

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 18
Number 1 *Parameters* 1988

Article 35

7-4-1988

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Recommended Citation

William A. Rusher, "THE MEDIA AND OUR NEXT INTERVENTION: A SCENARIO," *Parameters* 18, no. 1 (1988), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.1508.

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The Media and Our Next Intervention: Scenario

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“The power of the media not merely to influence but to determine and even make events is growing. That is bound, in the end, to lead to a popular demand that it be subjected to more democratic control.”

—Paul Johnson,
The Spectator, 1 November 1986

At 10:00 a.m. EST on Saturday, 15 February 1989, the President of the United States addressed the nation. His talk was carried on all major television and radio networks. It was brief and dramatic:

“My fellow Americans: As you know, our relations with Nicaragua have deteriorated gravely in recent years. The Sandinista regime, having consolidated its hold on the country after Congress ended military aid to the Contras, has stepped up its pressure against its non-communist neighbors. Guerrilla forces based in Nicaragua, and supplied by communist nations through that country, are gravely threatening the freely elected government of El Salvador through repeated bombings in its capital, San Salvador, and are also active in Honduras and Guatemala. I regret to say that there is evidence that revolutionary forces inspired by the communist bloc are preparing to strike in our closest neighbor, Mexico, in the near future.

“The United States has repeatedly warned Nicaragua and its communist allies that it cannot tolerate the steady, indefinite expansion of communism by force northward through Central America to our very border. In particular we have made it clear that the introduction of new weapon systems in that area would not be permitted, since they would fundamentally alter the strategic balance there and compel a reevaluation, and probably a major reduction, of this country’s global military commitments.

“Despite these warnings, Nicaragua and its supporters in the communist bloc have persisted in their attempts to destabilize the free and democratic countries to the north. And I very much regret to say that last week, in express disregard of our solemn and repeated warnings, three squadrons of Soviet-made MiG-29s—the most modern and deadly fighter planes in the Soviet arsenal—arrived at Nicaraguan military air bases in what is very clearly an attempt to change fundamentally the military balance in Central America.

“Under these circumstances, the United States is left no choice but to act before the situation becomes even worse and perhaps gets out of control altogether. Accordingly, after consultations with the National Security Council, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the relevant Cabinet members, and leaders of both parties in both Houses of Congress, I have directed the armed forces of the United States to occupy the territory of the Republic of Nicaragua and secure it for the forces of freedom, in preparation for early elections to choose a new government. Operations to that end began just a little over four hours ago, and will continue until the assigned objectives have been achieved.

“I am confident that these steps will meet with the full approval of the American people, and that they will also be endorsed by Congress if they are still proceeding in 60 days when congressional approval of the overseas deployment of US forces is required by the War Powers Act. Meanwhile, today our hearts are with our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines, on whom so much depends. Let us pray that casualties on both sides will be light, that the battle will be over shortly, and that all of Central America will soon know, once again, the blessings of freedom.

“Thank you, and God bless America.”

The first attacks of American forces—by landing craft on the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of Nicaragua, by land across Nicaragua’s border with Honduras, and by parachute and helicopter onto certain small airfields which could then be used to fly in supplies—were almost uniformly successful, and the mood in the White House and the Pentagon was described as one of “cautious optimism.” In Congress, only a handful of extreme leftist congressmen condemned the operation, while many in both parties praised it. A majority of members of the House and Senate, on both sides of the aisle, acknowledged privately that there seemed little else the President could do, in view of the brazen deployment of the MiG-29s.

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The major media too, during that first week, contented themselves with reporting the military operations, with due regard for the security of troop movements, etc. In fact, just about the only discordant notes came from foreign sources. In a special emergency session the UN Security Council, by an overwhelming margin, condemned the American attack. The nations voting for the resolution included some of America's closest allies, but the resolution was technically void because the US representative vetoed it.

Reaction throughout the communist bloc and the Third World was vociferously anti-American from the start. There were riots and anti-American demonstrations in almost every capital; bombs exploded near the American embassies in six countries; and three US Information Agency libraries were set ablaze. In NATO Europe, the gloom was intense; the conviction was almost universal that the United States had committed a disastrous blunder. The British prime minister insisted on suspending judgment until the situation became clearer, but was hooted down in the House of Commons.

