

The Press and the War

Robert Zelnick

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How tempting it is to say that David Westin, the president of ABC News, suffered a bout of foot-in-mouth disease when he told a Columbia Journalism School audience that “I actually have no opinion on that,” in response to whether he considered the Pentagon a legitimate military target on September 11.

What about Steven Jukes, the Reuters editor, who offered, “We all know that one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter,” as the excuse for the news agency’s decision against describing the hijackers as “terrorists.”

Or NPR’s foreign editor, Loren Jenkins, who explained why he would report a secret U.S. commando staging area in Northern Pakistan if he found one: “I don’t represent the government. I represent history, information, what happened.”

Alas, the statements belie an underlying moral confusion that is beyond arrogance. **If the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon are not acts of evil criminality, then is anything criminal in Mr. Westin’s world?** Rwanda? Katyn forest? the Holocaust?

If killing innocent civilians for political purposes is not terrorism, then Reuters has summarily rejected the conventional usage of a familiar term. Would it similarly decline to call the premeditated killing of a single individual “murder”?

Mr. Jenkins, whose judgment could send American military personnel to their deaths, offers a supposedly noble excuse: “We journalists are above national allegiances. We are the historians for all mankind, the future’s agents.” But if you are also the eyes and ears of the enemy, don’t demand access to military operations under the banner of the First Amendment. People no less idealistic than yourself died in the service of that amendment. It is not now yours to defile.

The press does have its role to play in a democracy, even during a time of war. That role is different from those of political or military institutions. The press cannot cease to ask questions and must view bland accounts of progress with skepticism. It cannot become a willing agent of disinformation in what the military euphemistically calls “the information war.” It cannot shy from reporting failed operations or even successful ones that trigger excesses among allied troops. It cannot ignore civilian casualties or unthinkingly accept military charges that many of those casualties result from the enemy using civilians as shields.

In today’s war the press was right to accept Taliban invitations to view what that government chose to make available, just as a decade ago, in the midst of Operation Desert Storm, Western reporters flocked to Baghdad to learn what they could. And yes,

the press should report the words of adversaries, even Osama bin Laden, if those words are newsworthy and present no clear and present danger of terrorist violence.

The quest is for truth. In time of war that quest is difficult and dangerous.

Coolness, analytic detachment, and an objective eye are all qualities to be admired in today's journalists as they have been in the past. But objectivity and neutrality are not synonyms. Nor does objectivity require the debasement of language. And no standard of credible journalism justifies putting the lives of Americans at risk.