

The Press and War

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When the United States becomes embroiled in a war, both the press and the military have their jobs to do. The military's job is to fight the battles and defeat the enemy, an undertaking that is—without argument—vital. The press has an important job also: to keep the American people informed about the war and how it is being conducted. Often, press coverage and editorial views have supported the nation's war aims. During the course of America's several wars, however, friction has arisen when the nation's military aims and the press' reporting or editorial actions seemed to have been in conflict.

The first major war involving the American colonies was the French and Indian War (1754–1763). It threatened nearly everything that was important to the colonists, and it became the focus of newspapers. Americans were tied culturally, social, economically, and religiously to Great Britain. Newspaper printers, like other colonists, believed that a French victory would disrupt all those connections and reverse the entire social order. Unlike many journalists in recent years, colonial newspaper publishers believed that their cause was one and the same as that of their country. Believing that France's military actions represented a grave threat, they encouraged the war effort. "*Friends! Countrymen!...*," warned the *Virginia Gazette* in 1756. "Awake! Arise! When our Country, and all that is included in that important Word, is in most threatening Danger; when our Enemies are busy and unwearyed in planning and executing their Schemes of Encroachments and Barbarity ... I need only repeat, *Your Country is in Danger.*"¹

America's first war as an independent nation was its revolution against Great Britain. The press' role in the Revolutionary War (1775–1783) began even before the actual fighting did. Colonial newspapers were vital in fomenting the dissension that culminated in the Revolution. Newspapers of the day published vitriolic denunciations of the English crown and condemnations of its colonial policies. Tory newspapers, that is, those that remained loyal to the king, were loudly condemned, and many of their publishers were intimidated into silence. Colonists boycotted some Tory papers and hanged their editors in effigy. As the revolutionary spirit inflamed more colonists, they sought out newspapers to read the latest political essays. In this way, not only did the press stimulate the Revolution, the Revolution led to growth of newspapers. Colonists bought more newspapers, and more newspapers came into existence. In 1750, the American colonies had 12 newspapers. By 1775, that number had grown to 48. These 48 newspapers helped to unify 13 diverse colonies into a single nation with a single objective: to throw off the yoke of English rule. Newspapers galvanized opinion against Great Britain by crystallizing colonists' economic and political resentments.

Despite the demand for news about the issues leading up to the war and the war itself, once the shooting began at Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775, information was difficult to come by. Editors had to wait for news to make its way to town from the battlefield, and this could take days or even weeks since news typically had to travel by horse or

ship.² Another frustration for Revolutionary editors, and one that would also plague newspapers during the Civil War, was the shortage of raw materials, especially newsprint, that had to be shipped in from Europe.

Because of the slowness with which news was transmitted during the Revolutionary War, censorship was not much of an issue. News traveled too slowly from the front to be much threat to military security. Consequently, there was no need for press censorship, and the opportunities for conflict to arise between journalists and military officials were rare. General George Washington was so sure of the necessity of newspapers to support the Revolutionary effort that he donated some of the army's supply of paper to keep newspapers publishing.

The War of 1812 (1812–1815), America's second war, featured the same enemy, but the issues revolved around international trade, the English propensity for impressing American sailors into their navy, and the interest of some Americans in annexing Canada. The press, due to its politically partisan nature in this period, was divided in its support for the war. Hezekiah Niles, editor of the non-partisan *Niles' Weekly Register*, urged unity for the duration of the war, but most editors turned a deaf ear. This may have been because so many editors believed that the United States could not lose a war with England.

Newspapers sponsored by or loyal to the Republican party essentially favored the war and wrote stories to maintain public support for the conflict. Most Republican editors believed the British intended a bloody war to devastate the American frontier and to divide the country. The Federalist press, on the other hand, generally opposed the war, often even daring to do so openly. This opposition led the government to debate what to do about press criticism, just as the Adams administration had done during fears of a war with France in 1798–1800. That debate had led to the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts. However, led by President James Madison, who would not countenance censorship, no official action was taken against any newspaper during the War of 1812. Public action, however, was another matter. Throughout the early and mid-1800s, the

public would mob newspapers that took unpopular positions on political issues. The worst example of a mobbing from the War of 1812 was that of the *Federal Republican* in Baltimore. Somewhere between 30 and 40 men completely wrecked the newspaper's office while a gathering of some 400 watched and cheered them on. The editor, Alexander Hanson, tried twice to restart his paper but was unable to do so because of public opposition.³

America's first war in which something approaching modern methods of news gathering and dissemination were employed was the Mexican War (1846–1848). Editors, however, continued to filter events through partisan lenses. Some, particularly abolitionist editors such as Benjamin Lundy, one-time business partner of William Lloyd Garrison, maintained that the war was a ploy by slaveholders to expand territory for their "peculiar institution," the South's favorite euphemism for slavery. Other editors depicted the United States as the unwilling victim of Mexican aggression, as having been forced to take up arms, while a few claimed that America had goaded the Mexicans into beginning the war by sending troops into a disputed border area in Texas.

