

DEFENSE

# The Pen and the Sword



*It's the Press vs. the Pentagon in a clash of two mighty and increasingly polarized cultures.*

**By James Kitfield**

Only a few days into Operation Allied Force in the Balkans last year, warning alarms began to sound inside the Pentagon about media coverage of the war. At least one 24-hour television news channel was broadcasting live video of U.S. warplanes taking off from their bases, potentially giving Serbian air defense gunners critical advance warning of attacks. That violation of informal media-military protocol during times of war was all the more alarming in light of news in the early days of the war that for the first time ever one of the United States radar-evading F-117 stealth fighter-bombers had been shot down.

In those early days of war, Pentagon officials feared that a voracious media pack—its ranks swelled dramatically in recent

years by reporters for numerous cable-television and Internet outlets who file around the clock—was increasingly getting its nose under the tent of operational security. The Defense Department responded by clamping down to an unprecedented degree.

The Pentagon and NATO refused to divulge the number of air attacks launched and the types of targets damaged or destroyed. Supreme Allied Commander Gen. Wesley Clark issued a “gag order” on virtually all of his commanders, and reporters were initially denied access to NATO air bases involved in the attacks. Those few who got access to allied pilots were not allowed to publish their names. Essentially, America went to war in blinders.

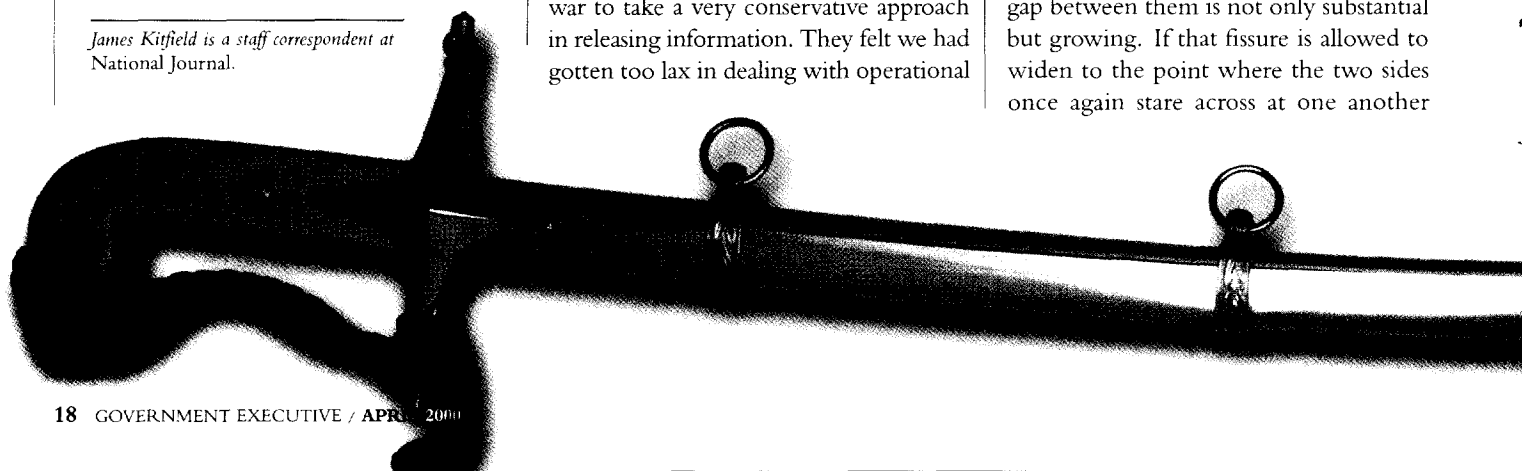
“Secretary of Defense [William] Cohen and [Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Gen. Henry] Shelton did make a conscious decision in the early days of the war to take a very conservative approach in releasing information. They felt we had gotten too lax in dealing with operational


security,” says Pentagon spokesman Ken Bacon. “We’re living in an age of multiple, 24-hour news networks all competing for scoops, and that’s led to much less respect in the media for protecting operational information. So this was a new kind of war, and it offered new challenges, and I’m not sure either the press or the Pentagon are yet up to that challenge.”

If Kosovo represented a new kind of war, however, many observers saw an old pattern in the dysfunctional relationship between the military and the media. Time and again the two professions have been thrown together during national emergencies, only to find themselves separated by a deep cultural chasm of distrust and mutual misunderstanding.

A close look at the historical currents and cultural dynamics driving the military-media relationship suggests that the gap between them is not only substantial but growing. If that fissure is allowed to widen to the point where the two sides once again stare across at one another

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not only with a lack of recognition, but with open disdain—as certainly happened in the period following Vietnam and Watergate—then both professions will have failed the American people.