These negative reactions were, of course, duly reported to the American people by the media, but they had little effect as long as the news from the battlefronts remained consistently upbeat.

During the second and third weeks of the invasion, the various fronts were stabilized. US forces had consolidated their hold on much of the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua, as well as on a smaller segment of its Pacific coast, and also over a portion of its northern sector where Nicaragua borders Honduras. However, it had become apparent that the Sandinista armed forces, including their "international" component, weren't going to be any pushovers. The Sandinistas were digging in grimly around Managua, Estelí, and Granada, and their large and well-equipped army was giving a good account of itself in pitched battles with US forces. The US Navy had, of course, effectively blockaded the country the moment hostilities began, and the Air Force could claim air supremacy over the battlefronts most of the time, though anti-aircraft missiles had managed, by the Pentagon's own admission, to shoot down six US helicopters and three troop carriers.

Now, however, opposition to the invasion was increasing and mobilizing on the domestic Left. By mid-March demonstrations—small at first, but growing in size and number—were being staged in almost every major American city, and there were "teach-ins" or other protest actions on virtually every college campus. Television coverage of these was, of course, intensive. Abroad, too, the protests (and the riots, and the bombings) grew; one American military attaché was gunned down as he stepped out of his car.

In Congress, now, there was grumbling in the cloakrooms and the corridors. How long, exactly, did the President expect members of Congress to take this heat? Was this operation going to be a quick, surgical strike, on the order of a bigger Grenada, or was it going to drag on for years, like Vietnam? Just how important was Nicaragua to American security anyway? It

had been communist-controlled, for all practical purposes, since 1979, yet the world hadn't vanished in a blast of flame, had it? Certain prominent liberals in both the House and the Senate told their countrymen, on the evening news programs of the major TV networks, that the President owed the American people an explanation.

What, exactly, was the *goal* of this invasion? The people of Nicaragua certainly weren't welcoming our soldiers with open arms. Besides, three squadrons of fighter planes were scarcely much of a threat to American sovereignty in the skies. "How many more American soldiers," one Senator demanded, "will have to be shipped home in body bags before we learn why this invasion was necessary, or call a halt to it?"

Meanwhile, in El Salvador, guerrilla forces launched a massive campaign of terrorism, and the country's chief executive was assassinated. His successor declared a national state of emergency.

On 20 March, on the recommendation of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the President authorized the commitment of 30,000 additional combat troops, to augment the initial invasion force of 50,000, and called up elements of the Reserve and the National Guard. This, however, simply increased the protests in Congress, in the country at large, and abroad. "Where will it all end?" demanded one of television's most prominent anchormen, who thereupon decided to use that question as his sign-off words every night.

And now, as March drew toward a close and the enemy, though slowly giving ground, fought with desperate intensity, the mood of the American people turned somber. Casualty reports were now a familiar phenomenon, and every sizable American city counted its dead and wounded. On television, the grim reality of war was brought home to the public every night by newsmen the vast majority of whom had opposed the invasion, at least privately, from the very start.

From a crater carved by an exploding shell of the battleship *New Jersey*, fired during the early days of the invasion, one TV correspondent picked up a fragment of shrapnel and held it out toward the camera.

"This particular shell did no damage," he explained with a smile. "It landed here, in an empty field. The only losers were the taxpayers who paid for it in the first place. But another shell"—and here he gestured with the shrapnel—"scored a direct hit over there. On an orphanage."

One of the battleship's 16-inch guns had indeed, it seemed, by accident hit an orphanage in a nearby town where enemy soldiers were holding up the American advance. The scene now shifted to a makeshift hospital, where nursing nuns were caring for children injured by the shell. They had nothing to say to the American TV crew, but their looks—and the sad-eyed faces of the children—told volumes.

On another network that evening, the reporter was interviewing wounded American soldiers. Most of them were pretty matter-of-fact about

it all. One young man with his arm in a sling just wanted to say hello to his folks back home. Another, who had lost a leg, was less exuberant. The war, he said, was “pretty bad.” The camera moved on.

