

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 21
Number 1 *Parameters* 1991

Article 12

7-4-1991

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Recommended Citation

Richard Halloran, "SOLDIERS AND SCRIBBLERS REVISITED: WORKING WITH THE MEDIA," *Parameters* 21, no. 1 (1991), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.1593.

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Soldiers and Scribblers Revisited: Working with the Media

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After World War II, General Dwight D. Eisenhower wrote in his book, *Crusade in Europe*: "The commander in the field must never forget that it is his duty to cooperate with the heads of his government in the task of maintaining a civilian morale that will be equal to every purpose."¹ The principal agency to accomplish that task, the general said, was the press. He asserted that the commander should recognize the political leaders' mission in the war and assist them in carrying it out. Throughout his military campaigns, General Eisenhower said, "I found that correspondents habitually responded to candor, frankness, and understanding."²

Relations between the military forces and the press have come a long way since those thoughtful and temperate words, and most of it has been downhill. In the Gannett Center for Media Studies at Columbia University, Liz Trotta, a veteran television reporter who conducted assessments of military-media relations, said in April 1990 she had concluded "that the relationship between the military and the media is at its most distant and cantankerous since the Civil War."³ That was before the deployment of American forces to Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf, where coverage, in the early days at least, seemed balanced. In Washington, the press occasionally sniped at President Bush's policy but generally the coverage reflected the public's support for him.

Even so, the ill will between the military and the press will probably continue unabated. One reason is that the Vietnam generation has come of age in journalism, as in the military service and other sectors of American life. Newspapers and television in the United States today are run largely by people

who sat out the war in Vietnam or actively opposed the American engagement. This generation is either apathetic about American soldiers and sailors or openly antagonistic to anything connected with military power. Consequently, even as many correspondents seek to play it straight, some of today's military reporting and editing borders on intellectual dishonesty.

Nevertheless, soldiers cannot avoid dealing with the scribblers of the press or the talking heads of television. To think otherwise would be naive. After a dinner with senior officers at Fort Leavenworth several years ago, a colonel challenged a correspondent: "Why should I bother with you? My job is to train troops to go to war." It was a pertinent question. On the positive side, as General Eisenhower pointed out, the press is a vital channel of communication within Clausewitz's trinity of government, the army, and the people. The scribblers squirt grease into that machinery to help make it go. On the negative side, the scribblers can also throw sand into the machinery. If military officers refuse to respond to the press, they are in effect abandoning the field to critics of the armed forces. That would serve neither the nation nor the military services. In this situation, the initiative must come mostly from military officers because the scribblers own the presses, buy ink by the 55-gallon drum, and have shown little inclination in recent years to develop professional relations with soldiers.

As Elie Abel, the TV correspondent and later dean of Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism, once wrote about the press: "Its instinctive rejection of self-improvement schemes as far back as the Hutchins Commission in 1947 leaves little room for hope of wholesale reform."⁴ Thus officers should accept the press as it is, whether that seems fair or not. They should learn to work with this flawed institution and seek over time to persuade journalists to be aware of military concerns. What follows, then, is one scribbler's suggested guidance to military officers on dealing with the press and television. Most of these suggestions apply in war, contingency operations, and peace.

• **Quit Bellyaching.** An anti-press bias akin to the mindless hostility of anti-Semitism or anti-Catholicism runs through much of the officer corps today. Part of the cause is, obviously, the search for a scapegoat for the defeat

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in Vietnam. Curiously, that antipathy is often more virulent among younger officers who never served in Vietnam than among more mature officers.

More disdain is generated by the traditional suspicion of soldiers for civilians, in this case for civilians who write critically or expose things that soldiers would prefer to be kept secret. Still more appears to arise from ignorance among officers of the First Amendment and the role of the press in America. And not a small amount is a reaction to excesses in certain elements of the press and television.

Like other citizens, military officers are surely entitled to their opinions. But the constant outpouring of vitriol upon the press does little to protect the armed forces from the abuses of the press or to provide for a professional working relationship with journalists who play it straight. In sum, bellyaching about the press is much like cursing at a Sunday school picnic: It sounds like hell and doesn't do a damn bit of good.

