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## Tomorrow's Wars and the Media

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**ABSTRACT:** Distilling lessons from the author's book, *The Media Offensive: How the Press and Public Opinion Shaped Allied Strategy during World War II*, this article provides applicable suggestions for the US military today. As in World War II, the press is both a weapon and a possible vulnerability in modern warfare. Consequently, this article offers practical suggestions for how the press can be used by public affairs officers, commanders, and policymakers to achieve victory in coming conflicts.

**Keywords:** press, World War II, public affairs, TikTok, media

**L**ieutenant General George S. Patton Jr. began a November 6, 1944, press conference by asking the assembled reporters for a favor. The purpose of the press conference was to brief the correspondents on the Third Army's coming offensive to capture Metz, France. Patton asked if the *BBC* correspondent was present and explained "you can do me a very great favor by lying for me when we attack by saying we are straightening our lines for a winter position." He hoped the deception would gain his army 24 hours. Other reporters reminded the general their stories were also broadcast on the radio, and Patton agreed they could help.<sup>1</sup> Major General Hobart Gay, the Third Army's deputy chief of staff, recorded that Patton "gave them practically all the details of the proposed attack." Gay added "the purpose of this statement is to mislead the enemy and not the public."<sup>2</sup> Patton had an additional request, "Another thing is to give the Corps, Division, and Regimental Commanders credit for what they do." Giving individuals or specific units' publicity would uplift the morale of both soldiers and civilians. After reminding the reporters that everything he had told them was secret, he ended by saying "I know I can trust you."<sup>3</sup>

Seventy-seven years later in the early morning hours of May 14, 2021 (Jerusalem time), the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) announced "air and ground troops are currently attacking in the Gaza Strip." Hamas reacted by ordering their ground forces into a maze of defensive tunnels to repel the assault. No ground attack came. Instead, the Israeli Air Force subjected the tunnels to 40 minutes of bombardment. Meanwhile, the IDF corrected their statement. No ground attack was afoot. Only artillery

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1. "Conference between General Patton and Third Army Correspondents," November 6, 1944, folder 7, box 53, George S. Patton Papers, Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress.

2. Hobart R. Gay, *Diary*, November 6, 1944, folder October 7, 1944 to November 20, 1944, box 2, Hobart R. Gay Papers, US Army Heritage and Education Center.

3. "General Patton and Third Army Correspondents."

fire from outside Gaza, which, in the fog of war, had been misinterpreted as a ground invasion. Despite the IDF denial, the international media were outraged and claimed the military had deliberately used the press to mislead Hamas into their crosshairs.<sup>4</sup> Whatever the truth, the erroneous report had worked to Israel's tactical advantage.

As the above examples demonstrate, the press has played a role in past conflicts and will continue to be an important factor in future wars. Although the two stories have notable differences, they also contain striking similarities. With changing technologies and the onset of social media and content apps (such as TikTok), the press's role in warfare continues to grow.

In my forthcoming book, *The Media Offensive: How the Press and Public Opinion Shaped Allied Strategy during World War II*, I argue the onset of total war made World War II combatants attempt to use the press as a weapon.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, press and public opinion increasingly influenced the battlefield decisions of commanders. In this article, I argue that both observations are valid today, explore how lessons from the World War II media war can guide future conflicts, address perennial issues in military media situations (not function as a critique of current US Army public affairs policies), and provide lessons drawn from history while acknowledging the vastly different media landscape that has emerged since World War II.

For this article, the definitions of what is “news” and “public opinion” have been left deliberately opaque. Most people, military officers included, do not have a formal definition for either term, but view where they get information on current events as news. Public opinion can be in the eye of the beholder. As this article shows, what an officer believes news and public opinion to be is more significant for explaining his or her actions than what news and public opinion actually are.

## News Will Influence Battlefield Decisions

Dwight D. Eisenhower, Ernest King, and George Marshall were hardly publicity hounds. During World War II, however, they allowed their military decisions to be influenced by the media as much as limelight-loving Mark Clark,

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4. David M. Halbfinger, “A Press Corps Deceived, and the Gaza Invasion That Wasn’t,” *New York Times* (website), May 14, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/14/world/middleeast/israel-gaza-disinformation.html?msclkid=5baa82afcd2f11eca81f0bc36e6545ae>; Josef Federman, “Israeli Military Accused of Using Media to Trick Hamas,” Associated Press (website), May 15, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/hamas-middle-east-israel-media-4d942411c64c8ae1e919ae93401f8919?msclkid=a6766017cd2f11ec9ddf42856dde7cd1>; Nir Dvori, “The IDF’s Ploy: This Is How the Tunnels Became Death Traps for Terrorists in Gaza,” N12 (website), May 14, 2021, [https://www.mako.co.il/news-military/2021\\_q2/Article-178966fb8e96971026.htm?sCh=31750a2610f26110&pld=173113802](https://www.mako.co.il/news-military/2021_q2/Article-178966fb8e96971026.htm?sCh=31750a2610f26110&pld=173113802).