There was straight battle reportage too, of course: camera footage of American soldiers scurrying forward across a road and through a line of trees. (“The gooks are over there,” a big black sergeant explained.) There was the sound of shots, and pictures of some sort of smoky fire. Then the reporter appeared onscreen: The village had been taken. Two American soldiers were dead. On, tomorrow, to the next village. But, “Where will it all end?”

By the beginning of April, five weeks into the invasion, polls indicated that most of the American people still supported it, but the percentage opposed had grown from 17 percent in late February to 26 percent in mid-March. Now it stood at 39 percent. In Congress, the rumbles had become a roar. Most congressmen, like most of the public, still supported the invasion, but they were growing increasingly uneasy as 25 April drew nearer—the 60th day of the operation and the one on which the President must, by law, recall America’s troops unless Congress had by then authorized their continued deployment abroad.

Public uneasiness was heightened by a sharp increase in Soviet military activity in the neighborhood of the Persian Gulf. Suddenly it seemed possible that what had begun as a quick, relatively painless military operation on our southern flank might escalate into a global conflict, with incalculable consequences.

The savage week-long battle for possession of Nicaragua’s capital, Managua, which ended in victory for the Americans on 7 April, was nevertheless depicted on American television as a disastrous defeat, because American casualties had been high. Closely paraphrasing Pyrrhus, one TV newsman declared that “one more such ‘victory’ and we will be ruined.” His camera crew took Americans, watching horrified in their living rooms, on a grim tour of a road on the city’s outskirts. Clearly visible were the bodies of seven American soldiers killed by a land mine. “I talked to this boy yesterday,” the reporter mused, gesturing. “He was going to be married in September.”

Another of the bodies was identified as that of Corporal Harry Flint, 22, of Rochester, New York. The scene switched to Rochester, where, by one of those miracles of modern television, Harry Flint’s mother could now be seen, “live,” watching this very program. A camera closed in tight on her homely face—puffy and red from weeping. But she was composed now, as she began to speak in a high-pitched, querulous voice.

“Harry loved the Army,” she began. “He really loved it. I know, if he had to die, this . . . he would have”—her chin was trembling now—“I only hope, somehow, that some good comes of all this killing. I didn’t want”—and now the eyes brim and overflow—“to lose my boy.” She covers her sobbing face with her hands.

(In December 1989 a special citation for distinguished reportage was awarded to the director of that program by a committee of the television industry.)

By coincidence it was later that very evening that another network carried an interview with the Nicaraguan foreign minister, taped earlier in the day through the facilities of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in Toronto. He was a mild-mannered, bespectacled man who spoke excellent English. He described mournfully the carnage the American invasion was causing in his country, and demanded reproachfully, "What have we done to you, to deserve this?" The interviewer raised the matter of the MiG-29s, only to be told that America's invasion proved why they were necessary—a point the interviewer seemed unable to refute. "Leave us in peace," the Nicaraguan begged; "we wish you no harm."

In vain the administration strove to remind the public of the stakes in this battle: Was Central America going to become a forward base of the Soviet empire, armed with its most advanced weapons (and requiring, therefore, correspondingly advanced defenses), or wasn't it? The daily inundation of news from the battlefronts rubbed the public's nose in the human tragedy that war has always been—but which it had never before, even in Vietnam, so vividly and constantly been seen to be. As one furious general pointed out, a viewer watching the war on TV in his own home—morning, noon, and night—actually heard far more gunfire than the average combat infantryman, and saw more American corpses.

Television was, of course, the major medium that shaped American opinion, but the print media were not to be disregarded. And even radio, which receives far less attention than television but retains a vast audience and is dominated by producers, directors, and writers with exactly the same spectrum of leftist and liberal political attitudes, did its Herculean share. (One New York radio station began every news report from the battlefronts with the deadpan phrase, "On the Nicaraguan killing ground . . .")