• **Never Lie.** In a luncheon address to the National Press Club in October 1988, General Colin L. Powell, then the President's National Security Adviser, said: "I do not believe a public official, . . . having sworn an oath to the Constitution and the people of the United States, has any part in any set of circumstances to lie, either to Congress or to the press."⁵ The General was right, idealistically and practically. Lying to the press is not important in itself. But an officer lying through the press to the people he has sworn to defend soils his uniform and violates the time-honored code dictating that officers do not lie, cheat, or steal.

Moreover, the liar will most likely get caught sooner or later, as witness Rear Admiral John Poindexter and Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North. No good reporter takes information from one source; rather, he checks with as many sources as possible to confirm and round out the story. Further, there is always tomorrow for a reporter to discover and correct today's lies or bad information. When that happens, the liar can expect to see his name in print. The fact of his lie will spread and he will lose his credibility, rendering him useless to his service and the armed forces as a source of information. Nor should an officer lie if asked about classified information; he can say: "I'm not at liberty to discuss that subject." The standard policy of neither confirming nor denying the presence of nuclear weapons could be used as an example in other cases.

Since deception is a basic principle of war, what about lying to deceive the enemy? That is not permissible when it goes through the press and deceives American citizens. The lie would not only be dishonorable but would erode the credibility of the military service once the lie has been discovered. But what if a lie is deemed necessary to save the lives of troops? I suggest taking the reporter aside to tell him the truth, warning him of the clear and present danger to life if he prints the story in question. Avoid the tired catchall "national security." It is vague and has been abused so often that

no reporter worth his salt will pay attention. If that warning does not work, get a senior general or civilian official to call the top editor or producer. The history of the American press is replete with examples of sensitive information being voluntarily withheld for good reason, though this fact is not widely known. If a publication refuses to withhold the information—and there are a few that would refuse—the only recourse is for the military to change its operational plans. In such cases, the operation has probably already been compromised anyway.

What if an officer is ordered to lie? Treat that as any other illicit order, pointing out why it would be wrong, appealing to higher authority if necessary, and being prepared to take the consequences if the order stands. It is a sad commentary on the state of military ethics that this issue need be addressed at all. But it is necessary because many officers have suggested that lying to the press would be permissible.

- **MYOB.** The time-tested advice to mind your own business, often applied in other contexts, works here. Officers will rarely misstep if, in interviews with the press, they stick to what they know and to subjects appropriate to their rank and position.

The unfortunate case of General Michael J. Dugan, the former Chief of Staff of the Air Force, is instructive. General Dugan, interviewed by three reporters aboard a plane returning from Saudi Arabia, got fired because Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney thought the General had overstepped the mark. Mr. Cheney asserted that the General, who spoke on the record, had discussed strategic decisions that were not his to make, had disclosed classified information, and had commented on the operations of other services. Senior Air Force officers said later the journalists had abided by agreed ground rules and normal journalistic practices, and even checked with the general's staff to ascertain that he had been quoted accurately and in context.

General Dugan's remarks, which appeared in Sunday editions of *The Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times*, were promptly disavowed on a television news program by Brent Scowcroft, the President's National Security Adviser. The next day General Dugan was dismissed in a penalty that, in this writer's view, was unduly harsh. The nation, the military services, and the Air Force lost because General Dugan had come to office armed with a plan intended to tell the Air Force's story better. His approach was a breath of fresh air after the stifling policy of his predecessor, General Larry D. Welch.

Ironically, in the same Sunday edition of the *Los Angeles Times* containing the report on General Dugan was an interview with Army Chief of Staff General Carl E. Vuono, who was also confronted with some sensitive issues. But General Vuono, asked about a residual force staying in Saudi Arabia, said, "I'm not going to get into that." Queried on a political issue, the General said, "I'm not going to comment." But asked about the shape of the

Army over the next five years, General Vuono gave an answer that many in Congress might not like: "If we're forced to take some of the deep cuts that some folks have talked about, and you're not going to have a trained and ready Army, the nation is going to be the loser."⁶

The lesson to be drawn from this comparison—a comparison intended not to be invidious in any way—is this: Do not avoid the press, but when talking with correspondents stick to what is proper for soldiers to talk about.