“I believe that the relationship between the media and the U.S. military in the interim between Vietnam and Desert Storm became so bad that it was a threat to the well-being of our republic,” says retired Gen. Bernard “Mick” Trainor, who on retiring from the Marine Corps began a second career as a columnist with *The New York Times*. Trainor remembers speaking at the war colleges and service academies in the 1980s and early 1990s, and being amazed at the hostility service members who were too young to even remember Vietnam showed toward the media.

“I couldn’t understand it, but then I would have lunch with the staff officers who taught the courses, and I saw immediately the source of the animosity,” recalls Trainor. “These instructors were still outraged at the media. And I think the military’s manipulation of the media and the tightening of its grip on essential information that we saw in Kosovo was payback for what the military still believes the media did to it in Vietnam.”

### **Vietnam Split**

The media and military have had a troubled relationship dating back at least to the Civil War. New York papers were exonerated for publishing the Union order of battle at Bull Run before the engage-

ment had even been fought. Legend has it Union Gen. “Fighting Joe” Hooker invented the journalistic “byline” by demanding that any reporter traveling with his units be identified by name in the newspaper so that blame for shoddy reporting could be properly levied.

In the modern relationship between the military and media, however, Vietnam remains the seminal event. A compliant media acted almost as a propaganda arm of the U.S. government in both World Wars I and II. In the less-than-total war in Korea tensions arose between the military and media, but were largely kept in check. The conflict in Southeast Asia, however, was a far more ambiguous type of war set in a different time.

Almost immediately, a credibility gap began to emerge between reporters covering the war and the U.S. military, in large part as a result of overly optimistic briefings on the war’s progress by senior officers in Saigon—the infamous “Five O’Clock Follies”—that never seemed to jibe with what reporters witnessed on the front lines. Though these negative field reports were largely excised by editors in New York and Washington in the early years of the war, the credibility gap increasingly strained military and media relations as the war dragged on.

By 1968, the reservoir of credibility which lubricates media-military relations had run dry, replaced by grating distrust and suspicion. Nearly every assertion made by military spokesmen in Vietnam

was greeted with cynicism by the Saigon press corps. When North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces launched the massive Tet Offensive on Jan. 31, 1968, most correspondents depicted it as a psychological victory for the Communist forces. But American military officials and many analysts at the time insisted that Tet was a major military defeat for the Communists. History has largely born them out.

The events surrounding Tet profoundly soured relations between the U.S. military and the nation’s media, convincing the former that reporters had somehow lost the war, and the latter that the military could not be trusted on any level. But in 1973, the situation got even worse.

That year, the U.S. military returned from Vietnam and began a long, painful drawdown, retreating into its garrisons and nursing wounds many perceived as aggravated, if not inflicted, by the press. Also in 1973, the Nixon administration abolished the draft, severing the tie that most closely bound the U.S. military to society, and ensuring that fewer and fewer members of America’s influential elite—including its journalists—would have firsthand experience with the military.

For the national media, 1973 was also a watershed year. The Watergate scandal and the eventual resignation of President Nixon marked a profound shift in how the media viewed its role and relations with government officials and those in authority. Nearly an entire generation of journalists who came of age in the tur-

PHOTOGRAPH BY WILLIAM DENNEY



ROBERTO BOREA / AP

When the U.S. military special forces arrived on the beach of Mogadishu's airport in December 1992 the media were out in force, too.

bulent aftermath of both Vietnam and Watergate saw themselves not so much as skeptical watchdogs, but as aggressive investigators intent on exposing the essential venality of government officials.

"I saw journalism change during the Watergate era, when all of the reporters coming out of journalism school suddenly wanted to bypass the fundamentals and regular beats and go right into investigative reporting," says Otto Kreisher, a Marine Corps veteran and longtime defense correspondent for the Copley News Service. "Their mentality was increasingly that journalism was all about bringing down Presidents, embarrassing those in authority, and exposing how the military was screwing things up. That's a very different view from old guys like me, who saw the government solve the Depression and the military win World War II. Even today, I see an attitude in younger editors that if it ain't negative, it ain't news."

Meanwhile, the post-Vietnam message disseminated through formal and informal channels in the U.S. military was that not only was the news media untrustworthy, it was the enemy. In one famous example, the Navy admiral in charge of the invasion of Grenada in 1983 excluded the media entirely from an operation that was later revealed to have serious shortcomings.

When a private boat chartered by reporters approached the island, Vice Adm. Joseph Metcalf had a Navy fighter aircraft fire warning shots across its bow. Asked later at a press conference what he would have done had the boat not turned back, Metcalf was unequivocal: "We would have blown your ass right out of the water."

