

Freedom of the Press: How Various Forces Aside from Government-Imposed Censorship Restrain the American News Media during Times of War

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ABSTRACT: Government-imposed censorship may hinder the press, but over the course of American history there have been other forces instrumental in restraining the news media that may not be so apparent. Because these forces are veiled, they pose a serious threat to the media environment, especially during times of war. Accessibility issues, as well as specific circumstances of a particular war, make it difficult for journalists to fairly report events. Furthermore, economic and structural aspects of the news media cause them to rely heavily on official sources for news. The Spanish-American War, the Vietnam War, and the Iraq War serve as excellent examples of how non-government imposed censorships affect the news media at times of conflict. During these conflicts, the American news media remained non-critical of the actions of the government and failed to convey important information to the American public.

Throughout American history, the freedom and independence of the United States news media during times of war have faced threats from various forms of government-imposed censorship. Perhaps even more crippling to the news media, however, are additional elements and forces that cause the media to self-censor what is reported. As demonstrated in the reporting of the Spanish - American War, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf War, the U.S. news media are restrained by American ideologies. Furthermore, issues regarding the economic structure of the news media, as well as accessibility problems and specific circumstances of war, all affect the ability of the press to fairly report events. These restraints cause the US news media to rely heavily on official sources for news, and for these sources to be reported favourably. Therefore, the examples of the Spanish-American War, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf War, demonstrate that non-government imposed forms of censorship contribute to the American news media's inability to criticize the United States' involvement in war. The U.S. news media thus fail to fairly and fully inform the American public of important knowledge pertaining to American conflict.

Author James Winter defines self-censorship as "the process of ideological blinkering that prevents the press from telling much of what it knows."¹ Indeed, one of the largest restraints on the United States news media is the fact that they are a part of American society. Submerged in the American way of life, it is not easy for members of the media to escape the influence of the political and social culture within which they work. Thus the reporting of events, such as the Spanish-American War, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf War, reflect the dominant

¹ James Winter, *Common Cents* (New York: Black Rose Books, 1992), 2.

social beliefs and past experiences of those individuals of the news media.² In all three conflicts, the basic ideological reasoning behind waging war is accepted by the media of the era. Criticism is present, but only in the form of questioning the effectiveness of the military. Reporting of the Spanish-American War seldom questioned the United States' justifications for becoming involved in a conflict between Cuban rebels and the Spanish government. In fact, the press was overwhelmingly in favour of the war, and are even blamed for perpetrating it: "[A]s media frenzy grew, demands by Congress and the public for intervention grew."³ The effectiveness of the U.S. military and its leadership was the centre of criticism in the press. General William Shafter, commander of the invasion forces in Cuba, was criticized by the press as an overweight, unintelligent man who badly managed his troops.⁴ The press, however, did not question the morality of the U.S. presence as a democratic and liberating force, nor did they question the consequence of death it held for many Cuban and Philippine citizens. Similarly, reporting of the Vietnam War rarely questioned the underlying ideology behind U.S. intervention in Asia. Military imposed censorship in Vietnam may have been minimal, yet with what has been described as "one-sided and ideologically loaded coverage and commentary," the press censored themselves.⁵ The notion that communism needed to be contained in Asia, and that it was the United States' prerogative as defenders of democracy and freedom to do so, was not challenged. As in the Spanish-American War, "[w]hat the (press) questioned was not U.S. policy, but the measures taken to implement it, not the violent interventionism and all the suffering it inflicted but its effectiveness."⁶ In both Cuba and Vietnam the news media were willing to overlook the death and destruction, as long as the Americans were winning. Reporting of the Vietnam War is unique, since in the latter stages of the war it advocated an end to the conflict through withdrawal of American troops. To the end of the war, however, the press remained sided with the dominant American ideology. If dissent was voiced within the press, it was the defeat of the American military that was criticized rather than the atrocities and devastation that occurred in Vietnam. The news media were able to maintain "the purity of the American establishment's motives for waging genocide in Vietnam."⁷ Accused of influencing the public and over-criticizing the government, the media received much of the blame for the

² Michael Parenti, *Inventing the Politics of News Media Reality*, 2nd ed. (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992) 51.

³ Lloyd, JR Chiasson, *The Press in Times of Crisis* (Westport CT: Praeger Publishers, 1995), 114.

⁴ Mary S. Mander, "Pen and Sword: Problems of Reporting the Spanish-American War", *Journalism History*, 9.1, (1982) 2-9, 7.