5. Alexander G. Lovelace, *The Media Offensive: How the Press and Public Opinion Shaped Allied Strategy during World War II* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2022).

Douglas MacArthur, and George Patton. As Francis de Guingand, Bernard Law Montgomery's chief of staff, wrote after the war, "It is well that the press should realise how even the most dogged and determined characters are influenced by what they say."<sup>6</sup>

Even strong-willed commanders who ignore the press will have to answer to military and political leaders who do the opposite. As Saddam Hussein's forces retreated from Kuwait during the Persian Gulf War, for example, they were caught in the open by the US Air Force. The press labeled the subsequent destruction the "Highway of Death." It did not take long before coalition commander General H. Norman Schwarzkopf heard his superiors were beginning to worry public opinion might be negatively affected by the graphic images. Schwarzkopf concluded, "Washington was ready to overreact, as usual, to the slightest ripple in public opinion. I thought, but didn't say, that the best thing the White House could do would be to turn off the damned TV in the situation room."<sup>7</sup> Clearly, the press is a weapon that cuts both ways and understanding how the media influences military decision making is a necessary precursor to wielding the media as a weapon.

During World War II, overseas commanders rarely had access to editorials, opinion polls, or timely news.<sup>8</sup> However, this lack of access did not stop them from guessing what public opinion was and responding accordingly. For example, near the end of the North African campaign in spring 1943 the British announced logistical problems prevented British and American forces from taking part in the final battle for Tunisia and explained they would take the Axis surrender. Major General Omar Bradley, who commanded the US II Corps, visited Eisenhower to complain. Bradley told Eisenhower, "The people in the United States want a victory and they deserve one," Bradley argued. "After playing an important part on the North African invasion and in the early Tunisian campaign, they would find it difficult to understand why the American forces were squeezed out in this final campaign."<sup>9</sup> Instead of inquiring how Bradley knew public opinion so conveniently supported his argument, Eisenhower changed the battle plans to include the II Corps. In this case, as in others, perception of public opinion mattered more than its reality.

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6. Francis de Guingand, *Operation Victory* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947), 381–82.

7. H. Norman Schwarzkopf, *It Doesn't Take a Hero: The Autobiography of General H. Norman Schwarzkopf* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), 468.

8. Eisenhower to Charles Kenon Gailley Jr., January 1, 1943, letter, in Dwight Eisenhower, *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower*, vol. 2, *The War Years*, ed. Alfred D. Chandler Jr. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), 883; Dwight Eisenhower to Edgar Eisenhower, February 18, 1943, letter, in Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower*, vol. 1, *The War Years*, ed. Alfred D. Chandler Jr. (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), 962; and Eisenhower to Alexander Day Surles, April 6, 1943, letter, in *Eisenhower Papers*, vol. 2, 1081.

9. Omar N. Bradley, *A Soldier's Story* (New York: Random House, 1951), 56–59.

Today, social media provides a new pressure—and danger—of influencing commanders and policymakers. Although it is easy to equate social media and public opinion, they are not the same. A 2019 Pew study of Twitter found 22 percent of American adults who have a Twitter account are more likely to be young, highly educated, wealthy, women, and vote for Democrats. A more stunning fact is that 10 percent of Twitter users are responsible for 80 percent of all the tweets created. Additionally, the study observed, “Individuals who are among the top 10 percent most active tweeters also differ from those who tweet rarely in ways that go beyond the volume of content they produce . . . Compared with other US adults on Twitter, they are much more likely to be women and more likely to say they regularly tweet about politics.”<sup>10</sup> More significant is the size of this group. With 22 percent of the US adult population, the group numbered 56,153,082 in 2019.<sup>11</sup> Ten percent of this number means 5,615,309 people made 80 percent of all the tweets on Twitter. This number is hardly insignificant, but when it is compared to the US adult population of 255,241,278, it is not impressive. Twitter activity may represent something, but it does not represent American public opinion.

The real power of Twitter is not so much the number of people that post, but the power they have to drive news stories. Indeed, Twitter and other social media sites have provided politicians, business leaders, and others with a platform that bypasses traditional news outlets. Tweets can be picked up by different news sources and have much wider influence than they would have on Twitter.<sup>12</sup> These posts, however, come from already-famous users who could attract media attention without Twitter. In addition, this group is much smaller than the 2 percent of the population that creates most tweets. At best, Twitter shows the opinions of the elite who post and should not be mistaken for public opinion.

Enemy actors can also use social media to create public pressure to end a war, amplify domestic unrest, create disinformation, highlight rumors, and spread havoc. The use of fake or stolen social media accounts by the Chinese and Russian

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10. Stefan Wojcik and Adam Hughes, “Sizing Up Twitter Users,” April 24, 2019, Pew Research Center (website), <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2019/04/24/sizing-up-twitter-users/>; and Mason Walker and Katerina Eva Matsa, “News Consumption across Social Media in 2021,” September 20, 2021, Pew Research Center (website), <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2021/09/20/news-consumption-across-social-media-in-2021/>.