The danger to the United States posed by such an estrangement between the media and the military is manifest. Had the full story of problems with the Grenada invasion never been told, the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reform Act might never have passed, robbing the military of reforms that led to improvements in the chain of command and in joint operations. In the nadir of military-press relations of the 1970s, the media largely missed the story of just how eroded military readiness and morale had become until the "hollow force" nearly collapsed on itself trying to conduct the operation to rescue U.S. embassy personnel in Iran.

Likewise, the successful reform and re-

building of the U.S. military in the 1980s was largely lost amidst a cascade of "waste, fraud and abuse" stories. The fact that many reporters in the mainstream media and the American public seemed genuinely surprised at the competence and confidence the U.S. military displayed during Operation Desert Storm is a clear indication that the media missed an important story.

## Growing Cultural Divide

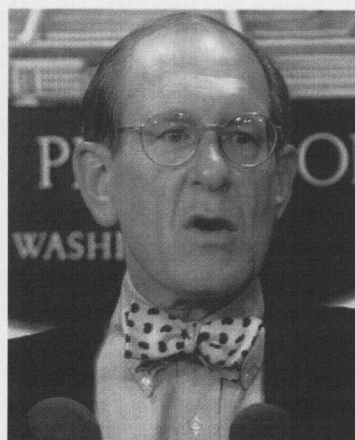
No one who has straddled the cultural divide between the media and military can fail to notice that over the past quarter century, the two professions have attracted Americans of vastly different natures and perspectives. In turn, these professions nurture and sharpen those natural proclivities. Media outlets entice people who are comfortable questioning authority precisely because they see their role as speaking truth to power. The military tries to attract and indoctrinate those who naturally respect authority because the battlefield brooks neither dissent nor questioning of orders.

Joseph Galloway, the former longtime defense and war correspondent for *U.S. News and World Report*, jokingly called the natural tensions between these two groups a struggle between the "anarchists" and the "control freaks."

Because journalists often view their role as protecting the underdogs of society even while serving as watchdogs of the most powerful institutions—or in the shorthand of the profession "comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable"—journalists also tend to be liberal on social issues such as women's rights, gay rights and affirmative action. Given the tremendous risks in lives and even national survival inherent in the profession of arms, military organizations are notoriously conservative by nature, and they tend to attract those who embrace tradi-

tionally conservative views on social issues.

Largely as a result of the end of the draft, the cultural gap in professional proclivities and attitudes has steadily grown. Fewer and fewer members of the media, have served in the military. Less than a quarter of the Pentagon press corps, whose photos hang in the Pentagon's "Correspondents' Corridor,"



PABLO MARTINEZ MONSIVIAS / AP

Pentagon spokesman Ken Bacon

are veterans. Meanwhile, surveys and opinion polls reveal that journalists have become relatively more liberal and the military relatively more conservative since the 1970s.

"Basically, the media and military are on opposite sides of virtually every ideological divide you can name, and that gap is probably increasing," says S. Robert Lichter, co-author of the book *The Media Elite* and director of the Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington. "The media is becoming more liberal largely as a result of a formerly white male bastion reaching out to more young working females and minorities, both of whom are demonstrably more liberal than the average. What stands out about military officers is that almost alone among the ruling elites in business, law, and government, they retain a socially conservative core belief system."

In a 1996 poll of 139 Washington-based bureau chiefs and correspondents, 89 percent said they had voted for Bill Clinton in 1992, compared to only 7 percent who backed George Bush and 2 percent who supported Ross Perot. According to the survey, 50 percent of the journalists identified themselves as Democrats, while only 4 percent said they were Republicans. Fully 61 percent put themselves left of center in political orientation, vs. 9 percent who were right of center.

Lichter found similar liberal politics in the media by tracing surveys going back to the 1930s. "What stands out from this potpourri of surveys—which span more than a half century and involve a wide range of sponsors, samples, and survey techniques—is the remarkable consistency of the results. Self-described liberals have always outnumbered conservatives [in newsrooms] by margins of two or three to one, and the gap has increased in the most recent surveys. This liberal tilt is all the more notable because the conservative label has long proven more popular with the American public," Lichter wrote in the 1996 edition of *Forbes Media Critic*.

