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Pete Williams

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The Press and the Persian Gulf War

PETE WILLIAMS

In World War II, the most disappointing thing a reporter could hear was probably, "I'm sorry. The channel is fogged in. We can't leave here for days." In Vietnam, it was probably, "Sorry, but the last helicopter left here an hour ago." In Operation Desert Storm, it was probably, "Hi. I'm your press escort, and I'm here to help."

The subject of press pools and escorts has been frequently written about, and the commentaries have been infrequently kind. Indeed, two negative myths have grown popular in the aftermath of the Gulf War, and they need to be debunked. The first is that the press didn't do a good job covering Operation Desert Storm. And the second is that reporters didn't have much of a chance to report the war.

Myth number one, ironically, has been asserted most forcefully by critics within the media's own ranks. The sentiment was expressed succinctly by David Gergen in *US News*. He said the American press knocked itself out to cover the story of the war. Then he wrote, "And what does the press have to show for it? A big black eye." None of this criticism of the effectiveness of the media, much of it self-criticism, gives an accurate picture of how the press covered the Gulf War.

Some of the critics of the press view the relationship between the military and the media as a zero-sum game: if military credibility is up, then press credibility must be down. It's true that the military has gained credibility. But that's true partly because the press has accurately reported what we've done.

Reporters have asked the tough questions, challenged the assumptions, exposed the mistakes, and held officials accountable. When a public institution passes these tests, its credibility rises. When it fails the tests, its credibility drops.

Another part of the reason for the military's high credibility is that Secretary Dick Cheney and General Colin Powell made the decision that we would say only what we knew to be true. We were careful not to get out ahead of our successes. We waited for initial field reports to be confirmed. Even in the first few days of the air campaign, when coalition aircraft losses appeared to be light, we cautioned reporters about saying the offensive would be easy. Washington loves to talk about spin control. This was the first government operation I know of that had euphoria control.

Part of the problem for the press was that many people at home, watching the story unfold, didn't understand what goes on in a press briefing. Day after day during the war, letters were sent to me at the Pentagon saying something like this: "Would you please ask reporters to give their names when they ask questions? Then we can write to their employers and tell them to buzz off."

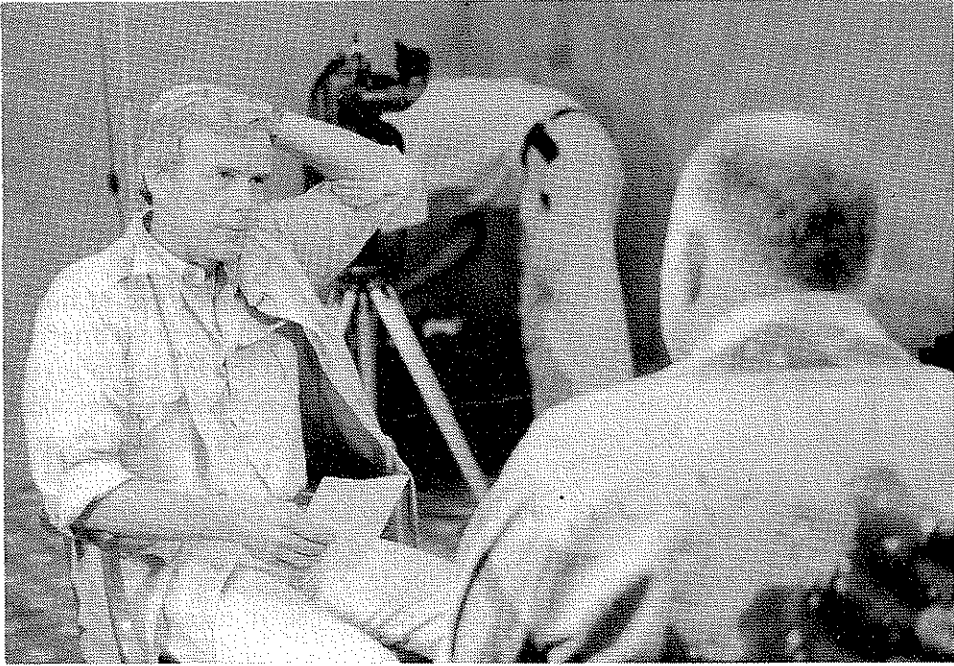
We never did that, of course. Having sat on the other side of the podium, I believe that there's no such thing as a bad question. The ritual of the press briefing, with its own strange etiquette, evolved in an era before live television. What's fair in the briefing room may not seem reasonable or even polite when seen in the living room.

