

Unholy Matrimony: Reestablishing Relations With America's Military and the Fourth Estate

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History is littered with painful examples that clearly reflect the often-tempestuous relationship of the press and the military. Since this country was founded, these two idealistic entities have been at cross-purposes with one another, especially during times of war. Ironically, each shares a common goal--to serve the interest of the American people from their distinct perspectives while upholding the Constitution's First Amendment freedoms. Each institution knows that they must rely on their counterpart to fulfill their respective purpose, but inevitably, in the fog of war, tensions erupt. In a worst-case scenario, the press unwittingly releases damaging information about troop locations and dispositions to the enemy. In another instance, the military uses its blanket of

security to cover up an embarrassing transgression that is eventually "uncovered" by the press. Each contributes to an atmosphere of mutual intolerance and mistrust that takes years to rectify. The situation begs the question: Can these two warring institutions of democracy somehow foster a productive relationship? To accomplish their intended purpose, as they enter a common but unpredictable future, it is clear that a balance must be struck based on mutual respect and trust.

To achieve an understanding of this reluctant marriage, it is essential to examine how they function apart from each other and why it is that their relationship becomes strained the moment they meet on the battlefield.

The military has always recognized that its primary responsibility is to preserve and defend national security. Furthermore, it knows that as a government institution, it must regularly keep the public informed of its actions while concurrently maintaining operational security. Conversely, the press believes that it has the Constitutional right to publish freely, and accordingly, demands that it have unfettered and immediate access to the battlefield.

America's Team: The Odd Couple aptly describes the military as a homogeneous organization deeply rooted in discipline, respectful of its hierarchal structure and extremely proud of its heritage. It is fiercely protective of

its reputation and oftentimes goes to great lengths to preserve it. (Aukofer, p. 213) However, the armed services recognize the press's inherent right to provide the public with combat-related information. Consequently, for the most part, they have done their part to facilitate "maximum disclosure, with minimal delay" on the battlefield. Given its record of successes during times of war, bolstered by a well-honed public outreach program, the military has enjoyed a public confidence second to none. Though they appreciate the press's pivotal role in fostering this perception, there are times when it becomes detrimental for them to accommodate the media's frenzied hunger for immediate information, especially during combat, when the need to control leaks becomes paramount.

The media, on the other hand, has often been compared to the mythological Hydra, a beast with the body of a hound and 100 serpentine heads. Each head has no loyalty to the others but demands to be equally served under the unifying body of First Amendment rights. Unlike the military, it has few institutional sets of controls or guidelines which regulate its behavior. Recent advances in technology have only served to exacerbate the competition between the various media outlets, and, as the public thirst for instant gratification increased, demand for information has become much more immediate. Concomitantly, the nature of the industry has changed.

Burgeoning media corporations, in pursuit of short term profitable returns often expend a minimal amount of money developing staff. Learning curves for reporters are shortened, leading one government official to say, "This week's food critic can become next week's military 'expert'."

The convergence of opposing forces produces a natural tug-of-war for public opinion. On the one hand, the military has a self-serving interest in controlling the information that the public receives, while the press merely wants to distribute it—the faster, the better, albeit at the expense of telling the whole story. The American people stand in the balance, culturally conditioned to receive their news much like their fast food—immediately and cheaply. At the same time, they want to be afforded the protections provided by the military, unaware or unable to understand how media access can undermine this very protection.

In an attempt to reconcile this relationship, it is important understand the historical evolution of the present relationship

During the period leading up to the Grenada invasion, the traditional relationship between the military and the media had been one of grudging cooperation when the country was at war. Each conflict produced its own set of problems, but for the most part the two understood their roles. The military was

flexible enough to allow members of the press to roam the battlefield and gather information relatively unimpeded, as long as there was a system of checks and balances in place to prevent security breaches. Controls ranged from full military censorship, as in Korea, to a tacit agreement that the reporters would self regulate and withhold information that could be beneficial to the enemy, as their predecessors had in World War II. Most importantly during this period, the military was afforded the luxury of time. This mattered from a strategic standpoint. By the time reporters were able to file their stories, transmission delays dependent upon previous technology prevented the enemy from discovering our intentions until it was too late. Also, in contrast to current practice, the media organizations placed dedicated experts in the field, whose primary responsibility was to cover the military and continually educate themselves on the military environment and the conduct of war.

However, by 1983, when the tiny island of Grenada was overrun by communist insurgents and the lives of small group American medical students were in danger, dramatic advances in satellite technology accelerated transmission and contributed to the public's expectation of "on-the-spot" real-time news. This was exacerbated by furious competition between media organizations whose nature had also changed--to big business.

Competition replaced community service and one such organization threatened to telegraph a surprise assault by American soldiers and Marines. During the initial hours of the invasion, the government imposed a blackout, and in the ensuing days, barred the media from the island until the operation concluded two days later. This sparked a flurry of protests from the press who complained that their First Amendment privilege of unrestricted access to the battlefield had been violated. In its defense, the government claimed that the tactical secrecy of the invasion prevented it from revealing intent prior to the assault. Eventually, in deference to the First Amendment, the government struck a deal with the press allowing them to cover future invasions using a pool system. (Freznick, p. 17) This arrangement allowed a small number of media representatives to cover the action from the outset, subject to censorship as deemed necessary to protect national interest. Once the battlefield was well in control, and the element of surprise was no longer at issue, the battlefield was opened to other members of the media.

