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The Military and the Media: A Troubled Embrace

BERNARD E. TRAINOR

At first they are polite, respectfully prefacing each question with “sir,” but when faced with their own prejudices, the veneer of civility evaporates, hostility surfaces, and the questions give way to a feeding frenzy of accusations. No, these aren’t journalists asking the questions. They are young officers and cadets, and I have experienced this phenomenon repeatedly when discussing relations between the military and the media at service academies and professional military schools. It is clear that today’s officer corps carries as part of its cultural baggage a loathing for the press.

Indeed, military relations with the press—a term I apply to both print and television mediums—are probably worse now than at any period in the history of the Republic. I say this recognizing that Vietnam is usually cited as the nadir in military-media relations. But at least during the Vietnam War military men actually experienced what they judged to be unfair treatment at the hands of the Fourth Estate, and the issue was out in the open.

The majority of today’s career officers, however, have had no such association with the press. Most of them were children during the war. In the case of those at the academies, some were probably still in diapers when Saigon fell. But all of them suffer this institutional form of post-traumatic shock syndrome. It is a legacy of the war, and it takes root soon after they enter service. Like racism, anti-Semitism, and all forms of bigotry, it is irrational but nonetheless real. The credo of the military seems to have become “duty, honor, country, and hate the media.”

Although most officers no longer say the media stabbed them in the back in Vietnam, the military still smarts over the nation’s humiliation in Indochina and still blames TV and the print media for loss of public support for the war. Today the hostility manifests itself in complaints that the press

will not keep a secret and that it endangers lives by revealing details of sensitive operations. The myth of the media as an unpatriotic, left-wing, anti-military establishment is thus perpetuated.

Having spent most of my adult life in the military and very little of it as a journalist, I am more qualified to comment on military culture than that of the media. I must admit that in the post-Vietnam years I too was biased against the press. But having had feet in both camps gives me a unique perspective which I now try to share with each, particularly the military.

Did the press stab the military in the back during Vietnam? Hardly. The press initially supported the war, but as casualties mounted and the Johnson Administration failed to develop a coherent strategy to bring the war to a satisfactory conclusion, the press became critical. Whether the press influenced public opinion or simply reflected it will be argued for years to come. But it was a misguided policy that was primarily at fault for the debacle, not the media.

The media was, however, guilty of instances of unfair and sensational reporting which veterans of that war still resent. This was particularly true in the latter stages, when the nation was weary of nightly war news and when cub newspaper and television journalists tried to make headlines out of thin gruel. More responsible supervision should have been exercised by editors, but it was not, and many in the military, already frustrated by the war, felt the press as a whole was deliberately trying to humiliate them.

The legacy of the war sharpened the tension which exists between the media and the military, but it is not its cause. The roots of tension are in the nature of the institutions. The military is hierarchical with great inner pride and loyalties. It is the antithesis of a democracy—and must be so if it is to be effective. It is action-oriented and impatient with outside interference. Many things it legitimately does make little sense to civilians who have scant knowledge of military matters. The military wants only to be left alone to carry out its assigned mission.

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To the contrary, a free press—one of the great virtues and elemental constituents of a democracy—is an institution wherein concentration of power is viewed as a danger. The press is a watchdog over institutions of power, be they military, political, economic, or social. Its job is to inform the people about the doings of their institutions. By its very nature, the press is skeptical and intrusive. As a result there will always be a divergence of interests between the media and the military. That they are both essential to the well-being of our nation is beyond question, but the problem of minimizing the natural friction between the two is a daunting one.

The volunteer force in a subtle way has contributed to this friction. At the height of the cold war and throughout the Vietnam War, the military was at the forefront of American consciousness. Scarcely a family did not have a son or loved one liable to the draft. The shadow of national service cast itself over the family dinner table and generated in virtually all Americans a real and personal interest in the armed forces. This interest was heightened by the experiences and memories of fathers and older brothers who had fought in World War II and Korea and who maintained a lively interest in soldiering. With the end of the draft and the advent of a volunteer army this awareness disappeared, along with the pertinence of the older generation of warriors. Only the families of those who volunteered for the service kept touch with the modern Army.