By mid-April, America was a nation torn asunder. A little over half of the public sincerely believed that unless the invasion was carried through to a successful conclusion, the Soviet Union would have succeeded in planting a forward military base in America's own backyard, ready to create still further trouble in Mexico and elsewhere. About 40 percent (the rest "didn't know") believed, equally sincerely, that no possible military or diplomatic objective could possibly be worth the slaughter unfolding before their eyes on the evening news programs. In Congress, which was controlled by the opposition party, it now appeared that narrow majorities in both Houses were prepared to deny authorization (required, after 60 days, by the War Powers Act) for the invasion to continue after 25 April. The President was staring disaster—military for the nation, political for himself—in the face.

On the morning of 18 April he summoned the owners of the major television networks, newsmagazines, wire services, and national newspapers to the White House for an all-day, off-the-record discussion. (Verbatim accounts of its key parts were published and broadcast the next day.)

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the President began somberly, “I have asked you to come here to consult with me because this nation faces a crisis that is truly constitutional.

“None of us wishes our country ill. If we disagree, it is over means, not ends. I ask you, therefore, to believe me when I say that my military and civilian advisers and I—this administration, if you will—sincerely believed, and continue to believe, that the introduction of Soviet MiG-29s into Central America represented a threat so grave that it warranted an immediate military response. I may add that this belief was, at least until the middle of March, common ground between the two major parties, including the great majority of congressmen in both. That is why there was, in the beginning, as little opposition to the invasion, in Congress, as there was.

“But in the nearly two months since the invasion began, there has been a dramatic swing in public opinion. Although the military operations are succeeding and my military advisers tell me that we will prevail, casualties have been somewhat higher than expected and we are about four weeks behind our timetable. Far more ominously, public support for the invasion has fallen from over 80 percent at the outset to only a little over 50 percent today, and polls indicate that many of its critics are not only against it but furiously so.

“The reason is perfectly plain. Modern technology, which is nobody’s fault, has made it possible for the news media to cover a war more rapidly, more intensively, and more vividly than ever before in history. The coverage of the Vietnam War, to which many people, rightly or wrongly, assign responsibility for America’s failure to finish that job, was not half as effective, in terms of its impact on the home front, as the coverage of this invasion has already been.

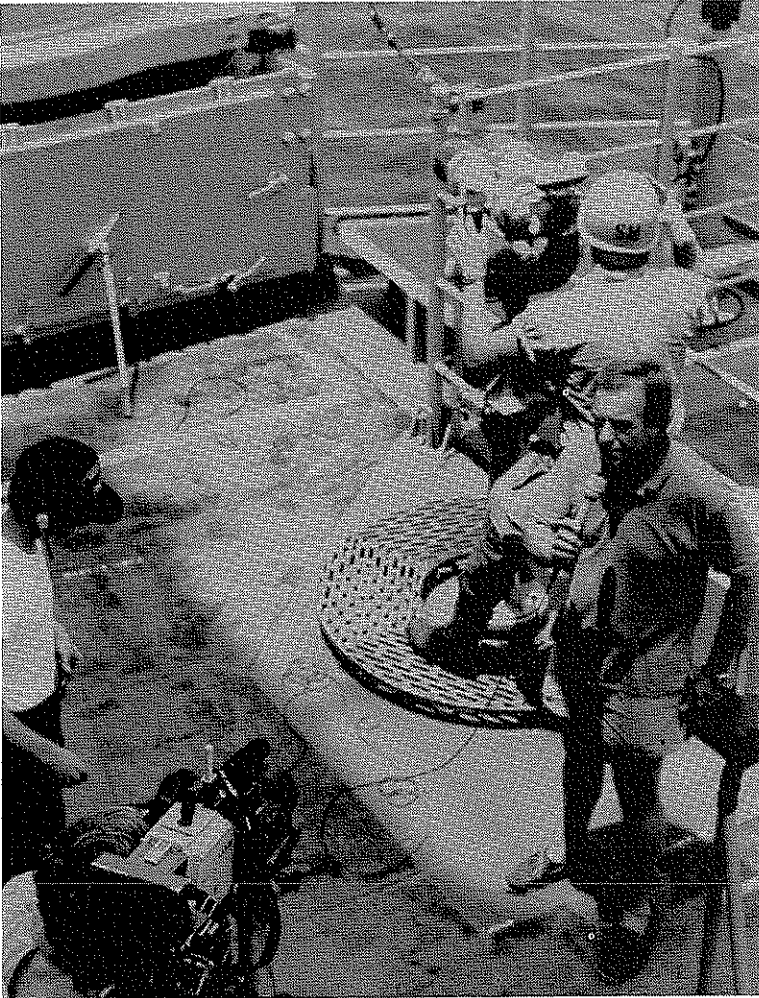
“Now, the freedom of the American press is a precious thing. Certainly neither I nor any responsible member of my administration wants to infringe on it. Ordinarily, in any case, you can generally figure in politics”—and here the President permitted himself a weary smile—“that pressure from one side will tend to be canceled out by pressure from the other.