Some years ago, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, not wanting to answer a question I had asked, leaned back in his chair and said: "Dick, the First Amendment gives you every right to ask that question. But there's nothing in the First Amendment that says I have to answer it."

- **Develop an IFF.** With devices known as "Identification, Friend or Foe," soldiers determine who is an ally and who an enemy. In the same way, an officer should always know to whom he or she is talking in the press. Is the reporter experienced in military matters or a novice? Do the reporter and his editors play it straight, or do they have their own agenda? It's easy to get a line on a reporter and publication or TV station because the track record is there for everyone to see. If the reporter is not known in Camp Swampy, a few phone calls into the network of public affairs officers should produce a clear picture.

Many officers, infected with the pervasive anti-press virus, fail to distinguish between journalists who play it straight and those who don't. Therefore they needlessly antagonize those who seek to render honest accounts. Officers should thus respond to experienced, reputable reporters in a courteous, straightforward manner. Approach a novice or sloppy journalist carefully. Refuse to truck with hostile muckrakers unless you absolutely must.

- **Differentiate.** During the deployment of battalions from the 82d Airborne and 7th Divisions to Honduras in March 1988, the Army herded a gaggle of print and TV reporters, still photographers, and cameramen into a chopper and dropped them on a hapless company in the field. It was a mess. Reporters stumbled over one another, cameramen and photographers shoved each other, and the troops were bewildered by the turmoil. It would have been far better to have sorted the gaggle into groups with similar interests and spread them out among different units.

Too many officers, including public affairs officers who should know better, lump all journalists together whether they are from print or television, from general papers or trade magazines, from the newsroom or editorial board, or from the ranks of columnists or straight reporters. In reality, journalists are as different as paratroopers and tankers, soldiers and sailors. They have different needs and ways of working. In simple terms, newspaper reporters need to talk to people while a television team needs pictures. Too often officers are so caught up in getting camera positions for television people that they don't have time to answer real questions from the print reporters.

• **Set Firm Ground Rules.** Before you begin talking with a journalist, have a specific understanding on the rules of engagement. Since no two journalists or officials agree on the exact meaning of code words, be precise. “On the record” means you can be quoted by name, rank, and serial number. After that it gets fuzzy; perhaps the most misunderstood term is “off the record.” For many officers, it means merely: “Don’t quote or identify me.” But “off the record” really means the correspondent may not report the information nor use it to pry out information elsewhere. Go off the record only with a reporter you trust; never go off the record with a group of reporters. Off the record should be confined to private conversations intended to clarify a point, to explain something that cannot be made public, to keep the reporter from stumbling into a mistake. Most good reporters will not agree to go off the record except with sources they trust not to sandbag them.

“Background” usually means something like “a senior Army officer” or “a policymaking Pentagon official.” “Deep background” was crafted to permit reporters to use information without leaving any trace of the source; this insidious form of sourcing allows officials to float viewpoints without taking responsibility for them. But it has become ingrained in Washington, largely because the press acquiesces.

If you violate ground rules to which you have agreed, expect to see your name in print. Sources cannot speak without attribution one day and then deny the story the next day. If a reporter violates the ground rules, chew his butt, report it to his superiors and competitors, and never speak to him again.

• **Speak English.** Every profession has its own jargon—law, medicine, military service, even journalism. Specialized language may ease communication within a profession, although that is debatable when acronyms intended to speed communication become so arcane as to require dictionaries.

Jargon, however, impedes communication with the outside world. Thus, speak to the press in plain English and be prepared to explain the meaning of military language. Be especially alert to inexperienced reporters who may be diffident about showing their ignorance. But be prepared for more seasoned correspondents to interrupt you in mid-sentence to ask for an explanation.