Tough questions are fair game. Plans don't always work the way they're supposed to. And even if they do, it isn't wrong for reporters to ask questions and raise doubts in advance. The way to judge the work of the press is to forget the questions and focus on the stories that are written and broadcast—just as a successful fisherman is judged by the fish he catches, not by the worms he uses.

The American people responded to the coverage. A *Newsweek* poll found that 59 percent of Americans think better of the news media now than they did before the war. An ABC News-*Washington Post* poll after the war showed that by a two-to-one margin, those surveyed thought the press had gained respect.

Partly because of the thorough job the press did, the *military* gained respect. Thanks to reporters, the American people could see what our troops, our commanders, and our weapons were doing. The ABC-*Post* poll showed that 88 percent of those surveyed thought the military gained respect during the Gulf War. Ten years ago, the military had only half that public confidence.

Pete Williams has been Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs since May 1989. His televised press briefings during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm placed him among the Gulf War's recognizable public figures. From 1986 to 1989 he served as Press Secretary and Legislative Assistant to then-Congressman Dick Cheney. A graduate of Stanford University, he previously had spent ten years in Wyoming as a radio and television reporter and news director. The present article is a recently updated version of Mr. Williams' remarks before the National Press Club on 14 March 1991.



DOD Still Media Records Center

NBC news anchor Tom Brokaw talks with General H. Norman Schwarzkopf prior to taping an interview in Saudi Arabia in November 1990.

Richard Harwood, *The Washington Post's* ombudsman, has pointed out that those reporters who long for the good old days of Vietnam should visit the archives. He said they would find no historical precedent for the expansive and detailed Desert Storm coverage. He's referring to the second myth about the press and the Gulf War—that reporters didn't have much of a chance to do their jobs because of the press arrangements we had there.

Last August, following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, US forces began to arrive a few days after Secretary Cheney's meeting with King Fahd in Saudi Arabia. When the first US Air Force F-15s landed on sovereign Saudi territory, there were no Western reporters in the kingdom. While the Saudi government studied whether to grant visas to journalists, they agreed to accept a pool of US reporters if the US military could get them in. So we activated the DOD National Media Pool, because there was no other way to get Western reporters into Saudi Arabia.

The pool arrived Monday afternoon, 13 August, and continued to act as a pool until 26 August. The Saudi government then started to issue visas to other reporters. But the news organizations in the Pentagon pool asked that we keep it going until the visa picture cleared up, and we did.

Starting with those initial 17 reporters—representing AP, UPI, Reuters, CNN, National Public Radio, *Time*, Scripps-Howard, the *Los Angeles*

Times, and the *Milwaukee Journal*—the number of reporters, editors, photographers, producers, and technicians grew to nearly 800 by December. Except during the first two weeks of the pool, those reporters all filed their stories independently, directly to their own news organizations.

They visited ships at sea, air bases, Marines up north, and soldiers training in the desert. They went aboard AWACS radar warning planes. They quoted generals who said their forces were ready—and privates who said they were not. There were stories about helicopter pilots crashing into the sand because of the difficulty in judging distances in the flat desert light. And reporters described the remarkable speed with which the US military moved so many men and women to the Gulf with so much of their equipment.

After the President in mid-November announced a further buildup of US forces to give the coalition a true offensive option, my office began working on a plan that would allow reporters to cover combat while maintaining the operational security necessary to assure tactical surprise and save American lives.

One of the first concerns of news organizations in the Pentagon press corps was that they did not have enough staff in the Persian Gulf to cover hostilities. Since they did not know how the Saudi government would respond to their requests for more visas, and since they couldn't predict what restrictions might be imposed on commercial air traffic in the event of a war, they asked us whether we'd be willing to use a military plane to take in a group of reporters to act as journalistic reinforcements. We agreed to do so.

A US Air Force C-141 cargo plane left Andrews Air Force base on 17 January, the morning after the bombing began, with 126 news media personnel on board. The fact that senior military commanders dedicated one of their cargo airplanes to the job of transporting another 126 journalists to Saudi Arabia demonstrates the military's commitment to take reporters to the scene of the action so they could get the story out to the American people.

In formulating the ground rules and guidelines for covering Operation Desert Storm, we looked at the rules developed in 1942 for World War II, at those handed down by General Eisenhower's chief of staff for the reporters who covered the D-Day landings, and at the ground rules established by General MacArthur for covering the Korean War. And we carefully studied the rules drawn up for covering the war in Vietnam.