News dissemination technologies sped up in the Mexican War, but the war was fought on such a distant front that it still took a long time for information to reach American readers. As a result, censorship—and the corresponding poor relationship between the press and the military—was not an issue.

This changed, however, during the Civil War (1861–1865). By then, newspaper production technologies, as well as information dissemination technologies, were sufficiently sophisticated and swift that injudicious reporting could influence the outcome of battles or campaigns. By 1861, hundreds of miles of railways and telegraph lines linked American cities, speeding travel and dissemination of information. Not only was the transmission of news faster in the Civil War than in any previous war, publication of war news was literally in the enemy's backyard. Soldiers and newspaper editors from both sides traded newspapers across the lines. It was a rare day that some Confederate paper did not carry stories from

the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, the *New York Herald*, or some other Northern journal—and vice versa. Union General William T. Sherman, in a letter to his wife, admitted that he used intelligence gathered from Southern newspapers in planning his campaigns.

The Civil War was the first war in which the press/military conflict became a perceptible component of war. This is not to say, however, that conflict was universal. Some officers, such as General William S. Rosencrans, tried to use the press to promote their careers, and some reporters would “write up” officers—that is, feature their exploits in dispatches—for money.⁴ Bad press/military relations, though, were more common, such as those between Sherman and the press. Early in the war, the Union general had predicted that the conflict would be long and bloody. The Northern press scoffed at this idea and called Sherman crazy. The press’ accusations incensed the general—not that he had much liking for journalists to start with—and turned his dislike for journalists into an out-and-out loathing.

Sylvanius Cadwallader, a *New York Herald* correspondent who eventually became that paper’s chief correspondent with General Ulysses S. Grant’s army, agreed with Sherman. In his memoirs, he wrote that Northern correspondents were “generally snubbed everywhere. The fault is their own. They should dress decently, behave like gentlemen, resent bad treatment, never crowd in where they are not wanted.” Cadwallader himself set a different standard. He vowed to take no freebies, to keep his interviews at headquarters short and to the point, and never to interrupt official business. He also made a point of not hanging around headquarters to eavesdrop. Consequently, he always found a warm welcome at headquarters and eventually became close to General Grant, which resulted in greater access to military leaders—and longer, more revealing, conversations.⁵

The level of military and governmental censorship during the Civil War is an often-debated topic. Certainly both the Union and the Confederate armies and governments tried, in varying degrees, to prohibit newspapers from publishing information about troop move-

ments, unit strengths, or any other information that would give aid and comfort to the enemy. The need to control those types of military information was especially acute in the Civil War since Northern papers circulated in the South, and Southern newspapers circulated in the North. While both the Confederate and the Union armies technically censored their newspapers, the censorship rules were only spottily enforced.⁶ Ulysses Grant, for example, believed he had too much to do to censor journalists. He left it up to reporters to decide what to report, but with the proviso that if they went too far in their reporting, they would be banished from the front. His general rule was that anything about previous operations could be published, but he disapproved of articles predicting future actions.

Where censorship rules were most strictly enforced, as in Sherman’s headquarters, enterprising reporters often found ways around the rules. When the military banned the use of the telegraph by the press, the *New York Herald’s* Cadwallader organized a relay system of private messengers who could get dispatches from Virginia to New York in under 36 hours.⁷ Until 1863, when the Confederate Press Association was formed, the Southern press usually did not have representatives at battles or even with commanders at their headquarters, the reporting of sensitive military information was less of a problem for them. In 1863, CPA Superintendent John Thrasher met with many of the South’s commanding generals and was able to get them to allow correspondents to cover their commands. In the South, the peoples’ extreme state rights position even made censorship constitutionally repugnant. At the end of the war, Confederate President Jefferson Davis was able to brag that he had not had to suppress a single newspaper during the entire war. U.S. President Abraham Lincoln could not make a similar claim.

Correspondents from the Spanish-American War (1898), a war allegedly “created” by newspaperman William Randolph Hearst as a means of selling more newspapers, have been criticized for exaggerating and romanticizing the performance of the American soldier. Newspapers outdid themselves in reporting the

gallant and brave deeds of soldiers and turning blind eyes to American set-backs. As a result, censorship was lax because so much press coverage was positive. Reporting the war was complicated, however, because so much of the action took place in jungle terrain, making it difficult for reporters to cover it; and the stories that did get through were highly suspect because they were so favorable.