During the invasion of Panama, the government tried to maintain this newly established system, by implementing an on-call national media pool, which would be briefed prior to an assault and permitted to accompany the first wave of American forces inland. Unfortunately, logistical constraints prevented

the pool from covering the initial incursion, and by the time they arrived, the operation had been underway for nearly four hours. (Freznick, p. 19) This created an outcry from the press.

Chastened by repeated admonitions and the threat of First Amendment lawsuits from the legal establishment, America's military was under tremendous pressure to mend relationships with a disgruntled press by the time the Gulf War erupted. Once again, the government did its best to accommodate the ever-increasing numbers of reporters by dividing them into organized pools consisting of a proportionate mix of television, print, and radio segments. Though the media was allowed to cover the initial airlift of troops into Riyadh, there were complaints of being spoon-fed a sanitized version of the war. (Fialka, p. 54) In a similar vain, Gen. Schwartzkopf feared the press would somehow reveal to the Iraqis his surprise "left hook" from the west to the Iraqis and restricted access.

On February 23, 1991, two hours after the U.S. ground offensive began, the Pentagon imposed a complete news blackout. Regular briefings in Washington and Riyadh were suspended and dispatches from the pools were delayed, ostensibly for security reasons. In response to the blackout, hundreds of reporters traveled to the desert on their own, in violation of the pool restrictions (Aukofer, p. 175)

Moreover, a factor was introduced into the equation that would widen the chasm between the Pentagon and the press. News editors were frequently placing inexperienced reporters, whose

knowledge of the military was minimal, in the field. This required an already taxed public affairs office to spend time re-educating the new reporters on the military's complex culture and need for security. Once again the two factions were at cross purposes. (Aukofer, p. 178)

During Desert Storm, it was becoming readily apparent that the media's concern for military affairs only resurfaced when there appeared to be war on the horizon. When the nation was at peace, there was a perception among the military that the media's interest lay in scandal and entertainment rather than in serious news reporting. Until a major conflict loomed, the press seemed to forget its institutional memory (veteran war correspondents) and would shuttle its most fledgling reporters to the front lines.

In the face of a potentially long and protracted battle against terrorism in Afghanistan it becomes necessary to reexamine the factors that have contributed to the deterioration of relations between the media and the military. The lessons of the past may shed some light on the prospects for the future.

First, the military must recognize that at least some representatives of the press, organized through a pool system or other cooperative mechanism MUST have the ability to cover all stages of an operation to the extent such access doesn't

jeopardize national interest. This is a fundamental right guaranteed by the First Amendment. Commanders must work closely with public affairs officers to ensure that the public's right to know is upheld and arrange a structured pool system that is embedded into an operational plan. They must realize that the military's privilege of censorship is only temporary as it affects the ground scheme of maneuver. Further they must be made aware that all restrictions will be lifted as the situation dictates. Equally important prior to the start of an offensive, the press must be educated on the seriousness of security breaches.

Secondly, both the press and the Pentagon must make a more concerted effort to understand one another's cultures. This can be accomplished by mutually arranged conferences, professional education programs, and informative websites that encourage open dialogue and enhance mutual trust. The military should extend an open invitation to field reporters to accompany troops in the field during routine exercises so that they might gain a better understanding of how the military operates and appreciate the need for stricter security measures. Efforts have been made in this area. Gen. Walt Boomer, Commanding Officer of I MEF and former public affairs officer, allowed a Washington Post reporter unprecedented access to his troops before, during, and after their assault into Kuwait City.

During this extended period, the reporter fostered a deep respect for Gen. Boomer and his situation and was able to relate her stories home while concurrently respecting his need for secrecy. (Aukofer, p. 18) The resulting positive coverage became a blueprint for how the press should be treated, and it can be safely assumed that the Army, who received significantly less exposure, learned a valuable lesson from the Marine Corps. Even so, more examples like that need to be repeated.

Finally, public affairs officers must do their utmost to indoctrinate service members at ALL levels of command on the ever changing nature of newsgathering, as well as educate them on how to engage reporters more effectively and emphasize the importance of the press's role in our democracy. Commanders and PAOs need to schedule formal training periods to achieve this, or even develop a PME program that demonstrates an appreciation for the inevitable link between the military and the media during operations.

The nature of war since Desert Storm has changed dramatically. Battle lines can no longer be clearly defined and the press seems more pervasive than ever. In Afghanistan, for example, there exists no pool system outside the boundaries of military installations and the press has roamed the region indiscriminately, often at their own peril. They are emboldened and determined to "be there first," aided by the latest

advances in videophone technology. Indeed, this has created inherent problems for the military in terms of operational planning and there seems no way to get control of the situation.

At the same time, it is critical for both the military and the press to understand that tension is inherent in their relationship and characterized by each member's desire to control the other. Will the marriage ever improve to the point where both parties are satisfied? It is highly unlikely, but perhaps through common dialogue and appreciation of one another's differences and mutually beneficial roles, some breakthroughs can be achieved.

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