11. “Total Population by Child and Adult Populations in the United States,” Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count Data Center (website), accessed January 4, 2022, <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/99-total-population-by-child-and-adult-populations#detailed/1/any/false/574,1729,37,871,870,573,869,36,868,867/39,40,41/416,417>.

12. Walker and Matsa, “News Consumption across Social Media.”

governments is well documented.<sup>13</sup> One 2021 study found that “[a] coordinated influence operation on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube is using a mix of fake and repurposed accounts to push pro-China narratives and distort perceptions on important issues.”<sup>14</sup> The same report estimated Chinese influence operations employed between 40 to 55 Facebook accounts, 300 to 500 Twitter accounts, and 12 YouTube accounts.<sup>15</sup> In other words, opinion gleaned from anecdotal social media posts no more represents public opinion than the anonymous notes Shakespeare’s Cassius left for Brutus to find to convince him the masses wished him to save Rome from Caesar.<sup>16</sup>

While commanders cannot always avoid letting public opinion influence battlefield decisions, they should exercise careful judgment over what is public opinion, what they assume is public opinion, and what is a loud minority or enemy disinformation.

### Today’s Media Is Different from the World War II Press

In 1987, journalists Peter Jennings and Mike Wallace participated in a discussion about combat ethics. The moderator asked Jennings what he would do if he were covering a hypothetical enemy unit preparing to ambush US soldiers. Jennings responded he would do everything in his power to warn the Americans. Wallace disagreed asserting, “I am astonished, really, to hear Peter say that. You’re a reporter. Granted you are an American. But you are a reporter covering combat . . . and I am a little bit at a loss to understand why, because you are an American, you would not cover that story.” The moderator asked if Wallace did not have a higher duty “as an American citizen” to save the lives of his country’s soldiers. Wallace replied he did not, and at this point, Jennings had changed his mind as well.<sup>17</sup>

Four years later, Saddam Hussein apparently had no more qualms about allowing an American news outlet to cover the Persian Gulf War from Baghdad than *CNN* had in providing the coverage. A few days after the United States began bombing Afghanistan in October 2001, National Public Radio’s senior

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13. Insikt Group, “Beyond Hybrid War: How China Exploits Social Media to Sway American Opinion,” March 6, 2019, <https://go.recordedfuture.com/hubfs/reports/cta-2019-0306.pdf>; Marcel Schliebs et al., “China’s Inauthentic UK Twitter Diplomacy: A Coordinated Network Amplifying PRC Diplomats,” The Programme on Democracy & Technology, University of Oxford; and Nina Jankowicz and Ross Burley, “The West Has Gotten Savvier about Russian Disinformation. Will That Help Ukraine?” *Washington Post*, January 22, 2022.

14. Benjamin Strick, *Analysis of the Pro-China Propaganda Network Targeting International Narratives* (Centre for Information Resilience, 2021), 4.

15. Strick, “Pro-China Propaganda,” 4.

16. William Shakespeare, “Julius Caesar,” in *The Works of William Shakespeare Complete* (New York: Black’s Readers Service Company, New York, 1937), 1.2.310. Referenced to act, scene, and line.

17. “Jennings & Wallace, Reporters First, Americans Second,” YouTube, video, 3:54, July 10, 2006, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGg\\_dpGhlf0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGg_dpGhlf0); and James Fallows, “Why We Hate the Media,” *Frontline* (website), <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/press/vanities/fallows.html>.

foreign editor Loren Jenkins was asked about the ethics of reporting the secret positions of US military units. Jenkins did not hesitate in responding he would expose the units' positions, explaining "I don't represent the government. I represent history, information, what happened."<sup>18</sup>

Such attitudes stand in stark contrast to those of the American press during World War II. When discussing the soldier-slapping scandal that might hurt or end Patton's contribution to the war effort, Demaree Bess of the *Saturday Evening Post* spoke for a different generation of reporters when he explained "we're Americans first and correspondents second."<sup>19</sup> The 60 journalists in the theater apparently agreed, and the story was only broken months later by a stateside commentator.<sup>20</sup> The Vietnam War, combined with Watergate, made the press much less trusting of government authority. Likewise, large media corporations followed the trend of other international businesses within the United States in seeing themselves as transcending national boundaries.<sup>21</sup>

More importantly, technology has fundamentally transformed the news business in terms of speed, accessibility, and who can influence news. Television changed who in news organizations influences editorial opinion. During the first half of the twentieth century, newspaper editorials were largely shaped by editors, media company presidents, and shareholders. The television format gave reporters greater latitude in interpreting the meaning of news.<sup>22</sup> Years later, the need to fill the 24-hour cable news cycle added to the increased focus on opinion shows and the competitiveness of journalism. At the same time, the proliferation of new outlets, including online news, has amplified the use of opinion over facts in reporting. A 2019 RAND Corporation empirical study comparing broadcast television to cable news found post-2000 cable news coverage "exhibited a dramatic and quantifiable shift toward subjective, abstract, directive, and argumentative language and content based more on the expression of opinion than on reporting of events."