The military, which for so long had been bound to civil society, drifted away from it. Military bases were few and far between and located in remote areas unseen by much of urban and suburban America. A large percentage of volunteer servicemen married early and settled down to a life where their base and service friends were the focal points of their lives. No longer did uniformed soldiers rush home on three-day passes whenever they could get them. When servicemen did go home, they did so wearing civilian clothes and, given the somewhat more tolerant attitude of the military toward eccentricity in dress and hair style, they were no longer as sharply marked by short haircuts and shiny shoes. Off post they were nearly indistinguishable in appearance from their civilian cohort.

To the average civilian, the term military soon came to be equated with the Pentagon, with fearsome intercontinental missiles, and with \$600 toilet seats and other manifestations of waste, fraud, and abuse. The flesh and blood association the civilian formerly had with the armed forces atrophied, and he came to regard the military as just another bureaucracy. For its part, the military settled into the relative isolation of self-contained ghettos and lost touch with a changing America. It focused on warlike things and implicitly rejected the amorality of the outside world it was sworn to defend. In an age of selfishness, the professional soldier took pride in his image of his own selflessness. A sense of moral elitism emerged within the armed forces which is apparent today to any civilian who deals with those institutions. The all-volunteer force not only created a highly



A CBS reporter interviews a Marine lance corporal in Vietnam, August 1966.

competent military force, it also created a version of Cromwell's Ironside Army, contemptuous of those with less noble visions. It is no wonder that those who chose the profession of arms looked with suspicion upon those members of the press who pried into their sacred rituals.

Oddly enough I have found striking similarities between my colleagues in both camps. Both are idealistic, bright, totally dedicated to their professions, and technically proficient. They work long hours willingly under arduous conditions, crave recognition, and feel they are underpaid. The strain on family life is equally severe in both professions. But there are notable differences as well. A journalist tends to be creative, while a soldier is more content with traditional approaches. Reporters are independent, while military men are team players. And of course one tends to be liberal and skeptical, the other conservative and accepting.

There is another big difference which bears directly on their inter-relationship. The military is hostile toward the journalist, while the journalist is indifferent toward the military. To the journalist, the military is just another huge bureaucracy to report on, no different from Exxon or Congress. But whereas businessmen and politicians try to enlist journalists for their own purposes, the military man tries to avoid them, and when he cannot, he faces the prospect defensively with a mixture of fear, dread, and contempt.

Most of my military brothers in arms would be surprised to know that when asked for an opinion about the military profession, young journalists having no prior association with the military rate career officers highly. They view officers as bright, well-educated, dedicated, and competent, although they wonder why anyone would make the service a career. Their prejudgement of enlisted personnel is far less flattering. Most journalists—mistakenly, of course—have the image of an enlisted man as a disadvantaged, not-too-bright high-school dropout who comes from a broken home and cannot fit into society.

Ask a journalist for his opinion of servicemen after his first reporting assignment on the military, and the view will be radically different. The journalist will lavishly praise the enlisted personnel he met and relate how enthusiastic they were. He will remark how well they knew their jobs. He'll note how proud they were of what they were doing, and how eager they were to explain their duties. Genuine admiration and enthusiasm come through in the reporter's retelling of his encounters. But what of the officers? "The officers? . . . Oh, they're a bunch of horses' asses."

To understand such a critical assessment of officers, one only has to take a hypothetical, though typical, walk in a journalist's shoes as he goes for his first interview with a senior officer. In this interview, it happens to be a general:

After a seemingly endless round of telephone calls to set up the interview, you arrive—a well-disposed journalist, notebook and tape recorder in hand—at headquarters. You are met by a smiling public affairs officer who signs you in and gets you a pass. You then are led through a series of offices under the baleful stare of staff factotums, while your escort vouches for the legitimacy of your alien presence. At last you arrive at a well-appointed anteroom where everyone speaks in hushed, reverent tones.