⁵ Parenti, 167.

⁶ Parenti, 140.

⁷ Paul Hoch, *The Newspaper Game*, (London: Calder and Boyars, 1974), 46.

American defeat in Vietnam. While these accusations have not proven to be founded, the resulting 'Vietnam Syndrome' has shown itself to be a powerful force. In the years following the Vietnam War, the media have reacted to criticism by reasserting their loyalty to America. The news media have attempted to prove their patriotism to the United States by remaining largely uncritical of the administration's actions.⁸

As a result of this desire to please the administration, the reporting of the Gulf War was even more a victim of ideological restraints than that of Cuba or Vietnam. The Vietnam Syndrome greatly contributed to the news media's need to demonstrate loyalty to the United States in their reporting of Iraq.⁹ Reporters were restrained not only by their submergence in American culture, but additionally, because the American culture largely blamed the press for defeat in Vietnam. Consequently, as in Cuba and Vietnam, questions surrounding the United States' involvement in Iraq were seldom raised. Ulterior motives of the United States, such as protecting the interests and profits of oil cartels, or pressuring Iraq into economic submission, were never brought up by the press.¹⁰ The explanation that the U.S. was defending freedom and democracy by protecting Kuwait was widely accepted.

The U.S. news media is also susceptible to the capitalist economic structure of American society. The independence of the media is restrained by the fact that it is a profit-driven business, and that information and news have commercial value.¹¹ First and foremost a news organization must be able to sell their news product to remain competitive in the market. The press of the Spanish-American War offers one of the best examples of the power circulation motives of the U.S. news media have in determining the way events are reported. Two major New York newspapers of the era, Joseph Pulitzer's *The World* and William Hearst's *The Journal*, are widely blamed for creating war fervour and pushing a reluctant U.S. Government into declaring war against Spain.¹² The issue surrounding Cuban independence was used as a battleground for a circulation war between *The World* and *The Journal*. In the three years prior to the outbreak of the war, both papers covered a number of events in a very sensationalist fashion in order to increase circulation and to gain profits.

Coverage of the February 15th, 1898 sinking of the U.S.S. Maine in the Havana Harbour best illustrates how the drive for circulation often does so at the cost of fair and truthful reporting. Before the government had even completed its investigation, both *The World* and *The*

⁸ Lance W. Bennett and David L. Paletz, *Taken by Storm: The Media, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy in the Gulf War*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 4.

⁹ Winter, 8.

¹⁰ Parenti, 171.

¹¹ Melissa Wells-Petry, "Reporters as the Guardians of Freedom", *Military Review* (1993), 73.2, 35.

¹² Louis Heren, *The Power of the Press?*, (London: Orbis Ltd., 1985), 69.

Journal immediately claimed the ship was deliberately sunk by the Spanish, and urged the American people to push the government into war with Spain.¹³ In order to beat each other to the story, both newspapers were willing to print hasty conclusions without proper evidence to prove them. The newsmen's call to action was answered on May 1st, 1898, when the fighting began between the Spanish and the Americans in Cuba. Both Pulitzer and Hearst welcomed the war, as it offered more events for their papers to build circulation around.¹⁴

The Vietnam War also proved to be an opportunity for the U.S. news media to benefit economically: "[W]hat it comes down to is that war provides rich material for a correspondent, and Vietnam was the richest ever."¹⁵ What corporate-owned media reported, however, was not always the most spectacular of stories. American atrocity stories went largely unreported, despite the fact that many reporters witnessed such events. Only when atrocity stories proved profitable did the press take notice of them. For the most part, the American news media published stories supportive of the war.¹⁶ In the latter stages of the conflict, however, the United States harboured an atmosphere in which there was growing discontent due to mounting casualty rates and the feeling that the end to the war was not in sight. The Tet offensive considerably contributed to the political and emotional climate of this period, in which the famous My Lai massacre story was finally published after a year of being rejected by numerous news corporations.¹⁷ Even within the realm of political debate the war was being openly criticized. Criticisms of the war were profitable at this time, as the majority of the American public were critical as well. Once withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam began, American atrocity stories and the truth of the war they revealed disappeared from the news media.¹⁸

Economics of the news business also restrained the reporting of the Gulf War. As in Cuba and Vietnam, the threat of war, and even more so, war itself, made a more profitable story than peace: "[T]he five-and-a-half-month build-up to Desert Storm provided a rare opportunity for media war hype on a grand scale."¹⁹ Reporters of the news media found it advantageous to outright support the war for promotional purposes, and were involved in patriotic activities such as 'Operation Yellow Ribbon'; a government run campaign to rally support for the war.²⁰

¹³ Chiasson, 114.