The same study compared print and online journalism between 2012 and 2017 and found online journalism tended to be "more argumentative, with an eye toward persuasion."<sup>23</sup> While older news models focused on trying to attract the largest audiences possible through objectivity, the RAND study found the opposite

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18. Steve Johnson, "Cutting through 'The Fog of War,'" *Chicago Tribune* (website), October 12, 2001, [www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2001-10-12-0110120007-story.html?](http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2001-10-12-0110120007-story.html?)

19. Quentin Reynolds, *By Quentin Reynolds* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), 296.

20. Virgil Pinkley with James F. Scheer, *Eisenhower Declassified* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1979), 160.

21. Jeff Jacoby, "Patriotism and the CEOs," *Boston Globe*, July 30, 1998, A15.

22. Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1997), 846–47.

23. Jennifer Kavanagh et al., *News In A Digital Age: Comparing the Presentation of News Information over Time and across Media Platforms* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), xvii–xviii, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2900/RR2960/RAND\\_RR2960.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2900/RR2960/RAND_RR2960.pdf).

trend to be true today. As news became increasingly opinionated, it also became more partisan and led to fragmentation.<sup>24</sup> There are more ways to get news than ever before, but with each outlet reaching smaller audiences. It is uncertain how much TikTok and social media platforms will continue to wrest control of news content from professional journalists. Real philosophical, technological, and structural differences, therefore, exist between the World War II press and the media today.

Given the press's hostile attitude, it might be tempting to advocate some form of censorship. If censorship saves military lives, would not the American public come to demand it? World War II censorship methods today, however, are as untenable as they are undesirable. During World War II, the military controlled the means of communicating written and broadcast news to the American people, which often took time and allowed for prepublication censorship. The advent of the Internet, live coverage, satellites, and other technological advances makes anything approaching World War II censorship impossible. News is no longer the sole domain of professional journalists. Censoring every blog or Twitter account would prove very difficult.

Despite these changes of the press in outlook and technology, World War II can still impart important lessons for the military leaders who are dealing with today's press. To begin with, commanders during that conflict were working with new forms of media (such as newsreels and radio) and the increasing speed of information. As Eisenhower discovered, modern communications meant the "commander in the field is never more than an hour away from home capitals and public opinion."<sup>25</sup> Nor was the World War II press nearly as subservient to the military as supposed.<sup>26</sup> Commanders had to deal with scandals, mistakes, and reporters hostile to the military. Finally, the basic task of reporters has not changed, nor has the power of news to shape warfare.

### The Press Is a Weapon

Fortunately, there are less draconian and more effective ways than censorship for the press to contribute to victory. To start, the military should establish channels to major news organizations long before any conflict begins to create trust and provide a way for dangerous or false new stories to be blocked or managed. After heavy criticism of the US military's agreement to allow Vichy French officials

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24. Kavanagh et al., *News in a Digital Age*, 8–9.

25. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1948), 184.

26. Steven Casey, *The War Beat, Europe: The American Media at War against Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 3, 347, 352; Richard A. Fine, "Snakes in Our Midst: The Media, the Military and American Policy toward Vichy North Africa," *American Journalism* 27 no. 4 (2010): 59–82; and Richard A. Fine, "Edward Kennedy's Long Road to Reims: The Media and the Military in World War II," *American Journalism* 33, no. 3 (2016): 317–39.

to retain power temporarily in North Africa in exchange for keeping order, journalist Alexander F. Jones of the *Washington Post* helped establish a committee with the American Society of Newspaper Editors to work with the military to get more accurate angles on controversial stories.<sup>27</sup> A modern equivalent could help prevent needless scandals while fostering greater understanding between soldiers and reporters.

The best public relations officers during World War II tended to be former reporters, or at least officers who were somewhat sympathetic towards journalism. Due to the massive growth of the US Army during the war, most high-level commanders had at least one former reporter on their personal staffs to facilitate contact between both groups and help commanders understand the needs of journalists. Although direct recruitment of professional journalists would be difficult, today's public affairs officers should have some experience or training as journalists to help meet the needs of both the military and reporters. Initiatives such as the PAO Program, which provides public affairs officers with additional training in journalism schools, is an excellent start.

Lessons learned from World War II led to the creation of the Defense Visual Information Distribution Service (DVIDS), which continues to cultivate goodwill with journalists.<sup>28</sup> Before D-Day, Allied public relations officers compiled a massive library of photos and information to be made available to fill the incredible demand for news the landing in France would generate.<sup>29</sup> Journalists sympathetic to both the military and their profession, such as CBS's Edward R. Murrow, worked as liaisons between news organizations and military officers planning press accommodations.<sup>30</sup> Modern news driven by constant television and online media will continue to need the important service DVIDS provides.