After a wait, the door to a better-appointed office opens, and you are ushered in with the announcement, "THE GENERAL will see you now." Not knowing whether to prostrate yourself or simply to genuflect, you enter the sanctum sanctorum vaguely aware of others entering with you, but grateful for their presence. Graciously received by the General, you are invited to sit down *THERE*, while the General resumes his place behind his imposing desk backed by colorful flags and martial memorabilia. In addition to the General and the public affairs officer, there are several other officers of varied ranks present to whom you are not introduced. All of them take seats at the nod of the General, one of whom places himself facing the General but slightly to your rear, at the outer edge of your peripheral vision.

Following introductory pleasantries, the interview gets underway. You set your tape recorder on the coffee table and open your notebook. This triggers a duplicate reaction on the part of those around you, and an elaborate

choreography begins. Your tape recorder is immediately trumped by at least two others, and the General's entourage poises with pencils and yellow legal pads to take note of the proceedings. Throughout the interview, marked by elliptical responses to your questions, you are aware of knowing looks, nods, and shrugs being exchanged around the room. More disconcerting is the series of hand and arm signals being given to the General by the officer sitting to the rear, in the manner of an operatic prompter. You are given your allotted time down to the second, at which time you are escorted out of the office as the General returns to important matters of state.

After turning in your badge and being bidden a good day, you are back out on the street wondering what it was all about. Why all the lackeys? Were they hiding something? Why the signals? Didn't the General know enough about the subject to discuss it without a prompter? Puzzled, you walk away wondering whether your host was a charlatan or a fool.

Obviously the little scenario above is an exaggeration, but those who have been through the process know that it is just barely so.

The attitude of the military is bound to affect that of the press and vice versa. If it is one of mutual suspicion and antagonism, the relationship will never improve, and in the end the American public will be the loser.

There is nothing more refreshing than an open relationship. Senior officers know their business and can talk about it sensibly without a bunch of flacks around. Journalists know that some topics are off-limits in any meeting with the press, and they respect the obligation of a military officer not to disclose information he should not. It is a poor journalist indeed who tries to trap an officer into a disclosure that is legitimately classified. The counter-battery of tape recorders and legions of witnesses are of course intended as protective devices in case a journalist does a hatchet job on the person he is interviewing. This is useless protection, however, because if a reporter is out to paint a deliberately unfair picture of a person or institution, he will do it regardless of recorded safeguards of accuracy. The best protection against the unscrupulous few is not to deal with them.

Each of the services has expended great effort at improving military-media relations. Public affairs officers are trained at Fort Benjamin Harrison, and all major commands have graduates of the school to act as a bridge between the warrior and the scribe. Installations and war colleges sponsor symposia and workshops to improve relations with the media. Special tours of military installations and activities are conducted for the press by the Defense Department and the services, and some components of the Fourth Estate even reciprocate. But these efforts have little effect on military attitudes and make few military converts because most of them end up focusing on the mechanics of the interrelationship rather than its nature. Discussing

how best to improve military press pool coverage in the wake of Panama, while a useful exercise, does little to minimize the underlying prejudice between the two institutions, much less eliminate it.

What is frequently overlooked by the military is that the profession of journalism is as upright as that of the military, with pride in its integrity and strict norms of conduct for its members. For example, it is absolutely forbidden at *The New York Times* to secretly tape an interview, by phone or in person, or to mislead a source as to the identity of the reporter. Most newspapers have similar restrictions. As a result there are few instances of yellow journalism today. The journalistic world knows who the unscrupulous are within its ranks and gives them short shrift. An unscrupulous journalist will never last on a reputable paper, and advertisers upon whom a newspaper depends for its existence are not inclined to place ads in papers with a reputation for unfair reporting.