The same criticism can be offered for World War I (1914–1918). News was highly censored and provided mostly favorable coverage of Allied efforts. Censorship was so extensive that an army official even managed to censor a correspondent's expense account. When Daniel Dillon, an International News Service correspondent, tried to send in his expense account report with a \$250 bill for entertaining General John Pershing, a press officer deleted the item. He did not want anyone to know the general had been spending time with reporters.⁸

The U.S. War Department set up a complex procedure just to weed out reporters who would be likely not to cooperate with the military in getting out its version of the story. To be accredited to report on the American forces in World War I, a correspondent had to:

1. Appear before the secretary of War or his designate.
2. Swear to report the truth, but not anything that might aid the enemy.
3. Hand write an autobiography, including an account of the correspondent's work, experience, character and health; what he planned to do in Europe; and where he was going.
4. Pay the Army \$1,000 to cover his equipment and expenses.
5. Post a \$10,000 bond to ensure he would "comport himself as a gentleman of the press."
6. Agree to wear a green armband with a big red "C" on it.
7. Pay the Army \$500 if he planned to take along an assistant.⁹

Coverage of World War I tended to be highly patriotic and supportive. The press offered little criticism of official policy because there

was general agreement that the war was necessary.

In World War II, though, correspondents often lived with the men about whom they were writing.¹⁰ This led to a new kind of war story: dispatches about the men who were actually fighting the war. These stories fell into step better with military objectives of keeping up morale on the homefront—so long as they did not reveal too much detail about living conditions and troop locations. Some of these "hometown stories" were contributed by a new kind of correspondent—one who worked not for a newspaper or radio network, but for the military services themselves. Dar Levin, who served as a Marine correspondent, recalled, "We were the hands recruited to sing the deeds of the Joe Blows."¹¹ He and the other Marine correspondents were soldiers first and correspondents second. Their gear differed only slightly from that of regular Marines, Levin and his fellow correspondents received a baby Hermes typewriter in addition to the regulation M-1 rifle. Like famed correspondent Ernie Pyle, Levin and his brethren were not at the front to tell the bigger story of the war, but to tell the story of "average Joes." Pyle and the other reporters who focused on this kind of reporting were criticized for not telling Americans the true story of what was happening in the war, but many historians agree that Pyle told the American people as much as he could without making them ill.

During World War II, correspondents generally went along with censorship because they thought it was in the country's best interest to do so. On a practical level, correspondents could only go to the front if they agreed to abide by censorship rules, so there were motives other than patriotism in agreeing to let the military examine dispatches before they were sent off. By and large, though, censorship during World War II was voluntary and based on a gentleman's agreement with the censorship office. A good example of how well the voluntary censorship worked is the atomic bomb story. Some journalists were aware that the bomb was under development, but they wrote little about it until August 6, 1945, the day Hiroshima was bombed. William Laurence,

a *New York Times* science writer, had written a secret history of the Manhattan Project, but his editors never knew the nature of the project. As a reward for his discretion, he was allowed to go along when Nagasaki was bombed.¹²

During the Korean Conflict (1950–1953), one of the difficulties that correspondents had in getting out the story was in knowing what they could report and what was prohibited. This was so much of a problem that they eventually asked for censorship rules so they could be assured of consistency. In the early part of the conflict, there were no official rules of censorship, and this resulted in two correspondents being expelled for stories deemed helpful to the enemy. Actually, dispatches from Korea faced double censorship—they were censored at 8th Army Headquarters in Korea and then again in Tokyo. This led to significant delays in transmission and an eventual relaxation of the rules.

The American press and public were immediately supportive of President Truman's decision to send troops to South Korea to resist the Communist North Korean invasion. Soon after hostilities began, the *New York Times* praised Truman's action as "momentous and courageous."¹³ Some media critics have complained that reporting from Korea, especially that of American reporters, was superficial and sensationalized. Others, though, have commended much of the reporting, primarily because many of the World War II-trained war correspondents were still on the job when the conflict began.

The Vietnam Conflict (1965–1973) was technically a war without any censorship. This was one reason why the military was so wary of the press.¹⁴ Authorities realized the futility of trying to impose censorship regulations on reporters from so many different countries. In the early years of that conflict, strict censorship was unnecessary since the American people and media paid little attention to the war.

As the war escalated, so did press attention. Many Americans who had previously supported a war they thought their country was winning were suddenly confronted with stories that indicated U.S. forces were bogged down in a civil war somewhere off in Indo-China. Popular support for the war began to falter and

pretty much crumbled altogether as a result of the 1968 Tet Offensive. While that offensive technically ended in victory for America and South Vietnam, it came across on television as a major loss. TV coverage was critical to attitudes about the war effort because a whopping 60 per cent of Americans got their war news from television. The death blow for America's involvement in Vietnam came about a month after the Tet Offensive when CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite went to Southeast Asia to find out what was going on. He studied the situation and then put together a one-hour special in which he concluded America had no chance to win this war.