The ground rules were not intended to prevent journalists from reporting on incidents that might embarrass the military or to make military operations look sanitized. Instead, they were intended simply and solely to prevent publication of details that could jeopardize a military operation or endanger the lives of US troops.

Some things were *not* to be reported:

- Details of future operations.

- Specific information about troop strengths or locations.
- Specific information on missing or downed airplanes or ships while search and rescue operations were underway.
- Information on operational weaknesses that could be used against US forces.

Reporters understood the reasoning behind these ground rules, and of all the aspects of the coverage plan for the war in the Persian Gulf, these off-limits topics were the least controversial.

The least understood policy was probably the system for copy review. Reporters covering World War II wrote their stories and submitted them to a military censor. The censors cut out anything they felt broke the rules and sent the stories on. The decision of the censor was final.

There was no such system of censorship in Operation Desert Storm. There was, instead, a procedure that allowed us to appeal to news organizations when we thought material in their stories would violate the ground rules. But unlike censorship, the system in the Gulf left the final decision to publish or broadcast in the hands of journalists, not the military.

While the pools were in existence, 1351 print pool reports were written. Only five were submitted for our review in Washington, and we quickly cleared four of them. The fifth appeal involved a story that dealt in considerable detail with the methods of intelligence operations in the field. We called the reporter's editor-in-chief, and he agreed that the story should be changed to protect sensitive intelligence procedures. This aspect of the coverage plan also worked well.

Only the pool stories, from reporters in the field, were subject to this review, not live television and radio reports or the thousands of other stories written in Dhahran and Riyadh, based on pool reports, the military briefings, and original reporting.

As the number of troops in the desert grew, so did the number of reporters to cover them. The US and international press corps went from zero on 2 August, to 17 on the first pool, to 800 by December, and to nearly 1400 just before the ground war started. Most of those reporters, the good ones anyway, wanted to be out where the action is. But with hundreds of fiercely independent reporters seeking to join up with combat units, we concluded that when the combat started, we'd have no choice but to rely on pools.

We agonized over this decision, because the part of my job we dislike the most is setting up pools and keeping them going. Unilateral, or independent, reporting worked well all during the fall and early winter. But once the war approached, the number of reporters in Saudi Arabia continued to grow, and the competition to get out with the troops was intense. There was simply no fair alternative to pools, especially considering the highly mobile nature of this war, prosecuted in a vast desert.

Now that the war is over and General Schwarzkopf has described the plan, it's clear why the press arrangements weren't like those in World War II. This was not an operation in which reporters could ride around in jeeps going from one part of the front to another, or like Vietnam where reporters could hop a helicopter to specific points of action.

Before the air phase of the operation began in January, news organizations were afraid that we wouldn't get the pools out to see anything. They reminded us of their experience in Panama. But as viewers, readers, and listeners know now, we had the pools in place before the operation started.

Reporters were on an aircraft carrier in the Red Sea to witness the launching of the first air strikes, aboard a battleship in the Persian Gulf that fired the first cruise missiles ever used in combat, at the Air Force bases where the fighter planes and bombers were taking off around the clock, and with several ground units in the desert.

Those early days were not without problems. The first stories written about the stealth fighters were, for some reason, sent all the way back to the F-117s home base in Nevada to be cleared.

Once the ground combat started, American units moved quickly—some of them by air. To cover the conflict, reporters had to be part of a unit, able to move with it. Each commander had an assigned number of vehicles with only so many seats. While he could take care of the reporters he knew were coming, he could not have been expected to keep absorbing those who arrived on their own, in their rented four-wheel drives—assuming they could even find the units out west once the war started.

Nonetheless, by the time the ground war began, 131 reporters, editors, and photographers were out with the Army and Marines on the ground. There were reporters out with every division and a few others at the two Army corps headquarters. The pool system allowed us to tell the divisional commanders how many reporters they would be responsible for. And the reporters in these pools were allowed to stay with the military units they covered, learning as much as they could about the unit's plans and tactics.

Once the ground war started, it wasn't like Vietnam, either, with minor skirmishes here and there and a major offensive every now and then. It was, as the world now knows, a set piece operation, with divisions from the Army and Marines moving quickly, supported by Air Force and Navy planes—all of it carefully orchestrated.

In this sense, it *was* like something from a previous war—D-Day. It's useful to remember that 461 reporters were signed up at the Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force, to cover D-Day. Of that number, only 27 US reporters actually went ashore with the first wave of forces.