Directing organized media attention toward ordinary soldiers, which the US military has done successfully in recent wars, also has its origins during World War II. For example, Patton tried—not always successfully—to direct media attention away from himself and toward his soldiers. He wrote the head of War Department Public Relations, stating “It is my opinion that in spite of our large conversation about the psychology of war, we utterly fail to utilize the

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27. Jones to Butcher, November 30, 1942, letter, folder November 30, 1942 to January 7, 1943 (2), box 166, Dwight D. Eisenhower Papers, Pre-Presidential, 1916–52, Principal File, Eisenhower President Library, Kansas.

28. “DVIDS,” Defense Media Activity (website), <https://www.dma.mil/Services/DVIDS/>, accessed April 16, 2022.

29. “Final Report on Invasion Reference Library,” June 9, 1944, folder 314.7, box 7, RG 331, National Archives Annex, College Park, MD.

30. Lynne Olson, *Citizens of London: The Americans Who Stood with Britain in Its Darkest, Finest Hour* (New York: Random House, 2010), 317.

simplest means of stimulating pride and valor in the troops.”<sup>31</sup> Patton took for granted that the names of commanders and units would already be known to the enemy, and thus there was no harm in criticizing or praising them in the press. He argued:

if the people at home know that the boys from Lensville [sic], Illinois or Junction City Kansas are fighting and doing well, they will get a great kick out of it and will write to the soldiers with the result that the soldiers will fight harder than ever. If, on the other hand, they learn that certain units have not done well, they will also write, and these units will do better.<sup>32</sup>

As Patton stated during a press conference in 1944, stories of individual heroism “are the things we should get to the people at home and they would have a tremendous uplifting influence on the people and on the soldiers.”<sup>33</sup> Eisenhower agreed, concluding “no thing . . . so improves the morale of the soldier as to see his unit or his own name in print—just once.”<sup>34</sup> He made an effort to have his photo taken with ordinary GIs and then had the pictures sent to their hometown newspapers.<sup>35</sup> By the end of the war in Europe, the US Army had formed bands of war correspondents who interviewed ordinary soldiers and sent the stories to hometown newspapers.<sup>36</sup> At the peak of the program, nearly 20,000 stories were sent home each week. One reporter recalled that “I’ve met soldiers who’d show me well-worn clippings about some story I’d written about them months before.”<sup>37</sup>

Today, as in World War II, accounts of ordinary soldiers make excellent news stories. Although news—particularly hometown newspapers—is different than during World War II such stories provide journalists with an inexhaustible supply of exciting and appealing articles.<sup>38</sup> It was no accident that Ernie Pyle became the most famous war correspondent of World War II by writing almost exclusively about ordinary GIs. These stories are limited when it comes to the larger context of the conflict, and they cannot help the war effort.

Commanders should take every opportunity to bring public attention to their subordinates and staff. The US Army released few division or regimental

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31. Martin Blumenson, *The Patton Papers, 1940–1945*, vol. 2 (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1974), 101.

32. Blumenson, *Patton Papers*, 101.

33. “Conference between General Patton and Third Army Correspondents,” November 6, 1944, folder 7, box 53, George S. Patton Papers.

34. Barney Oldfield, *Never A Shot in Anger* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1956), xii.

35. Patton, diary, June 26, 1944, folder 5, box 3, George S. Patton Papers.

36. Unpublished Lawrence memoir, page 219, folder Memoirs-World War II (2), box 2 Justus Baldwin Lawrence Papers.

37. Unpublished Lawrence memoir, page 219.

38. Tom Curley and John Maxwell Hamilton, introduction, in Julia Kennedy Cochran, ed., *Ed Kennedy’s War: V-E Day, Censorship, & the Associated Press* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012), xi.

commander's names to the press through most of World War II. Patton and other commanders spent a lot of time trying to get the policy changed in order to highlight their hard work and successes.<sup>39</sup> When Marshall visited him in fall 1944, Patton startled the chief of staff by facetiously saying the wife of one of his generals wanted a divorce. When Marshall offered to intervene, Patton replied that the only thing he could do was release the general's name to the press because his wife thought her husband was a slacker. Patton got his general's name in the press but remembered belatedly that Marshall had "no sense of humor."<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, such actions built loyal and highly motivated subordinates. Conversely, generals such as Clark and MacArthur created lasting resentment by failing to spread praise in the press about their officers and men.<sup>41</sup>

Directing media attention toward the officers and soldiers one commands is good press policy and one of the basics of leadership. One reason for the success of "embedded" journalists during the Iraq War was the focus it placed on ordinary soldiers. American troops are not saints, and there will also be stories that reflect badly on the US military. Nevertheless, the best public affairs specialist is the American soldier in combat. Commanders should remember two additional points. First, troops performing vital work (such as logistics) also deserve press attention. Second, praise and criticism must be merited. Honesty, in this regard, separates praise from propaganda.

