planning and execution drills should be incorporated into all major exercises and war games, giving commanders and their IO staffs a chance to rehearse critical wartime skills. Commanders must learn to prioritize IO and set clear-cut objectives for their program. IO planners, on the other hand, need to refine their skills in developing and executing IO campaign plans. Public information should (clearly) be an integral part of future IO planning and execution exercises.

Conclusions

In retrospect, many of the problems associated with public-information/IO integration during Allied Force were, perhaps, inevitable. After all, planners at Headquarters NATO and subordinate levels were attempting a first in military history: development and execution of a comprehensive IO cam-

paign, using public information as one of its many elements. Theirs was indeed a pioneering effort, a voyage into the largely uncharted waters of IO. Nowhere was this more apparent than in fledgling efforts to incorporate PA (and its public-information mission) into something called the IO campaign plan. Armed with vague doctrine references (and little else), IO planners and PA officers had no real guidance on how to effectively merge their skills into the larger IO effort. Without firm guidance, techniques, and procedures, mistakes were bound to occur—and they did. Yet, their efforts still contributed to NATO's ultimate victory; after all, it was Milosevic who capitulated, not the alliance.

However, the end of Allied Force also brought a realization that the margin of victory in the media campaign was perhaps smaller than originally thought. Despite a Western-dominated media culture and far greater technical resources, NATO still found itself playing catch-up in the media wars, responding to a series of collateral-damage incidents and Serb accusations of atrocities. Although the alliance proved adept at staging daily press conferences and showing cockpit video, it proved painfully slow at responding to Belgrade's charges and countercharges, fueling suspicion among the press. When NATO fumbled for an answer, isolated tactical incidents took on strategic importance. The Djakovica convoy incident—which claimed fewer than 30 lives—dominated

world headlines for almost a week, while a much bigger story—Serb atrocities and ethnic cleansing in Kosovo—went largely unreported. In cyberspace, hundreds of web sites and forums promulgated the Serb message, frustrating allied efforts to win the “Internet war.” As demonstrated by Allied Force, advantages in technology and media outlets did not necessarily translate into a clear-cut victory in the public-information wars.

A review of lessons from the media war against Serbia makes apparent the need for a better public-information/IO strategy. Despite reservations about lost credibility, PA must play a central role in future IO efforts—the public-information battle space is simply too important to ignore. However, the PA community must also do a better job of defining its IO role and creating a trained cadre of PAOs capable of planning and executing public-information-based IO initiatives. PA personnel all but ignored IO until recently, leaving their community ill prepared for the challenges of information warfare. Revised PA doctrine that addresses IO roles/functions remains a necessity, as is specialized IO training for PA personnel. Without these initiatives, PA will never assume its rightful place in IO, and the potential benefits of public information as an IO component will never be realized. As the media's impact on public opinion—and military operations—continues to grow, we simply cannot cede this critical battle space to chance—or our adversaries. □

Notes

1. “Civilians Are Slain in Military Attack on Kosovo Road,” *New York Times*, 15 April 1999, A1.

2. “Convoy Deaths May Undermine Moral Authority,” *Los Angeles Times*, 15 April 1999, A1.

3. “NATO Searches for Answers in Convoy Killings,” *CNN Interactive*, 15 April 1999.

4. “NATO Concedes Its Bombs Likely Killed Refugees,” *Washington Post*, 20 April 1999, A19.

5. Public Affairs After-Action Report on Operation Allied Force, 31st Expeditionary Wing, 24 March–20 June 1999, 2.

6. “NATO Concedes.”

7. “Casualties of War,” *Newsweek*, 26 April 1999, 26–29.

8. Brig Gen Dan Leaf, commander, 31st Expeditionary Wing, address to Air War College class of 2000, Maxwell AFB, Ala., 27 August 1999 (used with permission of speaker).

9. Jamie Shea, “The Kosovo Crisis and the Media: Reflections of a NATO Spokesman,” speech before the Atlantic Council of the United Kingdom, Reform Club, London, 15 July 1999.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. Briefing, Adm James O. Ellis, subject: A View from the Top, September 1999.

13. Gen Gordon Sullivan, former chief of staff, US Army, quoted in Joint Publication 3-13, *Joint Doctrine for Information Operations*, 9 October 1998, II-1.

14. Capt John Shaw, 32d IW Flight, “Does the JFC Need a JIOTF? Strengthening IO Doctrine,” *Cyber Sword*, Fall 1999, 4.

15. Alvin and Heidi Toffler, *War and Anti-War: Survival at the Dawn of the 21st Century* (New York: Little, Brown, 1993), 3. As defined by the Tofflers, the “first wave” of change reflected the tran-

sition to agrarian societies, while the Industrial Revolution represented the "second wave." At the time (the early/mid-1990s), the term *information warfare* was an umbrella concept, defined as "any action taken to deny, exploit, corrupt, or destroy an adversary's information and functions, while protecting friendly forces against similar action." *Cornerstones of Information Warfare* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Air Force, 1995), 3. Today, while IW is defined in similar terms, it is classified (along with information-in-war) as a subset of "information operations," supporting the ultimate objective of information superiority (Air Force Doctrine Document [AFDD] 2-5, *Information Operations*, 5 August 1998, 3.

16. Gen Ronald R. Fogleman, Air Force chief of staff, "The Fifth Dimension of Warfare," address to the Armed Forces Communications and Electronic Association, Washington, D.C., 25 April 1995.

17. AFDD 1, *Air Force Basic Doctrine*, 1 September 1997, 31–32.

18. Shaw, 4.

19. Michael R. Gordon and Lt Gen Bernard E. Trainor, *The Generals' War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995), 326.

