

Commentary

The Fire Next Time Fighting the Next War

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If you look around at the world today, it is difficult to imagine how the next war will be fought, much less how it will be covered by the news media. The definitions of war—and media—are changing. One year after the triumphal, round-the-clock live coverage of American tanks rolling easily into Iraq, the United States is engaged in an ugly war of occupation there. Viewers in this country have been shocked by news of suicide bombings, daily casualties, and the mutilation of bodies of American citizens. The United States and its allies have declared a global war on terror, a conflict that seemingly knows no geographic boundaries and no end.

There are twenty-first-century holy wars with calls for jihad on Web sites, hotspots from Haiti to North Korea, and secret special operations missions around the world—not to mention the work of domestic government agencies to thwart another terrorist attack in the United States.

It is a challenge, obviously, for the media and the military to determine how to apportion resources for so many possible fronts. But while planners at the Pentagon are mapping out strategies for a variety of conflicts around the globe, many members of the media seem to be either so satisfied with the new access they gained through embedding of journalists in Iraq or so preoccupied with covering the continuing conflict there that few in news organizations are asking, “How will we do it next time?”

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“I don’t know how to get my arms around a subject so broad as ‘How will the next war be covered?’ ” says Eason Jordan, CNN’s chief news-gathering executive and the person who has overseen CNN’s international war coverage for many years (interviews: October 7, 2003 and February 18, 2004).¹

So much depends on where, when, the host-country access, U.S. military involvement, the state of technology and many other factors. Since there’s no such thing as a generic war, it seems to me that pontificating about how we might cover the next big conflict would be wildly speculative and irresponsible.

The Washington, D.C., bureau chiefs for print and broadcast journalists meet regularly with Pentagon officials on a variety of subjects, including protests by media organizations over the treatment of some international journalists in post-war Iraq. But apart from these ongoing conversations and a planned, formal U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) “after-mission” report that will include interviews with journalists and military officials, there apparently is little discussion between the media and the military about the rules of engagement for the media in the next big conflict. “We haven’t had a lot of formal meetings” on how some future war might be covered, Sandy Johnson, Washington, D.C., bureau chief for the Associated Press, said in an interview February 17, 2004, before the focus of the Iraq war shifted more to the war of occupation. “Most people think embedding was a success.”

While the media may not yet be planning for coverage during the next war, the Pentagon surely is, although officials there also are reluctant to project where the next field of battle will be. “The U.S. Defense Department has plans for every kind of potential scenario” for war itself, Bryan Whitman, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, said in an interview February 24, 2004,

but I don’t think it’s productive or wise to discuss those. We don’t know how the next conflict will be fought, where it will be fought, how people will be receiving their news, and whether we can accommodate battlefield systems, radar and satellites and still accommodate the media’s needs for technology in some situations.

Whitman, one of the chief architects of embedding journalists in Iraq, said the military rates the policy a success. “From the Defense Department’s standpoint, whether countering disinformation from the enemy or giving the American people the opportunity to see their military at work, embedding seemed to work well,” Whitman said.

The feedback from the large majority of journalists has been that they were able to work within the guidelines of embedding while maintaining their standards as journalists. One of our guiding principles going forward is that it’s important for

the American people to have a broad understanding of the U.S. military, and we have to look for ways to include journalists that don't compromise missions.

Still, questions are well worth asking *before* the rules of media-military engagement are set, especially since many critics believe that news organizations were too willing to accede to the military's no-access ground rules during the Persian Gulf War in 1991. From extensive interviews with military experts, war correspondents, news executives, and others, several important conclusions can be drawn about the future of war and war reporting:

- In the "war on terror" and terrorists, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and others have said there will be an expanded role for small units of special operations forces, trained units of the services conducting secret missions to root out terrorists. Special operations forces helped capture Saddam Hussein, for example, and may find Osama bin Laden. But this mission and others like it will be conducted away from the scrutiny of journalists.
- The verdict on embedding of journalists during combat in Iraq is generally favorable, from the standpoint of many news organizations and reporters as well as from the military. But problems remain for the future of independent reporting, from covering postwar Iraq today to the next large-scale mobilization of U.S. forces. With the reality of the war of occupation in Iraq setting in last spring, some journalists who covered the first combat phase increasingly are expressing criticism of embedding and questioning the quality of the journalism it produces. A recent conference at the University of California, Berkeley, was one of the first such venues, although there remains a political climate in which criticizing the coverage still can be equated with criticizing the troops.
- The latest technologies for warfare and the ways the United States has fought its most recent wars may make covering the war in the next large-scale conflict seem so dangerous that, it could be argued, it will not be safe to be other than an embed on the battlefield.
- If there is another so-called "war of choice" for which the United States prepares (for at least the combat phase) for months, there likely will be a burst of the kind of all-live, all-the-time coverage that gave viewers a new appreciation of the U.S. military but, many critics say, often offered little context and perspective on the war as a whole.
- But conversely, such a "war of choice" by the United States may not come again for many years and for many reasons, including ongoing questions about the Bush administration's rationale and case for going to war against Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