¹⁴ Chiasson, 104.

¹⁵ Phillip Knightley, *The first casualty: From the Crimea to Vietnam: The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist, and Myth Maker*. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 403.

¹⁶ William M. Hammond, "The Army and Public Affairs: Enduring Principles", *Parameters* (1989) 19.2, 69.

¹⁷ Knightley, 398.

¹⁸ Knightley, 399.

¹⁹ John R. MacArthur, *Second Front*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 86.

²⁰ Bennett and Paletz, 158.

Furthermore, individual media people saw the war as a chance to further their careers.²¹ For the U.S. news media of the Gulf War, it was not beneficial “to be ‘unpatriotic’...or to promote peace or oppose the war, or to be critical of the president, especially in light of the Vietnam Syndrome.”²² The media were not willing to pass up an economic opportunity.

In addition, the news media of the Vietnam and Gulf Wars were restrained by a force not fully developed during the Spanish-American War; advertising. The news media involved in the reporting of these conflicts had to compete not only for viewers and readers, but also for advertisers.²³ At this time, advertisements covered roughly eighty percent of the cost publishing a newspaper.²⁴ This heavy reliance on advertising revenue forced editors to censor stories, so as not to alienate advertisers. The safest stories to publish, to ensure the patronage of advertisers, are most often those that are in accordance with the political realm of the government. The restraints of advertising also contribute to the lack of criticism in the press during times of war. The press of the Gulf war were wholly uncritical of the American presence in Iraq, and while the Vietnam press voiced criticisms, the media did not stray far from the arena of political debate within the administration. Conversely, the news media covering the Spanish-American War, unhindered as it was by the restraints of advertising, is perhaps the only example in American history in which the press significantly influenced military policy; notably, however, in the favour of waging war.²⁵

The hindrance of advertising aside, reporting of the Spanish-American War, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf War was conducted with the same principle that in order to be competitive, a news organization must be the first to report a story. During the Spanish-American War, “the successful journalist was one who, in the face of great personal risk managed to get the news back and into print before anyone else.”²⁶ As demonstrated by the hasty conclusions reporters made regarding the sinking of the U.S.S. Maine, the news media were willing to report events incorrectly if it meant getting the story printed first.

The speedier stories are reported, of course, the higher the volume of news printed, and the quicker the speed of the news-flow. Reporting in Vietnam suffered from the quickness of the news industry, as “each day’s news was swiftly consumed by the next day’s. Too few correspondents looked back and tried to see what it added up to, too few probed beyond the official version of events to expose the lies and half-truths, too few tried to analyse what it all

²¹ MacArthur, 95-101.

²² Winter, 13.

²³ Deborah Holmes, *Governing the press*, (London: Westview Press, 1986), 4.

²⁴ Winter, XV.

²⁵ MacArthur, 113.

²⁶ Mander, 3.

meant.”²⁷ As a result of this lack of historical context, reporting of Vietnam failed to inform the American public of the meaning of the war. A mid-1967 Gallup poll revealed that half of all Americans had no idea what the war in Vietnam was about.²⁸ Even after the war had come to an end and information regarding the war was widely available, its meaning was still left unassessed by the news media.²⁹

Gulf War reporting also lacked historical context, perhaps even more so than in Vietnam because of the dual force of the fast-paced nature of the news media and the Vietnam Syndrome. The history of relations between the U.S. administration and Saddam Hussein is one that supplies many criticisms of the American justification for the Gulf War. The U.S. news media, however, failed to inform the American public that the Reagan and Bush administrations had been aware of and ignored Saddam’s use of chemical weapons against Iran. There was little mention that Iraq had actually been dropped from the State Department’s list of terror-sponsoring nations in the 1980’s for reasons of U.S. economic interests, as trading with a country on the list is prohibited by law.³⁰ As with the Vietnam War, much information regarding the Gulf War became available upon its conclusion. Swept up in the ever-flowing torrent of news, it appeared not many journalists were interested in finding out what really happened in Iraq, and the press failed to contextualize the Gulf War as well.³¹

The speedy nature of the news business leads the U.S. news media to rely on official government sources for a dependable supply of news that is easily accessible and legitimate in the eyes of potential readers or viewers.³² It is simply not economical to seek out alternative sources of information when meeting a deadline for a story. Furthermore, news people are disinclined to be critical of these established sources, since they make up the bulk of their information.³³ The news media also face the concern of being recriminated if the administration is criticized. Officials have the power to deny interviews, withhold access of information to unfavoured reporters, and can reward favourable journalists in various ways.³⁴ In addition, “the state has shown itself ready to issue subpoenas to the press, and government lawsuits take a

²⁷ Knightley, 424.