20. TSgt Marilee Philen, USAF/IO planner, interviewed by author, 3 January 2000.

21. Col (Sel) Jack Ivy, instructor, USAF Public Affairs Center for Excellence, interviewed by author, 14 December 1999.

22. Ibid.

23. P. J. Crowley, principal assistant secretary of defense for public affairs, interviewed by author, 10 February 2000.

24. AFDD 2-5, 31.

25. Ivy interview. In October 1999, the 39th Intelligence Squadron at Hurlburt Field, Florida, launched a three-and-one-half-month, graduate-level IO course, designed primarily to train personnel for IO flights at the numbered air force level. Although students from a number of IO disciplines attended the inaugural class, PA specialists did not, partly because many PAOs lack the required Sensitive Compartmented Information security clearance. Ironically, the new course offers a block of instruction on the role of PA/public information in IO, taught by US Air Force PA officers.

26. Gen H. Norman Schwarzkopf with Peter Petre, *General H. Norman Schwarzkopf: The Autobiography: It Doesn't Take a Hero* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), 510.

27. Carl H. Builder, *The Icarus Syndrome: The Role of Air Power Theory in the Evolution and Fate of the U.S. Air Force*, 3d ed. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1996), 249.

28. The CNN effect is generally defined as the ability of CNN—and other broadcast media outlets—to galvanize public attention through its continuous coverage of events and force national leaders to make rapid decisions regarding national security issues. Somalia is a case in point; President Bush elected to deploy US forces to that country in late 1992, after a series of broadcast reports highlighted humanitarian concerns there. Graphic, televised images of starving Somalis greatly influenced the president's decision.

29. William G. Adamson, "The Effects of Real-Time News Coverage on Military Decision-Making," student paper (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air Command and Staff College, March 1997), 25.

30. James Kitfield, "Command and Control the Messenger," *National Journal*, 11 September 1999, 50.

31. Bill Hemmer, CNN anchor/reporter, interviewed by author, 23 December 1999.

32. Bradley Graham, defense correspondent, *Washington Post*, interviewed by author, 17 December 1999.

33. Howard Kurtz, "NBC's News Machine Marches to War," *Washington Post*, 21 April 1999, C1.

34. The level of media interest in the Balkans conflict is illustrated by the media contingent that descended on Aviano AB, Italy, hub of the allied air campaign. Eventually, the base would issue press credentials to more than seven hundred journalists,

many from broadcast news organizations. By comparison, only about four hundred journalists were reporting from Vietnam at the height of that conflict.

35. "Internet News Takes Off," Pew Research Center Biennial News Consumption Survey (Washington, D.C.: Pew Center for the People and the Press, 8 June 1998).

36. "Drudge Report Traffic Statistics," *Drudge Report*, April 1999; on-line, Internet, 10 January 2000; www.drudgereport.com.

37. "Internet News Takes Off."

38. Brian O'Keefe, "The Drudge Phenomenon," New York University Department of Journalism, Brown Bag Speaker Series, 26 February 1998; on-line, Internet, 13 January 2000, available from www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/journal.

39. Ibid.

40. Steven Brill, "War Gets the Monica Treatment," *Brill's Content*, July/August 1999; on-line, Internet 20 January 2000, available from www.brillcontent.com.

41. Capt John Shaw, USAF IO Flight, interviewed by author, 10 December 1999.

42. Philen interview.

43. Lt Col Barbara Carr, USAF deputy director of public affairs, interviewed by author, 10 December 1999.

44. Crowley interview.

45. Ivy interview.

46. Lt Col Virginia Sullivan, US Air Force, Retired, interviewed by author, 28 November 1999.

47. Carr interview.

48. Ivy interview.

49. Carr interview.

50. Message, 232214Z MAR 99, OASD/PA, to Headquarters EUCOM/PA, subject: Media Ground Rules for Kosovo-Related Operations in the EUCOM Area of Responsibility, March 1999.

51. Brig Gen Dan Leaf, commander, 31st Expeditionary Wing, interviewed by author, 14 December 1999.

52. Kitfield, 25.

53. Mark Thompson, defense correspondent, *Time Magazine*, interviewed by author, 22 December 1999.

54. Shea speech.

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid.

57. Crowley interview.

58. Kitfield, 25.

59. Graham interview.

60. Thompson interview.

61. "Speak No Details," *Time*, 12 April 1999, 32.

62. Ibid.

63. Kitfield, 50.

64. Thompson interview.

65. Graham interview.

66. Thompson interview.

67. Hemmer interview.

68. Crowley interview.

69. Shea speech.

70. Crowley interview.

71. Shea speech.

72. Ibid.

73. Capt Ed Thomas, Public Affairs, 31st Fighter Wing, interviewed by author, 16 December 1999.

74. Capt John Haynes, Public Affairs, 31st Fighter Wing, interviewed by author, 16 December 1999.

75. Carr interview.

76. Thomas interview.

77. Carr interview.

78. Ivy interview.

79. Sullivan interview.

80. Crowley interview.

81. Howard Kurtz, "Duck and Cover," *Washington Post*, 5 April 1999, C7.

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| <p>82. Ibid.
83. Graham interview.
84. Graham, quoted in Kitfield, 50.
85. Thompson interview.
86. Kitfield, 52.
87. Ibid.
88. Shea speech.
89. "Off the Air," <i>The News Hour with Jim Lehrer</i>, 4 May 1999.
90. Ivy interview.</p> | <p>91. Gallup News Service, "Kosovo Intervention Hasn't Shaken Americans' Basic World View," 24 June 1999.
92. Thompson interview.
93. Shaw, 4-5.
94. Philen interview.
95. Ibid.
96. Shea speech.
97. Ibid.
98. Ivy interview.
99. Shea speech.</p> |
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