"If there is another major force-on-force war like the Iraq war in the lifetime of current TV producers and newspaper editors, yes, there will be all-live, all-the-time coverage, with all its benefits and flaws," says Robert Hodierne a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who is senior managing editor for *Army Times* Publishing (interviews: December 18, 2003 and February 18, 2004).

I don't think anyone sees such a war scenario, however. If war came on the Korean peninsula, for example, it would be so punishingly brutal and short—and come with so little warning—that we wouldn't have time to prepare the coverage that was put in place for Iraq.

“I think most people would agree that the war in Afghanistan was a war of necessity—that any Administration would try to separate Al Qaeda from the Taliban,” says Roy Gutman, a veteran *Newsweek* war correspondent who won a Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of Serbian atrocities in the war in Kosovo (interview: February 17, 2004).

But with the war in Iraq, it seems to me, the Bush Administration has raised so many questions about its intelligence and its real intentions that they and any other administration will have a very hard time launching a war of choice in the near future.

Instead, says Hodierna, “We will be in a constant state of war in the future, and much of it will be secret operations that will go uncovered by the media. “If six or eight Special-Ops forces are going far behind enemy lines—perhaps from a landing base in a country that may not want its cooperation known—to look for Osama bin Laden or some other terrorist, they're not going to take a journalist with them. Reporters are not trained to keep secrets; they don't carry guns; and there aren't a lot of people in a newsroom who could carry 70 to 80 pounds on their back” the way the soldiers on the mission will be doing.

Before the Iraq war in 2003, according to several military journalists, former DOD Torie Clarke, Whitman, and other sophisticated public relations officials in the DOD argued that the military should return to what had actually been common practice in World War II, “embedding” journalists with troops. This time the goals, as Whitman indicated in the same February 24, 2004 interview, included countering what was expected to be anti-American propaganda from the other side and giving Americans a close-hand view of the American military. “Embedding was a brilliant strategy based on a more sophisticated understanding of the role the media can play,” says Hodierna, who covered the Vietnam War. The stated reason for keeping the media largely out of the brief battle of the Persian Gulf War in 1991 was fear over the inadvertent broadcasting of information to the enemy over twenty-four-hour satellite news channels. But another reason was the long-held belief among many in the military that the media had “lost” the Vietnam War by bringing that long, unresolved conflict into American living rooms.

The media were still largely excluded from the battlefield during the war in Afghanistan in 2002, but some twelve experienced war correspondents from *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, and other publications were allowed to cover initial

special operations force activities in Afghanistan at the beginning of the war. The success of those experiments in access, Whitman says, helped shape the decision to embed six hundred journalists with American forces in Iraq in 2003. By that time, as he notes, reporters also had acquired the bandwidth portability and other technology that allowed for some of the most dramatic, live footage of advancing U.S. troops. Such dramatic footage by American reporters undoubtedly helped tell the American side of the story. But with the Pentagon not even keeping statistics on the numbers of Iraqi casualties, the United States in recent months has been the subject of fiercely anti-American coverage in other countries. Coalition forces last spring shut down an Iraqi newspaper that told its readers that an American missile—not an ambush by insurgents—had killed fifty Iraqi police recruits. And with American media coverage increasingly focusing on continuing casualties and bombings, the DOD last spring opened its own news bureau in Iraq, the DOD said, to counter such dangerous disinformation and tell the coalition side of the story.