Be particularly careful in briefings for journalists. Military briefings are intended to transmit large doses of information in a compact time. But that format sometimes overwhelms the listener, especially if he or she is not experienced in such briefings. It can go a long way toward ensuring accuracy if the briefer provides a hard copy of the slides. This allows the reporter to concentrate his note-taking on the briefer’s remarks.

Robert Sims, a top Navy public affairs officer and later Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, gave the best advice in a book about the Pentagon press corps: “Precision is the vital ingredient in the relationship.”⁷

- **Anticipate.** At the public roll-out of the M-1 Abrams tank, the vehicle was put through its paces, including a run up a steep ramp. When the tank stopped just below the lip of the ramp, some reporters thought it had stalled. That sent Army officers, who had failed to anticipate the question, scurrying about explaining that the test had come off as planned.

Journalists do not see the world as soldiers see it. Yet officers who spend their careers making estimates of the situation get caught off guard by the press every day. Officers for whom making contingency plans is second nature are rarely ready to combat leaks or unfavorable publicity. For all senior officers, I suggest a check: before you sign off on a decision, ask yourself what it will look like on the front page of tomorrow's newspaper. If it will look good, fine. If not, reconsider the decision. If it's necessary nonetheless, prepare to defend it if it becomes public. Do not wait until it becomes news to start dealing with adverse reactions.

In addition, be prepared for leaked or adversarial accounts to be incomplete and out of context. In some cases, the best defense may be a preemptive strike by announcing the decision. Even if it is not of immediate interest to the press, which is a hard judgment for soldiers to make, you will have erred on the side of prudence. If the decision later becomes controversial, you can point to the earlier effort to make it known.

Public affairs officers should advise their commanders to anticipate. But too many PAOs sit on their duffs waiting for things to happen instead of gathering intelligence on news about to break.

- **React Faster.** It is an imperfect world and even officers who anticipate will sometimes get blindsided by an adverse leak or a critical report. Responsible reporters will call the military for a defense or rebuttal; responsible officers will make sure the reporters get it before the sun goes down. If not by then, any rebuttal will be lost in the wind. One afternoon in Washington, critics of the Navy put out a report asserting that the new Aegis cruiser was top-heavy and might capsize in a storm. Calls to the Navy for comment or evidence to refute the charge went unanswered for more than 24 hours. By that time, the story had come and gone and the Navy never caught up with it.

If an irresponsible reporter prints a story without getting your side of it, a simple denial the next day will not do. Find a way to plow new ground and thus warrant another story with fresh information, including your side of yesterday's story. When something goes wrong—a training accident, for example—don't wait for the first phone call. Get the facts, work up the best explanation you can at the time, and go public. Announce that not all the information is in and tell reporters that the episode will surely look different as it develops.

The former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral William J. Crowe, did a masterful job of briefing the press a few hours after the cruiser *Vincennes* mistakenly shot down an Iranian airliner. Throughout his briefing,

the Admiral warned that the findings were preliminary and that many questions remained unanswered. Unsophisticated accounts later tried to make much of what proved to be erroneous information, but the good reporters noted only that the account had changed as better information came in.

- **Leak.** At a seminar with the National Security Fellows at Harvard, an Air Force officer asked: "You say that officers should be ethical and not lie to the press. But you advocate leaking to the press. Isn't that contradictory? Isn't leaking a form of lying or cheating?" It was an incisive question and the answer is a tough call. A fine line runs between educating journalists and leaking to them. The first means giving correspondents the general background they need to improve their coverage. Leaks, however, are connected with specific issues and are intended to influence the course of events.

Judicious leaking is permissible; otherwise, you leave the field to critics. A permissible leak is straightforward, factual, in context. Understand that a good reporter will not run with just what you tell him but will use the leak to pry out more information elsewhere to round out the story. It is impermissible to leak if the information is false or misleading, would slander someone, or would be personally self-serving. It would also probably get the leaker into trouble once the checks have been made and the leak proven false.