²⁸ Knightley, 402.

²⁹ John Muelier, *Policy and Opinion in the Gulf War*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 136.

³⁰ Bennett and Paletz, 67.

³¹ Muelier, 137.

³² Bennett and Paletz, 96.

³³ Parenti, 52.

³⁴ Parenti, 64.

heavy toll on newspaper finances and reputation.”³⁵ Fearful of the government and falling behind the competition, the U.S. news media choose instead to censor themselves. As a result of the reliance on official sources, the reporting of Vietnam included the claims, appraisals, and statements of senior officials who asserted ‘progress’ was being made.³⁶ The charge that over-critical reporting on behalf of the U.S. news media was the cause of a shift in public opinion during the Vietnam War is doubtful, as the news media continued to heavily rely on official sources for their information. The criticism that emerged more likely mirrored the shift in opinion of official sources, which as mentioned earlier, resulted from a changing political atmosphere.³⁷

Gulf War reporting was likewise reliant upon official news sources: “[M]ore than 50% of all reports...emanated directly from official spokespersons...”³⁸ Considered alongside the effects of the Vietnam Syndrome, reports based on government sources were mainly non-critical. Reporters made use of retired Generals and other military experts, and heavily relied on the official reports of Defense Secretary Dick Cheney, Gulf forces Commander Norman Schwarzkopf, and of course, President George Bush.³⁹

In addition to the restraints of the economics of the news business, accessibility issues and specific circumstances surrounding the Spanish-American War, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf War made it difficult for reporters to obtain first hand accounts of the battlegrounds and occurrences of the wars. This difficulty further strengthened the news media’s reliance on official sources for information. The Spanish-American War, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf War were all fought on foreign soil, as the majority of American conflicts are. This poses a problem for reporters, who are often unfamiliar with the terrain from which they are reporting, and who are dependent on either the military or citizens for necessary supplies.

Those journalists reporting from Cuba during the Spanish-American War faced many obstacles in the way of obtaining first-hand accounts from the Spanish side of the conflict. Journalists first had to pass through Spanish lines. The jungle terrain of Cuba made this very difficult, and reporters were confined to travelling by rail.⁴⁰ Furthermore, there was the difficulty of sending a story safely back to the United States. American reporters were also apt to

³⁵ Holmes, 6.

³⁶ Charles Mohr, “Once Again- Did the Press Lose Vietnam?,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, v. 22 (Nov./Dec., 1991), 55.

³⁷ William M. Hammond, “The Press in Vietnam as Agent of Defeat”, *Reviews in American History*, 1989, 17.2: 319.

³⁸ Bennett and Paletz, 184.

³⁹ Winter, 40.

⁴⁰ Mander, 5.

sympathise with the Cuban rebels, as inefficiencies of the United States Commissary meant reporters relied on citizens supportive of the rebellion for food and supplies.⁴¹

In Vietnam, reporters also faced difficulties, and “[m]uch went unreported, although this may have been unavoidable in a sprawling nation of forty-four provinces and scores of allied divisions and brigades.”⁴² As in Cuba, reporters in Vietnam were faced with a jungle terrain of an extent unmatched in the U.S. There was no distinguishable front line or enemy, and reporters desiring to report from North Vietnam were not welcomed unless the North Vietnamese saw an advantage in allowing them access. Furthermore, those reporters who did manage to report from the North received accusations of being Communist sympathizers in America.⁴³ It was no easy task to report from the North, and it was not always beneficial; many journalists felt it was not worth the risk.