According to a recent analysis by Richard H. Schultz, a Tufts University scholar of international relations and Pentagon consultant who interviewed numerous high-ranking sources in the Pentagon and CIA for a report to the DOD in 2003, highly trained special operations forces were not used to go after terrorists after the bombing of the USS Cole and other terrorist attacks before 9/11. According to Schultz, whose findings were excerpted in the *Weekly Standard* and quoted in the *Washington Post* in January 2004, many top brass thought such operations were too risky; there were turf battles between agencies over them; and Clinton officials were also concerned about whether they would work, their legality, and how they would be perceived. Since the events of September 11 and with the declared policy of transformation of the military under Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, there is a stated new commitment to special operations missions. Yet there has been little reporting on them because, of course, they are secret until the military or others decide to talk about them. “Special Operations are one of the most important components of the military today, but their work is not being widely reported,” says Roy Gutman of *Newsweek* (interview: February 17, 2004). “They are regionally based and staged, and they operate in secret, sometimes by the seat of their pants.”

In the Iraq war, Gutman said, “There’s a whole Special-Ops story that, to my knowledge, has not been told. Special Operations forces went into Iraq while Saddam Hussein was in power and secured the oil fields there.” Today in Iraq, says Robert Hodierne, who recently returned from several months there, many special-ops missions are important, but much more mundane.

Let’s say there is intelligence that a leader of the insurgency lives at a certain house on a certain block. Before they send in soldiers to try to capture the guy, they need

to look at the house and photograph it. So some wiry dude with long hair and a beard driving a truck labeled Halliburton Construction drives by acting like he's lost. That guy doesn't want his cover blown by having every reporter in town know who he is.

With U.S.-led forces at one point growing more confident of capturing Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, the *Washington Post* published a lengthy account of how and why bin Laden had been missed in the early days of the war. But that reconstruction and others that may come out after the fact clearly required not only extensive digging but also extensive cooperation of military commanders on the ground as well as officials of the Central Intelligence Agency, the State Department, and others. The newspaper also has reported on interagency turf battles over other special-ops missions, but such reporting has been rare.

During the war in Afghanistan, CNN's Jordan notes, "We were able to do stories on some important Special-Ops missions, and we have worked our contacts among military commanders on the ground as well as in Washington, D.C." to gain access to other operations since (interviews: October 7, 2003 and February 18, 2004).

But with some exceptions, American journalists were largely excluded from the initial conflict in Afghanistan as America fought a "war by proxy" with its Afghan allies, the Northern Alliance; some international journalists were more successful at reporting before American troops arrived. In one controversial episode, Roy Gutman and several other *Newsweek* reporters conducted an investigation based on accounts from a physicians' human rights group that found that in 2002, hundreds of Taliban prisoners had asphyxiated as they were held in sealed containers by the Northern Alliance. The United States denied any knowledge or participation in the incident by U.S. forces, and *Newsweek* did not find any evidence of the deaths, which were later acknowledged, but claimed to be accidental, by the Northern Alliance leader. In the same February 17, 2004 interview, Gutman is skeptical. "It's hard to conceive that the Pentagon had no knowledge" of the incident, he says. "But that has been the official response." The incident, says Gutman, points out issues for possible new "wars by proxy," in which the United States could be allied with forces who do not necessarily abide by the rules of the Geneva Conventions for the treatment of prisoners or war.

Another important issue facing war correspondents for the future is the changing nature of the battlefield itself. "The battlefield of the future will be much more fluid, and much more rapid than ever before," says Vago Muradian, editor of *Defense News*, an influential publication that covers worldwide defense issues (interviews: December 11, 2003 and February 19, 2004).

The goal of the U.S. military in a war like Iraq is to move as quickly as possible using overwhelming U.S. air superiority combined with land and sea forces to

subdue the enemy as quickly and with as few casualties as possible. There is increased automation and speed in picking out targets and calling for them to be destroyed. And, at the same time, in such a war, it becomes more difficult to tell friend from foe. Look at what happened in the Palestine Hotel.

This was an incident in Baghdad in which, despite the hotel's being known as the residence of journalists, two international journalists were killed when U.S. soldiers mistook a shoulder-held TV camera for a rocket launcher and thought they had been fired upon. "Some soldier in the battlefield may have a few seconds to determine who's driving that van coming towards him," Muradian says, adding, "It's possible that there may not be a safe alternative to embedding journalists" in another war like Iraq in the future.

A number of journalists—including such prominent reporters as NBC's David Bloom and Michael Kelly of the *Atlantic Monthly*—have been killed or injured in Iraq, some of them in accidents and others (like Bloom) in deaths that may have been related to the physical rigors of reporting on the war. In terms of the length of combat, the war has had a high death toll among journalists so far, and some journalists there are concerned that journalists themselves are being targeted. "There's no doubt that roaming the battlefield trying to cover this story is extremely dangerous," says the Pentagon's Bryan Whitman (interview: February 24, 2004).