- **Yell About Mistakes.** Journalists, being human and fallible, make mistakes, some more than others. Do not let them pass. If mistakes are allowed to stand, they will be compounded by later stories and in data banks. More important, editors and reporters learn no lessons when mistakes are allowed to go by. The first step is to ask the reporter to run a correction, either in a place set aside for that or in the next day's article if it is a running story. The correction is more likely to be put into context in a story than in the corrections column. If the reporter refuses, go to his boss. If that doesn't work, go to the top editor. If you are still not satisfied, call up the competitors. There's little one reporter would rather do than catch his competitor in a mistake.

- **To Pool or Not to Pool?** After the ruckus over the exclusion of the press from Grenada in 1983, the Pentagon organized a press pool that was to be called out to cover contingency operations. From the beginning, the concept was flawed by basic differences in the way the press and the Pentagon looked at the pool. Those flaws surfaced in Panama in 1989 and left serious doubts as to whether the pool should survive. Most journalists see a pool as a temporary expedient when access is limited. For example, a small pool travels with the President on Air Force One because the entire White House press corps can't fit aboard. A pool is set up for a single mission. The task of the members is to gather information and to pass it on to the rest of the press as soon as possible. Most important, the pool self-destructs as soon as full coverage begins.

From the Pentagon's perspective, however, the pool has been a way to limit access, to control coverage, and to minimize the burden of having

reporters around. Communications, the lifeblood of correspondents in the field, have been largely ignored. All of that came out in Panama, where the pool was a miserable failure. When it was over, Fred Hoffman, the former Associated Press correspondent in the Pentagon and then Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs in the Reagan Administration, was asked to determine why the pool had failed.

His report was scathing. Mr. Hoffman laid much of the blame on Mr. Pete Williams, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, for "less than effective leadership and performance."⁸ There was no public affairs plan when the operation was mounted, the pool was called out too late to cover the decisive assaults, and unit commanders in the field "had no idea" of what the pool was all about.

Mr. Hoffman said military leaders played no part in the decision to delay activating the pool and quoted General Maxwell R. Thurman, the SOUTHCOM commander, as saying: "I think we made a mistake by not having some of the press pool in with the 18th Airborne Corps so they could move with the troops."⁹ Pentagon officials said later that General Powell, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was unhappy with the pool arrangement in Panama and had taken a strong hand in seeking to put things right. But when Operation Desert Shield in Saudi Arabia was mounted in 1990, the Pentagon delayed again in calling out the pool because the Saudi government was not keen on press coverage. After that was straightened out, the pool worked fairly well until its dissolution when full coverage began.

Conclusion: The entire concept should be reexamined from top to bottom. Mr. Hoffman suggested such scrutiny in his report, but the response from the Pentagon was lukewarm and the prospects for the pool ever working are dim.

• **Forget Media Days.** The "media days" held by the war colleges and intermediate military schools in which reporters are invited to discuss military-press relations have been, with rare exceptions, a waste of time. Officers posture by wrapping themselves in the flag and journalists do likewise by standing on the pedestal of the First Amendment. The sessions end in mutual bloodletting with no communication, no one's mind changed, and more ill will when the antagonists are pulled apart.

Moreover, the wrong people are talking to each other. Lieutenant colonels and commanders on one side and frontline reporters and television producers on the other can't do much to improve matters. The people who need to get into this struggle are generals and admirals and senior editors and producers, the people with the authority to change things.

A suggested substitute for media days would be to have a service chief invite ten or a dozen top editors and producers to Washington for a day. The Chief, the Vice Chief, and the senior staff, including the Chief of Public Affairs, would air their concerns about the press and television in a calm and

professional manner. They would then invite the senior journalists to bring up their problems in covering the military services.

To follow up, the commandant of the service's war college could invite managing and assistant managing editors for a similar session at Carlisle Barracks, Maxwell AFB, or Newport. Still another follow-up would have the service's Chief of Public Affairs meet with press and television bureau chiefs in Washington. The whole process could be repeated every year or two.

• **Educate Officers.** In a moment of pleasantry before beginning an interview, a three-star general asked a reporter whether he got paid by the word or the article. The general was surprised to learn that staff journalists are paid salaries, just like soldiers, and that they are paid whether they write that day or not. Many military people haven't the foggiest notion of how the press and television operate and why. (In fairness, neither do some journalists.) Little is taught about the press in the military academies or ROTC programs and even less as the officer progresses through his military education.