## TikTok Wars

In fall 2021, schools across the United States experienced a wave of vandalism inspired by "devious licks," a TikTok "challenge" that encouraged students to steal from—or destroy—bathrooms and post videos of the results.<sup>42</sup> During the week of September 13–17, for example, the school resource officer for Hempfield School District in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, made six arrests and questioned numerous students in connection with extensive bathroom vandalism.<sup>43</sup> The "devious licks" episode is a warning that TikTok can quickly spread influential messages with destructive consequences. The Russian invasion of Ukraine provided evidence of TikTok's influence in military affairs. As the *Washington Post* noted, "TikTok videos offered some of the first glimpses of the Russian invasion, and since then the platform has been a primary outlet for spreading news [of

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39. George S. Patton Jr., *War As I Knew It* (New York: Bantam Books, 1947), 139.

40. Blumenson, *Patton Papers*, 566.

41. Rick Atkinson, *The Day of Battle: The War in Sicily and Italy* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007), 547, 550; and William M. Leary, ed., *We Shall Return! MacArthur's Commanders and the Defeat of Japan 1942–1945* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988), ix–x.

42. Megan Marples, "The 'Devious Licks' TikTok Challenge Has Students Stealing Toilets and Vandalizing Bathrooms," *CNN* (website), September 18, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/09/18/health/deviuous-licks-tiktok-challenge-wellness/index.html>.

43. Tim Marks, telephone interview by author, March 17, 2022.

the war] to the masses abroad.”<sup>44</sup> Some commentators even began labeling the conflict a “TikTok war.”<sup>45</sup> As of this writing, the role TikTok will play in warfare is unclear, but a few preliminary results are apparent.

TikTok poses a much more serious challenge than other social media sites because it is not a “social media” app. Instead of connecting people, TikTok tailors content to individual users by employing an algorithm that attempts to find out what the consumer wants to see.<sup>46</sup> When a user scrolls through a line of short films, the algorithm notes how long the viewer lingers on a video and begins showing similar content. A *Wall Street Journal* investigation found these suggestions led users down “rabbit holes, which are hard to escape.”<sup>47</sup> Hence, it is difficult for a consumer to stop using TikTok because it is designed to release dopamine. University of Southern California Professor Julie Albright compares this effect to playing slot machines.<sup>48</sup> Finally, TikTok operates out of an authoritarian state with a record of human rights violations and an adversarial relationship with the United States. In other words, an addictive information site created in China feeds tailored content to users around the globe.

So far, the use of TikTok in warfare suggests it is the latest technological innovation for news to influence conflict. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, a former comedian, skillfully used the platform to connect with his people and the world. He also used TikTok to speak to the enemy, encouraging the Russian people to end the invasion.<sup>49</sup> His success was demonstrated when Russia enacted a “fake news” law. The law punished anyone knowingly propagating false information with years in prison, levied hefty fines, and drastically limiting news from outside countries.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, the White House briefed 30 TikTok “influencers”—one as young as 18 years old—on the war in Ukraine. “Saturday Night Live” quickly produced a skit ridiculing the meeting,

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44. Taylor Lorenz, “The White House Is Briefing TikTok Stars about the War in Ukraine,” *Washington Post* (website), March 11, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/03/11/tiktok-ukraine-white-house/>.

45. Kyle Chayka, “Watching the World’s ‘First TikTok War,’” *New Yorker* (website), March 3, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/infinite-scroll/watching-the-worlds-first-tiktok-war>; and Kaitlyn Tiffany, “The Myth of the ‘First TikTok War,’” *Atlantic* (website), March 11, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2022/03/tiktok-war-ukraine-russia/627017/>.

46. Fergus Ryan, “TikTok Algorithm: Why It Isn’t Really A Social Media App,” *Vision of Humanity* (website), n.d., accessed March 17, 2022, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/why-tiktok-isnt-really-a-social-media-app/>; and Senate of Commonwealth of Australia, Select Committee on Foreign Interference through Social Media, September 25, 2020, 10.

47. *Wall Street Journal* Staff, “Inside TikTok’s Algorithm: A WSJ Video Investigation,” *Wall Street Journal* (website), July 21, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/tiktok-algorithm-video-investigation-11626877477>.

48. John Koetsier, “Digital Crack Cocaine: The Science behind TikTok’s Success,” *Forbes* (website), January 18, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnkoetsier/2020/01/18/digital-crack-cocaine-the-science-behind-tiktoks-success/?sh=2ad508f578be>.

49. Chayka, “Watching the World’s ‘First TikTok War,’” *New Yorker*, March 3, 2022.

50. Ann M. Simmons and Alexandra Bruell, “Russia Targets Media Outlets With ‘Fake News’ Law, Blocks Facebook,” *Wall Street Journal* (website), March 5, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-targets-media-outlets-with-fake-news-law-blocks-facebook-11646442530>; and Liza Lin, “TikTok Struggles to Find Footing in Wartime,” *Wall Street Journal* (website), March 9, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/tiktok-struggles-to-find-footing-in-wartime-11646827213>.

but the influencers did not appear surprised. The *Washington Post* quoted Kahlil Greene who explained his “generation gets all our information from TikTok.”<sup>51</sup>

### No Such Thing as a “Noble Lie”

Nazi propaganda minister Josef Goebbels was deservedly called the “father of lies” by the Allies.<sup>52</sup> Yet, his diaries suggest Goebbels understood spreading misinformation as news was a position of weakness.<sup>53</sup> For example, when the Japanese began to refer to their defeats as “successful evacuations,” Goebbels fumed that such obvious lies made the Axis a “laughing stock.”<sup>54</sup> For their part, the Japanese militarists also understood the need for honesty. After Pearl Harbor, for example, the Japanese government publicly admitted they had lost all the midget submarines involved in the attack. As Admiral Matome Ugaki reasoned, “Since the Washington press reported” the story, “Japan could not but announce it.”<sup>55</sup> While the Axis nations habitually lied in their press and propaganda, they also knew lying had its limits.