This is not to say that journalists will shy from using every legitimate means to dig out a story. The reputation of government agencies, including the military, for overclassifying, for withholding the truth, and for putting a spin on events is well known, and a good reporter will never take things at face value. The tendency of journalists to disbelieve half of what they are told also adds to the military's paranoia.

There is no question, of course, that some journalists go too far in reporting a story, and so do some newspapers. Journalism, besides being a profession, is also a business, and businesses must show profit. This leads to fierce competition. A scoop means sales, sales mean profits, and that is what free enterprise is all about. For a reporter it also means reputation, and if his editors were not pushing him for exclusive stories he would be pushing himself so as to enhance his reputation and maybe win a Pulitzer prize. Thus a journalist may uncover a story relating to national security which would jeopardize that security if it were made public. This is particularly true if it is on operational matters, the favorite complaint of today's officer corps. In his eagerness to be on the front page, the journalist may disregard the security sensitivity of his story and file it to his newspaper. But that is where editors come in. They are mature people with long years in the business and good judgment on the implications of a story. In truly critical instances an editor will withhold a damaging story.

The record of the American press in this regard is good, despite unsubstantiated claims made by military officers that the press leaks operational information. Let two examples suffice to illustrate the point. Newsrooms knew beforehand of the planned airstrikes on Libya in 1986 and held the news until the raids had taken place so as not to endanger the air crews. Likewise, every Washington newsman knew that Marine Lieutenant Colonel Richard Higgins had held a sensitive job in the office of the Secretary of

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Defense immediately prior to his United Nations assignment in Lebanon, where he was kidnapped and later executed. Yet in hopes that his captors would remain ignorant of this possibly compromising information, no mention was made of it in the American press until after it appeared in a Lebanese newspaper.

Whether the press acted responsibly during the December 1989 Panama invasion, when it reported air movement of troops on the night of the operation, is the latest subject of debate. News of the airlift was on television before H-Hour, but nothing was said of a planned airborne assault. Whether anyone in the press knew for certain that an assault was about to take place is in doubt, but if it was known, nothing was disclosed publicly. The air activity was alternately reported as a buildup for military action or part of the war of nerves against the Noriega regime. Our government itself actually contributed to the “leak” with its cute reply to newsmen’s questions about the unusual air movements. The government spokesman said they were routine readiness exercises unrelated to Panama, but he withdrew the “unrelated to Panama” part of his statement *prior* to the assault the following day, thus giving away the show.

On the whole the military was satisfied with press coverage of its Panama intervention. Certainly Just Cause received more favorable reporting than the Grenada operation in 1983. However, the one vehicle designed to improve military-media relations during military operations was a failure—the press pool.

The idea of a press pool came about as the result of the exclusion of journalists from the Grenada operation. At the time, the press howled that the people had the right to know what their armed forces were doing and that journalists should not be denied entry to a war zone. The press concluded that they were shut out more to cover up military incompetence than to preserve operational security. They were more convinced of it when stories of that incompetence surfaced. As a result, DOD-sponsored press pools were established to allow selected journalists from the various mediums to represent the press as a whole during future operations. The pool reporters were rotated periodically and were told to be ready on short notice to accompany military

units. A list of names was held at the Pentagon for that purpose. They were not to be told beforehand where they were going or what was about to happen.

The system was tested in some peacetime readiness exercises to everybody's satisfaction. But in its first real test, during the 1987-88 operations in the Persian Gulf, reporters complained that they were isolated from the action and kept ignorant of events. Many complained that their military hosts were more interested in brainwashing them than exposing them to the news.¹

Panama was the second test, and again the pool concept failed.² Reporters were flown to Panama but kept at Howard Air Force Base and given briefings during the highpoints of the operation. When they were finally taken into Panama City, it was to view events and locations of little news value. Meanwhile, journalists not in the pool were streaming into Panama on their own and providing vivid firsthand accounts of the action. Pool reporters cried foul. The military, for their part, complained that the pool journalists made unreasonable demands for transportation and communications facilities and that they were callous of the dangers involved in taking them to scenes of fighting. Nobody was or is happy with the pool arrangement.