To rectify this situation, the services might insert a three-hour block of instruction into courses for junior officers. It would cover the First Amendment, the press as a diverse institution, and what a public affairs officer is. At mid-level courses, a four-hour block would expand on the role of the press in peace and war, on differences in dealing with the press and television, and on how to talk to a reporter. Handling classified or sensitive information vis-à-vis the press would get particular attention.

At the war colleges, instruction would include an eight-hour block on political issues, practice sessions in working with reporters, and case studies in which officers did well or stubbed their toes. Lastly, generals-to-be would get some constructive indoctrination on press relations when they attend charm school before having their stars pinned on, certainly more than a few hours coaching on the tactics and gamesmanship of dealing with reporters.

• **Educate Journalists.** Defense industry executives who assembled at the Industrial College of the Armed Forces in Washington were wailing the usual litany about press coverage. Finally a reporter asked how many of them had ever invited the editor of the local paper out to the plant for coffee. Only a half-dozen raised their hands.

Since military officers and defense executives do little to educate the journalists assigned to cover them, their first encounters often come only after all hell has broken loose. Then the executives or officers are confronted with a bunch of demanding, competitive, and often rude strangers. How much better it would be if a post commander or chief of staff invited the editor for lunch to talk over what was going on at Camp Swampy and to learn what the editor had on his mind—all before a crisis; or if the public affairs officer had invited a reporter out for a day of briefings and informal looking around, with neither expecting a story to come out of the visit.

That sort of education generates more understanding of military life, makes for better stories, and, when the crunch comes, produces a journalist willing to listen before rushing to judgment in print or on the tube. Such educational sessions are best done one-on-one or with a small group of compatible people. A large gaggle of reporters from newspapers, television, radio, and the trade magazines usually doesn't work because the briefings get to be canned, a schedule must be followed, and everyone has a different set of questions.

• **Support Public Affairs Officers.** Journalists are sometimes asked which service has the best PAOs. Truth, and a sense of survival because a correspondent must work with them all, dictates this answer: Each service has its share of first-class, competent, dedicated public affairs officers. Unhappily, each service also has its share of time-servers who go through the mechanical motions of public affairs.

The most important element in the relationship between a journalist and a PAO is the policy of the PAO's commander. A commander with an open attitude communicates that tone to his subordinates and enables the PAO to do his job. A commander who wants a palace guard will get it, and with it, most likely, a bundle of bad press clippings. The commander should demand the assignment of a competent PAO and listen to him as with any other staff officer. Equally important, when things beyond the PAO's reach go wrong, and they will, the commander must protect him against wrath from above, just as he would protect another staff officer.

A final observation: The Army and Marine Corps require young officers to spend time with troops before becoming public affairs officers. That seasons them and gives them credibility. The Navy and Air Force, in contrast, make PAOs out of young officers who, while they may be fine people, lack the feel of the deck or the flight line. They are too inexperienced to do much more than pass out press releases.

NOTES

1. Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Crusade in Europe" (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1948), p. 299.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 300.

3. Liz Trotta, Seminar Transcript, Gannett Center for Media Studies, Columbia University, New York, 11 April 1990, p. 40.

4. Elie Abel, "Leaking: Who Does It? Who Benefits? At What Cost?" Twentieth Century Fund Paper (New York: Priority Press, 1987), p. 68.

5. As quoted in "Gen. Powell Says NSC Again 'Moral Operation,'" *The Washington Post*, 28 October 1988, p. A3.

6. As quoted in the *Los Angeles Times*, 16 September 1990, p. M3.

7. Robert B. Sims, *The Pentagon Reporters* (Washington: National Defense Univ. Press, 1983), p. 150.

8. Fred S. Hoffman, "Review of the Panama Pool Deployment, December 1989," Memorandum for Correspondents, The Pentagon, Washington, D.C., 20 March 1990, p. 1.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 3.