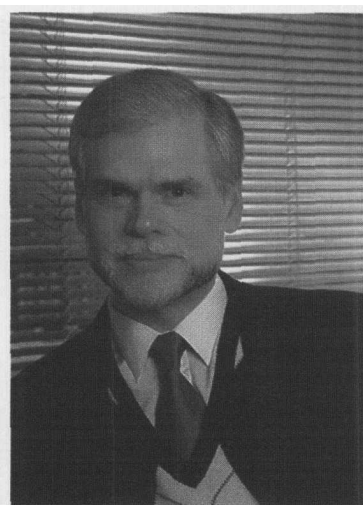
Meanwhile, since the end of the Vietnam war and the draft, the political orientation of the U.S. military has by most accounts shifted in the opposite direction. After several decades of self-selection, the all-volunteer force has become increasingly conservative and identified with the Republican right.

In a 1999 paper, "A Widening Gap Be-

tween the Military and Civilian Society?" Ole Holsti, professor of international affairs and political science at Duke University, found that between 1976 and 1999, the proportion of self-identified Republican military officers grew steadily, from fewer than one in three to six of every seven. Meanwhile, those officers declaring themselves non-partisan or independent dropped from a solid majority to roughly one in four. Only one officer in 20 is self-identified as "liberal" or "somewhat liberal."

"The virtual disappearance of liberalism among military leaders [in the two decades since the end of the draft] is quite dramatic, as is the deepening chasm between the military officers and civilian leaders in that respect," Holsti wrote. The trend, he notes, shows no sign of abating.

The degree to which conservatism in the officer corps is displayed in open partisanship has also concerned a number of observers. "In a sense, we've gone from a



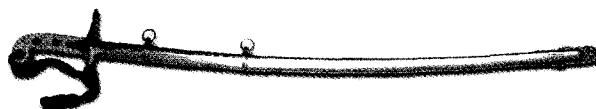
Author S. Robert Lichter says the military-media divide runs deep.

number of experts have noted the same phenomenon in media coverage of military matters.

"My experience with the press is that news judgment trumps cultural bias," says one retired longtime public affairs officer. "I don't think the media covered Tailhook like a blanket because of some feminist agenda, for instance, but rather because it sold newspapers and gave *The New York Times* an opportunity to put a juicy story about sex on the front page. I complained about the unending coverage to one TV reporter, and his reply was simple: 'Hey, it gets watched!'"

Sometimes the media's professional imperative to cast a critical eye on an issue and to present both sides out of fairness is perceived by those closest to a story as bias or lack of proportionality. Actors in a drama form strong opinions and frequently expect reporters to reflect those leanings in their coverage.

"People in the military often don't understand that the media is supposed to come at a story with a critical eye and to present both sides of an issue. They agree with the story as long as their side is being presented, but as soon as you put on a talking head from some women's or gay group, they see that as bias as opposed to fairness," says Mark Brender, former Pentagon producer for ABC News and a Navy veteran. "Our different cultures mean we also tend to come at a story differently. If a Marine major attends a bake sale and some grandmother wins the award for best apple pie, he's going to feel good about grandma and apple pie. Sam Donaldson is going to ask that grandmother



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**—Ret. Navy Capt. John Byron**

military that emulated George Marshall's dictate not to even vote, to one that seems to feel only one political party in America produces patriots," says retired U.S. Navy Capt. John Byron. "I find that chilling."

### **Mercury and Mars**

The evidence suggests a "the media are from Mercury, the military from Mars" cultural dynamic, with the messenger and the warrior coming at issues from diametrically opposed directions. Judging how that cultural gap colors relations between the two and media coverage of military matters, however, is a complex and imprecise science.

whether she used artificial sweetener."

Human nature being what it is, however, it's logical to assume that such divergent cultures in the media and military will color media coverage. In the latter category, many defense reporters recall a breakfast interview on the morning of Nov. 17, 1995, with Adm. Richard Macke, commander of U.S. Pacific Command. As reporters were gathering up their tape recorders at the session's end, Macke offered an aside about three U.S. servicemen charged with raping a 12-year-old Japanese girl on Okinawa. The comment was destined to destroy his career.

"I think it was absolutely stupid," Macke said of the Okinawa rape. "I've said several times, for the price [the servicemen] paid to rent the car, they could have had a girl."

Macke's comment was exactly the kind of quip a reporter was likely to hear in the mess rooms of nearly any warship, or in a locker room for that matter, and few of the veteran defense reporters felt it particularly newsworthy. Immediately on hearing the comment, however, a woman named Holly Yeager from the Hearst wire service hurried from the breakfast and by early afternoon her story leading with the comment was on the wires. By nightfall Macke had been forced to accept early retirement.

"What Macke said was really stupid for an admiral, and in the politically correct environment that existed after Tailhook it was suicidal. But it was also the kind of thing a gunny sergeant or chief petty officer would say all the time," says Kreisher of Copley News Service. "A lot of us defense reporters, myself included, didn't think it warranted writing about. But that young woman reporter sure did, and that's a pretty good indication that the cultural gap [between the military and media] could be widening."