“But, in the case of the major American media and this invasion, the fracture line runs, not through the media (which are now in almost unanimous opposition to it), but between the media and certain of their allies on the one hand and, on the other, those groups and forces in American life that have normally supported me.

“Well, there’s nothing wrong with that.” (Another smile.) “I’ve been in this game too long to be surprised by, or angry at, opposition. But,

ladies and gentlemen, we are approaching a point at which our media, dominated by people who are still in the minority politically, may nonetheless be able to impose their political will, thanks to the virtuosity of the news technologies they control. And I'm not sure that would be democracy.

"I have called you together, therefore—the people who, in effect, control what the American people see and hear about this war—to ask you to modify your reportage. I am not asking you to say or do anything that is false, or to suppress anything that is relevant. I *am* asking you to make your coverage better balanced, and to avoid taking cheap shots with what George



One device for keeping the news flowing during military emergencies is the DOD National Media Pool. Here, Carl Rochelle, Cable News Network reporter, videotapes a report from the *USS Kidd* in the Strait of Hormuz.

Will once called 'the pornography of grief.' My military advisers estimate that we should be able to complete this operation by mid-July, but we can't do it by April 25th. Unless Congress authorizes continuation of the operation it will fail, Nicaragua will remain communist, all of our dead will have died for nothing, and communist efforts to seize control of the rest of Central America and Mexico will have received an enormous boost. I can't believe," he concluded, "that you want that any more than I do."

There was a thick silence. Then a prominent publisher spoke up.

"What bother some of us, Mr. President, are your assumptions. For example, plenty of people think your military advisers are wrong. What if there's no light at the end of the tunnel? What if this war drags on endlessly, like Vietnam, grinding up more and more human lives? And anyway, what makes you think that a communist El Salvador and Nicaragua necessarily mean a communist Guatemala or Honduras or Mexico? And if so, so what? The peoples of those countries have every right to decide for themselves what kind of government they want. If they decide they want to buy some Soviet MiGs to defend themselves (and I saw the Nicaraguan foreign minister on TV the other night, and he *pledged* they would only be used defensively), I say let 'em. The American people are turning against this war, and they're right."

There were murmurs of agreement around the long table. The President stared at the tabletop, then slowly replied.

"You may be right. But the toughest thing about this job of mine is making the hard decisions. You know, Jimmy Carter said that all the easy decisions get weeded out on the way to the President's desk. The only ones that wind up here are the ones nobody else can make—or, perhaps, wants to make. And in this case I have made my decision. Now, under the law, Congress must ratify that decision within 60 days, by authorizing the further deployment of our forces abroad, or, in effect, reverse it. I don't think that law was such a hot idea, but it *is* the law, and I respect it as such. And Congress may very well refuse authorization to continue the operation beyond April 25th. Frankly, I think it *will* refuse, unless you people in the media lay off. No people has ever had to undergo the kind of psychological assault and battery you have been subjecting the American people to in the last month or so. I seriously question whether any people ever ought to be compelled to."

"What about freedom of the press?" The speaker was the controlling stockholder of a major television network. "Are you telling us to shut up and put our tails between our legs and start praising this cockeyed expedition? Do you have any right to do such a thing? Anyway, even if we did what you want us to, I doubt our news staffs would go along. I think mine would walk right out from under me. And it'd be right."

"After all, Mr. President," another voice took up the argument, "these things that you don't like to see on TV or in the newspapers are happening. That's not our fault. We just report what's there to be reported."