The pool concept suffers three fatal flaws. The first is that the military is always going to want to put on its best face in hopes of influencing the reporters it is hosting. When the military is faced with the choice of taking a reporter to the scene of a confused and uncertain firefight or to the location of a success story—well, take a wild guess which the military will choose, regardless of its relative newsworthiness. Second, because the military brings pool reporters to the scene of action, it also feels responsible for transporting them around, and this may not be logistically convenient at times. Third, the military is protective and feels responsible for the safety of any civilians they are sponsoring. Keeping the press pool isolated at an air base in Panama was a genuine reflection of military concern for the reporters' safety. It is only during long campaigns like Vietnam that the protective cloak wears thin, and then usually because journalists find ways of getting out from under the military's wing.

Implicit in the military attitude toward the pool is not only its institutional sense of responsibility, but also its lack of understanding of journalists. If the pool is to work better, the services must recognize that they have no obligation to the pool other than to get them to the scene of the action and brief them on the situation. Beyond that, reporters are on their own. They are creative people who can take care of themselves. Any additional assistance rendered is appreciated but not necessary; it certainly doesn't provide grounds to restrict coverage of the story. Naval operations and in some instances air operations can be an exception because no facilities may be available other than those aboard ships or in a plane. But as the Persian Gulf illustrated, journalists proved to be a resourceful lot by hiring civilian helicopters to overfly the fleet—even at the risk of being shot down.

The press, on the other hand, should be selective in whom they send to war. Pool membership should require a physically fit, versatile journalist who knows something about the military. Few reporters have previous military experience, unfortunately, and few editors can afford the luxury of a military specialist on their payrolls. But the Defense Department would be happy to provide pool members with orientations and primers on military matters. At least then a reporter could learn some military jargon and the difference between a smoke grenade and a fragmentation grenade.

Old-timers long for the days of Ernie Pyle and Drew Middleton, when the military and the press saw events as one, and there was a love bond between the two. In those days the military could do no wrong—but even if it did, a censor saw to it that the public did not find out about it. Those were the days when the nation was on a holy crusade against the evil machinations of Fascism and Nazism. In this desperate struggle, propaganda was more important than truth. Had it been otherwise, many of the World War II heroes we revere today would have been pilloried by the press as butchers and bunglers.

Today's generals have no such friendly mediation. Moral crusades are no longer the order of the day, and unquestioned allegiance to government policy died with our involvement in Vietnam. The government lied once too often to the American people and lost their confidence. Today the press does what Thomas Jefferson envisaged for it when he rated it more important than the Army as a defender of democratic principles. It keeps a sharp eye on the military and on the government it serves.

This should not dismay the professional soldier. After all, parents have a right to know what the military is doing to and with their sons and their tax money. If the services act responsibly and honestly, even with mistakes, there is little to fear from the press.

This is the challenge to today's and tomorrow's military leaders. They must work to regain the respect and confidence of the media as their predecessors once had it in the dark days of a long-ago war. The press is not going to go away. Hence, the anti-media attitude that has been fostered in young officers must be exorcised if both the military and the media are to serve well the republic for which they stand.

NOTES

1. See Barry E. Willey, "Military-Media Relations Come of Age," *Parameters*, 19 (March 1989), 76-84; Tim Ahern, "White Smoke in the Persian Gulf," *Washington Journalism Review*, 9 (October 1987), 18; and Mark Thompson, "With the Press Pool in the Persian Gulf," *Columbia Journalism Review* (November/December 1987), 46.

2. Fred S. Hoffman, "Review of Panama Pool Deployment, December 1989," unpublished report, March 1990.