While terrible things happened to journalists in all kinds of situations, whether embedded or not, our experience would demonstrate that it is even more dangerous to be out there as a "unilateral," especially when you have enemy forces driving around in SUV's that are not dissimilar from news media, and some reporters hiring guards with guns for their own protection.

The Pentagon, which conducted its own investigation of the incident at the Palestine Hotel after protests by news organizations, concluded that the action "was fully in accordance with the rules of engagement," with a tank "properly fir[ing] upon a suspected enemy hunter/killer team in a proportionate and justifiably measured response" on a day of "very intense fighting."

Frank Smyth, the Washington, D.C., director for the Committee to Protect Journalists, is not satisfied with the Pentagon's report. "We believe that there may have been a violation of the Geneva Conventions" in the incident, "with the military value of the target weighed against the number of civilians involved," Smyth said in a February 17, 2004 interview. "We believe the Palestine Hotel was not a legitimate target; the Pentagon has ruled that it was."

Moreover, Smyth says,

I don't buy the argument that journalists will all have to be embedded in the future. Unilateral reporters are assuming the risks involved. But the Pentagon has

to recognize that journalists are civilians, and that part of the military's job in war-time is to minimize civilian casualties.

Although being a unilateral during war is dangerous, some important stories may be missed if there are fewer such observers from the major American media and other news organizations in the future. John Donovan, a correspondent for ABC's *Nightline*, was one of the unilaterals, or unembedded reporters, who covered the Iraq combat for U.S. media. Donovan believes that some significant stories were missed in the American TV networks' focus on dramatic footage of U.S. troops rolling into Iraq live and on television (interview: December 11, 2003).

The only thing I have against embedding is that the news media itself falls in love with the glitz and glamour and whiz-bang of embedded reporting and puts so much emphasis on embedding that it lets the public forget they're not seeing the war itself, but a tiny slice of the war [Donovan said]. Embedded reporters were courageous and self-sacrificing, but you almost literally didn't have to breathe the air in Iraq when you traveled with U.S. troops.

Donovan, whose small crew was adopted by a friendly U.S. military unit, encountered hostility from Iraqis when he came to the city of Safwan shortly after the world saw images of a just-liberated Iraqi there hitting a portrait of Saddam Hussein with his shoe. "I was surprised to find that everybody we met expressed suspicion about U.S. intentions and outrage over civilian casualties," says Donovan, who reported this and other stories about Iraqi concerns for *Nightline* during three weeks in Iraq. "The idea that Iraqis would simply greet us with dancing in the streets was a skewed perception once the first soldiers came and left town."

"On the whole, embedding was a model for cooperation between the media and the military," says CNN's Jordan (interviews: October 7, 2003 and February 18, 2004). Still, as Jordan notes, more than half of CNN's forty-five reporters in the region were not embedded, and several were expelled by the Iraqis after combat began. "When you put all the reporting together, you can present a well-balanced picture," Jordan said.

"An objective look at the military during war shows that there are good stories to be told, with people often behaving in skillful, courageous ways," says Robert Hodierne of *Army Times*, who covered the Vietnam War. "One interesting aspect of embedding is that—in contrast to the post-Vietnam era—there are now hundreds of journalists in their late 20s who have had a formative and generally positive experience with the U.S. military" (interviews: December 18, 2003 and February 18, 2004).

Other veterans of Vietnam War reporting believe that journalists may be giving up their independence if embedding becomes the norm. "If Iraq is an

example, the media are not going to be part of how war coverage is done in the future,” says Morley Safer, the *60 Minutes* correspondent who helped turn American public opinion against the Vietnam war with his 1965 story about Marines casually torching a South Vietnamese village with Zippo lighters (interview: November 20, 2003).

The entire agenda is being set by the Pentagon; if the media shout themselves blue, nothing’s going to happen. In the post September 11th climate, the media were so hunkered down before the war that there was very little questioning of the Administration’s case for war.

As Safer told the makers of a PBS documentary called *Reporting America at War*, “Embedded reporters in Iraq were courageous, but it leads reporters—especially young ones—to think we’re all on the same team.”

The next time, Safer said in an interview with the author on November 20, 2003, “If it’s all live, all-the-time again, no reporter is good enough to bang turn on a camera and tell you anything meaningful about what just happened.”