Radio made it easy for combatants to listen to the other side’s news. To avoid looking foolish, news and propaganda had to be kept close to reality. During the war, US General Robert Eichelberger wrote, “I listened to one of their [Tokyo Radio] broadcasts and it is comparatively conservative. Noting they knew their enemy was listening he observed, “I guess they try not to let it sound foolish, although of course they present an improper picture.”<sup>56</sup> While the press of the Western Allied democracies was freer and more honest than the Axis, technology also made the US government release information that it otherwise would have kept secret. As Professor Steven Casey notes, when the American government refused to release casualty figures, Allied news outlets reported Axis claims.<sup>57</sup> After the Battle of the Coral Sea, for example, the US Navy was reluctant to release any information about the battle. When the Japanese began falsely claiming a great victory with high Allied losses, MacArthur felt obliged to release accurate information to refute the enemy propaganda.<sup>58</sup>

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51. Lorenz, “Briefing TikTok Stars.”

52. David Fraser, *Knight's Cross: A Life of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 308.

53. Louis P. Lochner, trans., *The Goebbels Diaries: 1942–1943* (Garden City, NY: 1948), 239, 457, 458.

54. Lochner, *Goebbels Diaries*, 461.

55. Matome Ugaki, *Fading Victory: The Diary of Admiral Matome Ugaki 1941–1945*, ed. Donald M. Goldstein and Katherine V. Dillon, trans. Masataka Chihaya (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1991), 57–58.

56. Robert Eichelberger, *Dear Miss Em: General Eichelberger's War in the Pacific, 1942–1945*, ed. Jay Luvaas (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972), 96.

57. Steven Casey, *When Soldiers Fall: How Americans Have Confronted Combat Losses from World War I to Afghanistan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 48.

58. D. Clayton James, *The Years of MacArthur*, vol. 2, 1941–1945 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975), 164.

New technologies have made deception more difficult, but truthful news—news reporting that accurately depicts events—has a power that defies human invention.<sup>59</sup> Goebbels's and Ugaki's statements tacitly acknowledged truth's power, even if they understood it was a weapon they could not employ. Lying to the public may yield short-term gains, but it comes at significant risk. For example, in the Battle of Waterloo, Napoleon Bonaparte learned the Prussians were advancing to assist the Duke of Wellington's troops. Nevertheless, he ordered the story spread that French Marshal Emmanuel de Grouchy was arriving with reinforcements. Napoleon's soldiers believed him until defeat arrived, along with reality. It was enough to shatter French morale and turn defeat into a rout.<sup>60</sup>

Deceiving the enemy is an important and legitimate part of warfare. The media can help fool the enemy, as the examples at the opening of this article demonstrated. As the journalists Patton spoke to understood fully, he was not trying to deceive them, his soldiers, or the Allied public. Today's media is not the World War II press corps, and commanders should use media deception with extreme caution. Deceiving the enemy is necessary, but lying to one's side is dangerous.

### Lessons Learned

Have new media technologies made the lessons from World War II military-press relations obsolete? As of this writing, the war in Ukraine is still raging, meaning any lessons drawn from the conflict must deal with incomplete information. Nevertheless, the war has clearly shown that the media is still a weapon in modern warfare, and new technologies have increased the media's power. As noted, Zelensky has brilliantly used TikTok to build support for Ukraine.<sup>61</sup> Not since Churchill has a leader exploited media technology to link himself closely to resistance in a desperate cause. As evidenced by Russia's persistent efforts to kill him, Zelensky has succeeded in placing himself at the center of gravity for Ukrainian endurance.<sup>62</sup> Making one person the focal point of resistance is dangerous; it leaves a vacuum if that person is killed. This technique, however, has served the Ukrainian cause well.

Zelensky is not the only Ukrainian using social media. Thousands of ordinary Ukrainians have uploaded videos and posts to Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and

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59. Lovelace, *Media Offensive*, 5–6.

60. David Howarth, *Waterloo: Day of Battle* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), 172, 182.

61. Chayka, "Watching the World's 'First TikTok War,'" *New Yorker*, March 3, 2022.

62. Namita Singh, "Ukraine's Zelensky Has Survived More Than a Dozen Assassination Attempts, Adviser Claims," *Independent* (website), March 10, 2022, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/ukraine-zelensky-assassination-attempts-russia-b2032759.html>.