"I don't think it's quite that simple, Pete," the President replied. "War is hell. We all know that. But one of your TV crews can go down there and make an important achievement like the capture of Managua look like a disaster simply by concentrating on the American casualties."

"Suppose we do," someone else interjected, "—just for the sake of argument. Don't we have that right? Doesn't the First Amendment to the Constitution guarantee it? Even if we are in the minority as you contend, don't we have the right to be heard?"

Again the President spoke slowly. "You have the right to speak, of course. But what I am facing here is not simply opposition but something no President has ever faced before—certainly not to anything like this extent. I am facing a situation in which the entire American media, or at any rate virtually all of them that count in the shaping of public opinion, have not only chosen to oppose this operation but are very deliberately using their control over the dissemination of news about it to turn public opinion against it. In the present state of news technology, that amounts to the power to decide the issue. The power to broadcast and to publish has become, at least in certain circumstances, the power to destroy."

The discussion continued for several hours, more or less along the lines outlined above. Tempers grew heated; voices were raised. One or two of those invited to the White House tended to side with the President, and urged their colleagues to agree to modify their coverage of the invasion to reduce the amount of "tear-jerk stuff," as one publisher put it. But the great majority were unmoved. They actually broke into applause when one magazine owner told the President bluntly, "Face it: You don't have the country behind you on this one, and you should never have launched this invasion in the first place. Now your best bet is to end it as quickly as possible."

The President's face was hard, but his voice was almost inaudible as he responded.

"Maybe so, Sam; maybe so. But I'm the guy who was elected President, and I swore to protect and defend the Constitution of this country to the best of my ability, so help me God. And I would urge you to look carefully at that Constitution. To be sure, the First Amendment says that 'Congress shall make no law' abridging freedom of speech or of the press. But neither it nor anything else in the Constitution places any limitation on the president in his capacity as commander in chief of the armed forces. We have had military censorship, to one degree or another, in every war we've ever waged. If Abraham Lincoln could suspend the writ of habeas corpus throughout the United States by executive proclamation and get away with it, I see no reason why I cannot, as commander in chief, limit far less extensively the right of journalists to brainwash the American public, by highly

selective reportage, into bugging out on a military operation *in media res*. And I might add that my attorney general agrees with me.”

There was a long silence. Then somebody breathed, “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Wouldn’t I?” the President retorted. “Want to try me?”

In considering the above scenario, it is important not to be distracted by irrelevancies. The scenario concerns a military operation against Nicaragua, and therefore risks entanglement with whatever the reader’s attitude toward Nicaragua may be. But Nicaragua was chosen for the scenario merely because military intervention there, in the event of the introduction of MiG-29s to the area, has long been an acknowledged likelihood. It would be almost as easy, however, to devise a scenario involving an American military operation in the Middle East or Angola or the Philippines which would likewise pit an American president and his administration against the nation’s dominant media.

Similarly, there is nothing inherently implausible, or even particularly strained, about the various journalistic tactics described. Many of them—e.g. the media’s generous coverage of the accidental bombing of an orphanage, and the radio station that began each evening’s news with the words “On the Nicaraguan killing-ground . . .”—are modeled carefully on actual episodes during the Vietnam War or in more recent United States military operations.

The discussion between the embattled President and the media owners is intended only to present the two sides of the argument, with somewhat greater emphasis on the President’s side because it is, of course, less widely or often heard in the country today. But I certainly don’t mean to suggest that the dilemma, in our wide-open and lustily democratic society, is an easy one to resolve, still less that all justice is on one side or the other.

I *do* suggest that the present distribution of forces in American politics, in which presidents are often able to amass impressive electoral majorities, only to find the major media allied with their opponents and almost unanimously opposed to administration programs and goals, presents a very serious problem when the currently available techniques of news gathering and news presentation are used by the media to turn public opinion against an ongoing military operation.

It is certainly not enough merely to quote the First Amendment, as the President in our scenario pointed out. There is another rule of law as old as Rome: *Salus populi suprema lex*—The safety of the people is the supreme law. What shall we do, if and when those two great principles collide?

It would be far better to face the matter now, and thrash it out as far as possible before the event, or we may find ourselves confronting it some day under far more urgent and much less satisfactory circumstances. □