The geographic size of the war zone in the Gulf also hindered the ability of journalists to cover the war fairly. Reporters realized that “this was not Vietnam, the size of California where you could run out and get a quick fire-fight, come back to the hotel Rex, file your story and that was the end of it.”⁴⁴ The desert landscape of the Gulf made it necessary for reporters to use military vehicles to get to the battle scenes. Those journalists who attempted to travel without the military risked getting lost or getting caught in a sandstorm. CBS television correspondent Bob Simon and his crew, found themselves captured by the Iraqis; an additional risk journalists took travelling on their own.⁴⁵ As in Vietnam, there was no defined front in the Gulf, and even those journalists who did not get lost or caught by the Iraqis travelled long distances on rough roads to reach the battlegrounds.

A problem plaguing both Vietnam and Gulf War reporters was that much of the combat in both the Vietnam and Gulf wars was conducted from the air. For, “[i]n any air war, the inability of journalists to accompany the military into battle severely limits their independence and enhances the capability of the government to control the information environment.”⁴⁶ This effect is seen in the latter stages of the Vietnam War, in which the bombing of North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia was given less publicity than the ground war: This is despite the fact that the air attacks were more devastating.⁴⁷ Even more so than the Vietnam War, the nature of Gulf War

⁴¹ Mander, 5.

⁴² Mohr, 56.

⁴³ Knightley, 416.

⁴⁴ Gadi Wolfsfeld, *Media and Political Conflict: News from the Middle East*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 134.

⁴⁵ Wolfsfeld, 134.

⁴⁶ Wolfsfeld, 135.

⁴⁷ Wolfsfeld, 135.

fighting was mainly of the air. The media called aerial combat of the Gulf War 'antiseptic' since they were unable to accompany the flights, and faced much danger if they were to report from the side of the enemy as it was being bombed.⁴⁸ Consequently, the media had little choice but to rely on the daily briefings given by the military for information.

It was not only the nature of combat that affected reporting of the Gulf War, but also its short length. This holds true for the Spanish-American War as well. The Spanish-American War lasted less than year, and the Gulf War was a matter of months. Compared to the drawn out years of the Vietnam War, the short conflicts in Cuba and the Gulf never reached the point where mounting casualty rates, or a shift in opinion, would lead to criticism in the press. The Vietnam War encompassed both of these things; the circumstances surrounding this conflict were very different than those of Cuba or the Gulf.

The United States did not have the tactical initiative in Vietnam; the Tet offensive is demonstrative of the fact that the tactical initiative of the war belonged to the North Vietnamese. The Tet offensive helped to induce a change of opinion regarding the Vietnam War, both in the American public and the administration. Flaws in the United States' strategy contributed to this, and allowed "[t]he enemy (to choose) when and where to fight."⁴⁹ In the years leading up to the Tet offensive, the general feeling within the U.S. was that America was winning the war. While the Tet offensive was technically a defeat for the North Vietnamese, it was such a major offensive that many interpreted it as a sign that America was far from claiming victory in Vietnam and that more Americans would die fighting in the meantime. Indeed, "the war itself, rather than the press, alienated the American public"⁵⁰ Perhaps if the tactical initiative of the war had been in American hands, the government would have been able to better control criticism within the press

Contrary to the Vietnam War, the tactical initiative during the Gulf War belonged to the U.S., not to the enemy. Consequently, the Americans were able to control events and the battlefield.⁵¹ Surprise attacks, such as the Tet offensive in Vietnam, were absent during the course of the Gulf War; it was the Iraqis that reacted to the actions of the U.S. In control of events, the administration was able to prepare the press releases and briefings of the various phases of the war in advance.⁵² Combined with the limited access the press had to the

⁴⁸ Peter R. Young, ed., *Defence and Media in Time of Limited War*, (London: Frank Coss and Co., 1992), 178.

⁴⁹ Wolfsfeld, 25-26.

⁵⁰ Hammond, "The Army and Public Affairs: Enduring Principles," 71.

⁵¹ Wolfsfeld, 132.

⁵² Wolfsfeld, 132.

battlefront and the vast terrain of the war zone, the ability of the government to plan out news briefings proved beneficial in controlling criticism within the news

As the reporting of the Spanish-American War, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf War demonstrate, during times of conflict in the United States, non-government imposed censorship of the news media stands as an invisible barrier in the way of critical, truthful and objective reporting. Ideological and economical restraints, as well as issues of accessibility and specific circumstances of war, have proven to endanger the independence and freedom of the United States news media. Subject to a number of forces, including a reliance on government officials for news sources, the U.S. news media fail to report information pertinent to the comprehension of American involvement in armed conflict.

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