Since Vietnam, the American military has been involved in several police and peace-keeping actions. The police actions, such as the invasion of Grenada to rescue a group of American medical school students, and Panama, to capture Nicaraguan leader Manuel Noriega, have been of short duration. They were more like spot news stories than sustained war reporting. Consequently, there was little opportunity for much reporting, even if there had not been any censorship.

Although relations between the press and the military began to disintegrate during the Vietnam War, the real watershed, that is, the point at which press/military relations reached the lowest of the low, was during the 1984 invasion of Grenada.¹⁵ The media dissatisfaction with the Pentagon-arranged press pool during the Persian Gulf War in 1991 did little to improve relations between the press and the military.

The military was reluctant to allow coverage of actions like those in Grenada and the Persian Gulf because of new communications technologies that allowed for "real time" reporting. Some scholars believe that the new technologies will lead to new kinds of military reporting—and to new kinds of restrictions on that reporting.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the Persian Gulf War was probably America's best covered *and* worst covered war as a result of the new technologies. On the one hand, instantaneous communication was possible. On the other, it was not allowed because of military censorship. And because the censorship was so restrictive,

war coverage devolved into lots of stories about the technology of the Patriot missile and behind-the-lines reporters reporting on their own courage.¹⁷

In the Persian Gulf War (1991), censorship began only after the war actually began. In fact, Americans knew, thanks to CNN, the war had begun a full 27 minutes before the Pentagon press office announced the firing of the first shots. CNN correspondents Peter Arnett and John Holliman and anchor Bernard Shaw reported live and uncensored throughout that first night of war in January 1991. Arnett was in the interesting position of being able to broadcast live from the enemy capital throughout the short war. His censors were not Americans but Iraqis who were intent on using his reports to gain sympathy for their side.¹⁸

One of the lessons the military learned in Vietnam—and applied in the Gulf War—was that if reporters don't go to where combat is occurring and don't have a chance to film bodies, they can't show the fighting or the bodies to viewers at home. During the Gulf War, the military completely controlled reporters' movements. They could not travel anywhere in the war zone without a military escort and could not talk to soldiers without military permission. This was particularly true of the pool reporters who got their slots only if they agreed to abide by military regulations. Some reporters took off on their own without military assistance, but they were few.

Pentagon censorship of the Gulf War has been called "unprecedented," and some critics have claimed that the military censors not only wanted to control the information that got relayed home, but also the perceived reality of events. Censorship, according to one critic, was primarily intended to make the reporting of numbers of casualties impossible.¹⁹ Gulf War censorship was different from any other war's. Rather than requiring that completed stories be submitted to censors, as had been done in previous wars, censorship policies gave the Pentagon the power to determine what news people could and could not see.

This tension between what Americans want to know about their wars and what they need to know has continued to be an issue in

contemporary conflicts and may offer at least a partial explanation for why Americans today so often favor press censorship. They may agree that a war needs to be fought, but many do not want graphic battle footage or stories brought into their homes. No wars have been fought on American soil for more than 130 years. The American public is used to watching war from a sanitized distance. Certainly during the Persian Gulf War, citizens supported the military action against Saddam Hussein (throughout the conflict, opinion polls showed from 75 to 84 per cent of Americans supported the war²⁰), and while they thrilled to hear Peter Arnett, Bernard Shaw, and John Holliman reporting on the bombing of the enemy capital, they were often critical of journalists' attempts to get out of headquarters and report on what was actually happening in the field.

That contrast in the public's attitudes illustrates the dual-faced issue of the press and war. The effect of war reporting on public morale has been an enduring question since the Civil War. The war reporters whom later journalists have thought most highly of, however, are those who went beyond merely giving reports of battlefield action. They asked those troublesome questions that the military, and oftentimes the public, would just as soon not answer—questions dealing with issues such as the performance of U.S. forces, the wisdom of U.S. defense policies, the nature of national interests, and even the qualifications of the commanders in charge.

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Notes

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2. Wm. David Sloan and Julie Hedgepeth Williams, *The Early American Press, 1690-1783* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994).
3. Carol Sue Humphrey, *The Press of the Young Republic, 1783-1833*, (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996), 90.
4. Sylvanius Cadwallader, *Three Years With Grant* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 3, xxii.
5. *Ibid.*, 237, 12.
6. The Confederate Congress never adopted any censorship legislation and even required generals to rescind some of their censorship orders.
7. *Ibid.*, 11.
8. Philip Knightley, *The First Casualty: From the Crimea to Vietnam. The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist and Myth Maker* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1975), 131.
9. *Ibid.*, 124.
10. Jack Stenbuck, ed., *Typewriter Battalion: Dramatic Front Line Dispatches from World War II* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1995), with an introduction by Walter Cronkite, 4-5.
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