Pools rub reporters the wrong way, but there was simply no way for us to open up a rapidly moving front to reporters roaming the battlefield. We

believe the pool system did three things: it got reporters out to see the action, it guaranteed that Americans at home got reports from the scene of the action, and it allowed the military to accommodate a reasonable number of journalists without overwhelming the units that were fighting the enemy.

Now that the war is over, it's time to look back. As I review our own arrangements, there are clearly some things we could have done better. Here are some preliminary observations.

- We could have done a better job of helping reporters in the field. Judging from what I've heard from the reporters who went out on the pools, we had some outstanding escorts. But we must improve that process. Escort officers shouldn't throw themselves in front of the camera when one of the troops utters a forbidden word—as happens on that piece of ABC News tape from last fall that is shown every time there's a program about the press. We need to teach public affairs personnel how to do their jobs so that reporters won't feel their interview subjects are intimidated.

- Our first obligation to the press is to get reporters out with the action, so that journalists are eyewitnesses to history. I've seen some excellent examples of that—some of Molly Moore's stories on the Marines for *The Washington Post* and Joe Galloway's pieces on the 24th Infantry Division in *US News*. But we must do better at getting stories back to the press center. Some units did well, using computer modems and tactical telephone fax machines. The Marines seemed to be best at using the technology of the 1990s to get the stories back. Others didn't do so well. I've heard from reporters who said their stories were delayed for several days. We must do better. If reporters fear that we will not perform the mission of getting their stories back to file, their frustrations will lead them to strike out on their own, serving neither the public interest, the press, nor the military.

- Part of the problem was the sheer number of journalists to accommodate. As someone who works for the government, I can't decide who goes to cover the war and who doesn't. Maybe it's too much to expect an institution as competitive as the press to limit its numbers in a war, especially when local papers want to provide coverage to the hometowns where the troops come from. But it's a subject worth raising.

- Several bureau chiefs told me last fall that in planning for war coverage, the security of reporters was their concern, not mine. But that's not realistic, because I couldn't ignore that even if I wanted to. It's not morally possible. We were on the phone to CBS News nearly every day that Bob Simon and his crew were missing, and we were greatly relieved when they came through their ordeal okay. And when a group of US journalists was captured in Iraq after the ceasefire, four news industry executives wrote to the President, saying that *no* US forces should withdraw from Iraq until the issue of

the journalists was resolved. The issue was raised by the US government with the Iraqi representative in Washington, with Iraq's ambassador at the UN, with Soviet officials, with the International Red Cross, and at two meetings between US and Iraqi military officers in the Gulf. We shared the media's sense of relief when the journalists were set free. We must drop the pretense that the safety of journalists isn't the government's concern.

There are more lessons to be learned, mostly from the journalists who covered the war themselves. I've heard from a few already. I am sending a letter to every reporter who took part in a pool, asking for each individual's criticisms, observations, and suggestions. And I will arrange to meet with the bureau chiefs of Washington news organizations to continue the discussions we began last fall.

Whatever else the press arrangements in the Persian Gulf may have been, they were a good faith effort on the part of the military to be as fair as possible to the large number of reporters on the scene. They were a good faith effort to get as many reporters as possible out with troops during a highly mobile, modern ground war. And they were a good faith effort to allow as much freedom in reporting as possible while still preventing the enemy from knowing what we were up to.

This was, after all, an enemy that had virtually as much access to American news reporting as our people had here at home. From what we've been able to learn, Iraqi military commanders didn't have a clue as to which coalition forces were out there, where they were, or what they were up to. They appear to have been caught totally off guard by the quick move of the 18th Airborne Corps west of Kuwait, deep into Iraq. For the sake of the operation and the lives of those American, British, and French troops, we absolutely could not have let the enemy learn that.

In a recent issue of *Newsweek*, Jonathan Alter missed the point of all this. He wrote, "With its quick win, the Pentagon will surely try to repeat its press policy the next time." Well, maybe, if "next time" means that we're once again in Saudi Arabia, once again facing Iraq in occupied Kuwait. The point is that these press arrangements were dictated by the nature of the military operation and the number of reporters on the scene. The next military operation will undoubtedly be different. The presumption, in any event, must be against pools.

I think the point was better understood by Arthur Lubow, writing in *The New Republic*. He said this: "In modern war, reporters must be permitted at the front, and they must submit to sensible censorship. Mutual mistrust is part of the shared heritage of soldiers and journalists in time of war. So is mutual accommodation."

It is to mutual accommodation that we must pledge our future efforts. □