Twitter, giving the war immediacy to those watching thousands of miles away.<sup>63</sup> Studies have also found disinformation on social media sites and TikTok.<sup>64</sup> Persistent efforts to root out misinformation suggest the importance of truth in warfare has not ended.<sup>65</sup>

Commanders and policymakers should mentally prepare for making difficult decisions that might counter editorial or public opinion. They should remember social media and Twitter storms do not necessarily represent popular sentiment and realize they are more knowledgeable about events than stateside critics. They must also resist the temptation to remove competent subordinates to satisfy public opinion.

Commanders and policymakers should resist any attempts at prepublication censorship. Nazi Germany tried to stop *BBC* radio broadcasts in World War II and failed.<sup>66</sup> Russia's repeated unsuccessful efforts to block Western social media in Ukraine indicate modern Internet censorship will be ineffective.<sup>67</sup> Instead, journalists should be accredited or embedded with units and provided guidelines on what they cannot publish—and removed from their assignments if they violate the guidelines. Criticism, and even disinformation, should not be silenced. Opposition opinion in the United States was not restricted during World War II, and this policy should continue in future wars.

Likewise, commanders must be honest with the press. Within the limits of operational security and with an understanding that deception is part of warfare, commanders should avoid lying to the media. Recently, there has been much discussion of “fake news,” disinformation, or misinformation. The cure for such problems is trust in institutions built on their personnel being honest. Even when it is distasteful, humans want the truth, and honest commanders will serve their country better than liars.

Nor is bad news necessarily detrimental when it comes to public relations. Military leadership during World War II worried that if the press were too optimistic, Americans would believe the conflict was almost won and lose interest. This belief led to the release of photographs of dead American soldiers during the

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63. Kate Linthicum, “TikTok and Twitter Capture Ukraine War in Frighteningly Real Time,” *Los Angeles Times* (website), March 31, 2022, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-03-31/ukraine-war-social-media-tik-tok>.

64. Shayan Sardarizadeh, “Ukraine War: False TikTok Videos Draw Millions of Views,” *BBC* (website), April 25, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/60867414>.

65. Sardarizadeh, “Ukraine War.”

66. Nicholas Stargardt, *The German War: A Nation Under Arms, 1939–1945, Citizens and Soldiers* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 79.

67. Sarah E. Needleman and Evan Gershkovich, “From YouTube to RuTube: Inside Russia's Influence Campaign,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 20, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/from-youtube-to-rutube-inside-russias-influence-campaign-11650447002?msclkid=74bdd15bcd6311ec867c81e121a00d8c>.

middle of the war.<sup>68</sup> Negative news stories can keep the civilian population from taking victory for granted in long conflicts.

During a war, all commanders should direct media attention toward their subordinates. Most importantly, the military should provide access to ordinary soldiers and encourage journalists to write about them. These types of stories make exciting news and will improve military morale. Although local newspapers are less relevant today than during World War II, the Internet has opened new avenues to reach audiences. Business and nonprofit organizations have long used Facebook groups, Patreon, YouTube, and other social media to connect with specific audiences by following the day-to-day lives of individuals in pursuit of a particular goal. The military can do the same to highlight the accomplishments of units and soldiers.

Finally, these conclusions are the result of an academic historical study. They come from the past, but practitioners must be careful how they are applied in the present. If they are tested in future wars and found wanting, they must be discarded. Military leaders should remember that orchestrated violence wins wars, not media strategies. The press is simply one weapon in the arsenal of modern warfare.

## Conclusion

Just as today, World War II military leaders sometimes viewed a free press as a liability. “It’s one of the disadvantages of democracy that it can’t conduct politics or war according to logic and intelligence,” smirked Goebbels, “but have to respond to the up-and-down swings of public opinion.”<sup>69</sup> Marshall worried over the same issue. After the war he recalled, “the leader in a democracy has to keep the people entertained.”<sup>70</sup>

Despite the annoyance and danger the press can cause the military during a war, this article has argued that a free press is a powerful weapon in modern warfare. Like all weapons, the media should be used and understood carefully. Commanders, unduly influenced by public opinion—or what they believe to be public opinion—may make unwise battlefield decisions. *The Media Offensive* provides a deeper exploration of these topics; however, this article has briefly outlined some lessons from the book that may be helpful. Studying the

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68. George H. Roeder Jr., *The Censored War: American Visual Experience during World War Two* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 1.

69. Entry 21.7.1942, Joseph Goebbels, *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels*, ed. Elke Fröhlich (Munich: K. G. Saur, 1995), Teil II, Brand, 160, quoted in Nigel Hamilton, *The Mantle of Command: FDR at War 1941–1942* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 317–18.

70. Larry I. Bland, ed., *George C. Marshall Interviews and Reminiscences for Forrest C. Pogue*, 3rd ed. (Lexington, VA: George C. Marshall Research Foundation, 1991), 622.

military-press relationship during World War II provides excellent intellectual training for anyone considering the possible and probable challenges the press will pose in future conflicts.

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