

War correspondents: military pawns or truth seekers?

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Throughout the Persian Gulf war, Americans deplored Saddam Hussein's exploitation of the media.

Our military also recognized the power of the press but exploited it in a more subtle and successful way. The military, citing security reasons, restricted the media's access to the battlefield and censored or delayed their reports of military operations.

Military censorship and delaying of reports have historically created severe friction between the press and the military. The Mexican-American War saw the emergence of the modern war correspondent in 1846, and during the Civil War tension between the military and the press first arose and has pervaded every armed conflict since.

One of the best methods of espionage for both the North and South was to read the other side's newspapers, which regularly published information on troop movements. As a result, Gen. William T. Sherman and Gen. Ulysses S. Grant expelled reporters from the front at various times.

President Abraham Lincoln placed the military in charge of all telegraph lines for the purpose of censoring reports and temporarily shut down some newspapers for publishing secrets.

During World War I, reporters were required to submit stories to censors and were stripped of their accreditation for failing to do so.

During World War II, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower censored all political reports for six weeks in 1943 to facilitate

History reveals how the media have been used, controlled during war

achievement of a settlement in North Africa. During World War II and the Korean War, Gen. Douglas MacArthur routinely censored and delayed all reports about himself or his troops. By contrast, censorship was hardly imposed in Vietnam.

The immediate transmission capabilities spawned by advanced technology made coverage of the Persian Gulf war different from that of any past war. Not only did the immediacy of satellite coverage hinder the military's ability to review and censor the dispatches, but it also gave the reporters and their editors less time to revise the reports, or reflect on the wisdom of publishing them. Compounding this problem was the danger that the media might feed valuable in-

formation to the Iraqis via satellite, particularly while a bombardment was in progress.

The groundwork for fooling the Iraqis through the press was laid weeks before the assault. The press pools, hungry for action photographs, were more than happy to publicize the Marines' amphibious exercises — to which they were repeatedly escorted — and to predict the assault would originate from the sea.

The military also steered the media to the positioning of troops and patrols south of the Saudi-Kuwaiti-Iraqi border. The media's resulting coverage helped deceive the Iraqis into believing that an armored thrust would move through this area.

More than its decoys and deceptions,

however, the military credits the success of the land war to the self-restraint of the media. During the preparations for the assault, the questions of certain members of the press, including CBS, NBC and The Washington Post, made the military suspect that they had correctly guessed the ultimate strategy.

The military contacted these reporters and asked them not to disclose or emphasize the significance of the westward movement of troops. They voluntarily complied with the request, thereby assisting the military in utterly surprising the Iraqis and saving tens of thousands of allied and Iraqi lives.

There has been great controversy over the role of the media in this war and the tension between it and the mili-

tary. In a democracy such as ours, the government must answer to the people. The people, however, would remain ignorant of the government's actions were it not for the vigilance of the media.

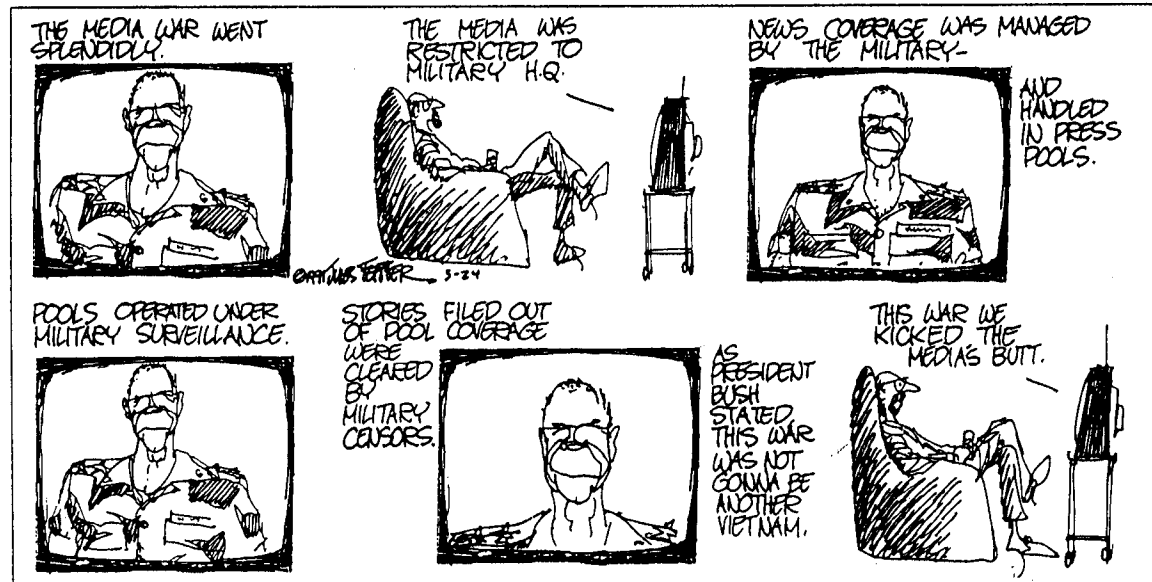
The press maintains, as it well should, that it serves as the eyes and ears of the American public and as a watchdog over the military.

In Vietnam, America was shocked to learn of the extensive bombing in Laos and Cambodia that the military was able to keep secret from the press in 1969 and 1970. Moreover, the military would not have spontaneously initiated an inquiry into the atrocities committed at My Lai if the press had not exposed them.

In the Persian Gulf war, however, we are either ignoring or commending the military's deception of the media and the media's cooperation with the military. This attitude is attributable to at least two factors, namely that this is by far a more popular war and that human lives were saved rather than destroyed by the secret action.

While it is difficult to argue with the latter factor, we should not be so quick to compromise the purposes and functions served by the press depending on the popularity of a particular war.

As Peter Arnett of CNN once said in defense of press coverage of Vietnam, "We wrote about what we saw and heard, rather than practice the selective reportage that enthusiastically enhanced national objectives in previous wars."



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