Given the distinct media and military profiles, social, gender and sexual orientation issues remain a likely battlefield. "Social issues are always tense between the military and media because the military is different from the rest of society, and we reporters tend to put a magnifying glass on whatever's different. We also work in newsrooms where no one makes a big deal if someone is a woman or gay," says Steve Komarow, defense reporter for *USA Today*. "And while we may not always fully appreciate why the military feels it has to be different, the military sometimes



Lt. Col. Gary Dornan tells reporters in Albania about an April 1999 Apache helicopter crash.

has a real tin ear on these social issues."

Besides their sensational nature, social scandals dominate news coverage of the military from time to time because they delineate a fault line in the military and media cultures. Service members tend to view each case through a prism of conservative values and potential impact on mission, whereas journalists' innate liberalism may draw their focus to the rights of the individuals involved and the differences between the military and the rest of society.

"I think the root of the media's liberal bias is revealed in these cases by [its] view that the primary issue is equal career opportunities, whereas those of us on the conservative side of the equation think the needs of the military come first," says

U.S. armed forces do not become dangerously out of step with the fundamental values of the society they serve.

"From your first moments in uniform, you are taught about good order and discipline, and with its traditional values the military just doesn't equate that with integrating women and gays into units," says Navy and ABC veteran Brender. "It will change—who would have thought we'd see women flying combat jets—but the change will take time."

### Future Fault Lines

As the military-media clashes during the war over Kosovo revealed, changes in the nature and technology of both the journalistic and military professions seem likely to exacerbate the cultural divide in the future. Basically, the "anarchists" are by many measures becoming more chaotic, and the "control freaks" more controlling.

Media critics have long worried that an explosion of media outlets via cable television and the Internet, the cutthroat competition to get a story first with the punchiest headline in an era of 24-hour news cycles, and a marked shift to more

interpretive reporting would all conspire to trample fundamental journalistic standards such as objectivity and meticulous sourcing. Without those traditional firewalls, any bias that does exist in the media subconscious is more likely to leak into the news.

"I don't think there's any question the media in general are becoming more in-

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Elaine Donnelly, director of the conservative Center for Military Readiness.

From the media perspective, however, coverage of sensational social issues is a natural outgrowth of the painful, messy but necessary process of forcing the military to articulate and defend its unique culture and, where that defense is deemed inadequate, to change military culture so

terpretive and less objective. Just look at the number of articles now slugged 'news analysis' and compare them to the wire stories of yesterday," says Stephen Hess of the Brookings Institution, who has written widely on the press. "I blame the phenomenon on the advent of television—essentially an entertainment medium—as the dominant news medium. That's when values and professional ethics started to change, because newspapers and news magazines responded by trying to distinguish themselves with more interpretive reporting. That's a slippery slope, because any cultural bias you have will more likely seep into your coverage."

On the other hand, many reporters were deeply concerned about the Pentagon's tightening grip on information flow. They found that the nature of modern warfare, and a growing sophistication among military public affairs officers, may be playing to the military's innate desire for total control. Those concerns came to a head in the early weeks of Operation Allied Force in Kosovo, when the heads of a number of major media outlets wrote to the Pentagon demanding relaxation of what they felt was an overly restricted flow of informa-

tion about the war.


"Kosovo represented a setback for relations between the military and media. The Pentagon's whole approach left a lot of unnecessary ill feelings among reporters, particularly those of us who have worked very hard to try to understand the military and handle sensitive subjects responsibly," says Bradley Graham, defense reporter for *The Washington Post*. He cites an "unfortunate confluence of factors," including a genuine concern on the part of Pentagon officials that they had been too quick to release sensitive information, and a war that NATO hoped would be over quickly that was dragging on. "The result was the Pentagon decided to clamp down on information and adopt an overly secretive policy," says Graham.

A better understanding of the unique cultures of the media and military and the gap that separates them can help relieve some of these inevitable tensions. The more the two professions understand each other, the less likely they will be to hold



Because of DoD restrictions on releasing information, pilots remained nameless and faceless during Operation Allied Force.

those differences against one another. Ultimately, however, the "anarchists" and the "control freaks" will inevitably play to their strengths and fundamental natures.

"What stands as a virtue in one profession is a vice to the other," says Lichter. "What leads to career advancement in one would be professional suicide for the other. From the broad perspective of society, however, that's good. The worst thing for America would be soldiers who behaved like journalists, and journalists who behaved like soldiers." 



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