Reporting by “embeds” often seemed like a tape loop of troops and sand that was very sympathetic to the U.S. soldiers and often “gee-whiz” about military hardware. Casualties of any kind were rarely shown. “There was a lot of institutional self-censorship on the part of the American media. You just have to look at some international reporting, on Iraqi casualties, for example, to see it,” maintains John R. MacArthur, publisher of *Harper’s* magazine and author of *Second Front*, a book critical of the media during the 1992 Persian Gulf War (interview: December 19, 2003). “Even *The New York Times* has yet to apologize for erroneous stories [by reporter Judith Miller] about Iraqi weapons,” stories that reportedly had Ahmed Chalabi, the exiled Iraqi leader favored by the Bush administration, as a source.

Although there were almost no early reports critical of the conduct of U.S. soldiers, Hodierna says,

I believe that embedded reporters, with few exceptions, thoroughly reported what they saw in Iraq. The problem was that there was no overview. That wasn’t the fault of embedding—that was the fault of the military’s rear-briefers, who did not believe it was their mission to keep us well-informed about how the war was developing. (interviews: December 18, 2003 and February 18, 2004)

Army Times ran afoul of the Pentagon in Iraq when it published a photograph of a wounded soldier in Iraq who died soon after the photograph was taken. U.S. Army officials tried to expel two *Army Times* correspondents, but the Pentagon ultimately overruled the army because the magazine had followed DOD guidelines calling for a delay of seventy-two hours or notification of the next of kin

before publishing such a photograph. Publishing the photograph, Hodierna editorialized, was “a painful decision that illustrated a fundamental truth,” that U.S. soldiers were dying in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Many journalists in Iraq also were not experienced at covering the military, Hodierna and others note, which led to “gee-whiz” reporting about hardware and, in one instance, stories largely ascribing a halt in pushing into Iraq to supply shortages when in fact, Hodierna says, “They halted because everyone had been up for 72 hours.”

In the continuing, bloody aftermath of the war in Iraq, tensions have increased between some reporters and some military officials. President Bush and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld have complained that the American public is getting only the “bad news” of casualties and bombings in Iraq, at the expense of good-news stories about rebuilding infrastructure and writing a new constitution. Many American news organizations have pulled out the bulk of their journalistic troops after the end of twenty-four-hour live combat in Iraq. And while major American publications like the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times* are continuing to report on both U.S. soldiers and Iraqi citizens, some international reporters have complained that they recently have been harassed by the military as they are trying to cover Iraq today. Some thirty international news organizations recently protested to the Pentagon about what they said were “numerous examples of U.S. troops physically harassing journalists and, in some cases, confiscating or ruining equipment, digital camera discs and videotapes.” In one incident, four Iraqis working for the Reuters news agency and NBC claim that they were detained and physically abused by U.S. soldiers as they arrived at the scene of a downed U.S. helicopter. Bryan Whitman says the Pentagon is still investigating the incident, but officials at Reuters have said that an initial internal report was “woefully inadequate.”

“We are concerned about what appears to be a growing trend towards treating journalists as hostile forces who have no right to be there,” says Frank Smyth of the Committee to Protect Journalists (interview: February 17, 2004). “It reflects an attitude that’s coming from higher up.”

With all the focus on ratings, it is gravely important—not only for journalists but for the American people—to focus their gaze on many fronts, from fighting for an independent press in the next big war to finding ways to report on bureaucratic infighting and clandestine operations in the war on terrorism. In fact, given the government’s own analysis of its poor intelligence leading up to the war in Iraq, the acknowledged poor planning for winning the peace, and the estimated \$200 billion price tag so far, it may be that short of another big conflict, the most pressing duty for journalists today is to take their eye off the battlefield for a moment. What might have happened if there had been more reporting about the intelligence and the military’s own high estimates for troops and

money needed there before the bombs started dropping on Baghdad? The fact is, we need both aggressive war reporters and aggressive prewar reporting, hard slogging domestically on many different agencies and branches of government before the United States goes to war again. “This is where we’re spending our treasure,” says Roy Gutman. “This is where we’re spending lives and money” (interview: February 17, 2004).

Note

1. Except where indicated, all quotes were taken from interviews conducted by the author on the dates cited.

Biographical Note

Jane Hall is an assistant professor in the School of Communication at American University in Washington, D.C. She is a former media reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* in New York.

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