

# War and the American Press

E. L. PATTULLO

© 1992 E. L. Pattullo

Perhaps the events of the Gulf War are now sufficiently distant, yet still fresh enough in memory, to enable us to consider calmly the recurrent problem of determining the proper role for the press in wartime. Reporters, almost all of whom were critical of restrictions imposed on them during the Gulf War, seem to assume that the principal job of the media is to criticize the ways and means by which US policy is carried out. An immediate case in point is an article by free-lancer Michael Massing. Arguing that the press could have been far more critically probing than it was, despite restrictions, he cites three examples of the “real story” missed: (1) the Pentagon’s “destructive [bombing] plan . . . designed to return Iraq to ‘a preindustrial age,’” (2) the allies’ “slaughtering” of “hapless conscripts sent to the front against their will,” and (3) the use by US forces of “fearsome . . . flesh-searing” weapons like napalm.<sup>1</sup> In each case, it is the press’s failure to expose and criticize these activities that he condemns. Clearly his thinking is premised on the idea that damning the military is the proper purpose of the wartime press; if denied free access to the front, reporters should look for other ways to find fault. Neither he nor any other commentator has yet argued that unrestricted reporting would *help* the war effort. Apparently, that’s not the reporter’s department.

To the layman this seems odd. It implies questions about the role of a free press in a democratic society more basic than any yet raised by critics or defenders of Pentagon policy. If the ethos of a free press requires that journalists concentrate on what is wrong with the nation’s war effort, military and political leaders and ordinary citizens alike have good reason to ensure that reporters are reined in. Morale—at home and in the field—is vital to successful prosecution of a war and can only be weakened by constant criticism. The puzzle, indeed, is why reporters—themselves citizens with the same stake in the nation’s destiny as any other citizen—should wish to be free to scourge the military when their country is at war. When ethical imperatives

clash, which should demand their first allegiance—those of their country, on one hand, or those of their trade and their own professional advancement, on the other? If some men and women must give their lives to the nation's cause, can its press insist upon maintaining a fine neutrality? Perhaps the role of a free press in a democratic nation must necessarily change when the country moves from peace to war.

Members of the fourth estate during and after the Gulf War have not truly come to grips with such questions. Tom Wicker in a thoughtful column argued the case for allowing dissent in wartime, citing the extent to which it persisted in the North during the Civil War despite Abraham Lincoln's best efforts to contain it.<sup>2</sup> He did not, however, address the issue of censoring and regulating reports from the front. Anna Quindlen, on the other hand, approvingly asserted that "telling the truth about war can shift public opinion towards peace," while insisting that the people's "stand-ins must be there. The cameras. The reporters. . . . We should know what it is that is being done in our name. That's what the people need. That's what the press must provide. And it's what the government should allow."<sup>3</sup> But, should it?

Reporters insist they can be trusted not to reveal operational details that endanger the lives of our troops. Military commanders are skeptical, but that is not the issue which concerns us here. Nor is the American press's penchant for criticism of its own government basic, though it complicates the matter. I do not doubt that most war correspondents report the truth as they see it. The root problem is that in a war zone one sees only the part of truth that makes rational men and women abhor war—the awful fact of humans preparing to kill, killing, and being killed. Excluded from the picture is the chain of events that has persuaded the nation to resort to force. For this reason the government of a nation at war, especially a democratic one, has a positive duty to censor and control reports from the battle zone. Uncontrolled reporting, however truthful and unbiased, necessarily distorts the larger truth about the enterprise. What reporters see at the front is the misery and confusion of war; unless each dispatch is to include an editorial on the background of the war, an adequate perspective can be maintained only by regulating reports from the field.

---

Mr. E. L. Pattullo has long been associated with Harvard University. Before his retirement in 1987, he was a senior lecturer on psychology, Director of the Center for the Behavioral Sciences, Associate Chairman of the Department of Psychology, Director of the Psychological Laboratories, and Chairman of the Institutional Review Board. He previously was associated with York University in Toronto and with the University of Chicago, the latter being the site of his undergraduate and graduate education. During World War II, he was an ambulance driver with the British 8th Army (1941-42), and then served as an infantry captain with the 13th Frontier Force Rifles in His Majesty's Indian Land Forces (1942-47). Mr. Pattullo is also the author of numerous articles in the behavioral and social sciences.

---

---

*Perhaps the role of a free press must change  
when the country moves from peace to war.*

---

The plain, unvarnished facts of battle and bombing are so terrible that civilized men and women instinctively recoil from them. A free nation will find it hard to persist, however just its cause, if its citizens are confronted daily and hourly with the human cost of battle. Though the righteousness of our cause in Vietnam is widely disputed, all agree that unrestricted coverage of the fighting played a principal role in eroding public support for that venture. At least one journalist, Robert Wright, acknowledges the basic problem: "A nation needs chauvinism to win wars, so mass enlightenment has the ironic property of steadily ceding all struggles to the morally primitive (e.g. Saddam Hussein)."<sup>4</sup>

The will to endure is sorely tried, whatever one's faith in cause and country, when confronted with graphic evidence of the horror of modern war. Many readers know this from their own recent experience: the most ardent hawks felt misgivings after viewing the heartrending results of our February 1991 bombing of the "command and control center" in Baghdad that turned out to be used also as a civilian air raid shelter. Saddam had every reason to be pleased that modern photojournalism could repeatedly beam horrifying pictures of this catastrophe—which we had perpetrated—into every American living room.

Or consider Philip Caputo, Vietnam veteran and war reporter, struggling to rationalize his reluctant support of the Gulf War while remembering the revulsion stirred by past scenes of battle:

There were other memories from other wars. The Arab-Israeli war in October 1973: the rabbi, a battalion chaplain, assigned to piece together the arms and legs of tank crews so their bodies could be identified; the Syrian soldiers napalmed on the Golan Heights—blackened dolls with no faces and charred knobs for hands. Cypress, 1974: The Turkish-Cypriote teenager with a wounded leg festering from gangrene, a leg he would lose. Lebanon, 1975: The splattered entrails of Christian militiamen cut in half by machine-gun fire.<sup>5</sup>

And Michael Kelly describes the scene on a road between Kuwait and Basra after US forces caught up with retreating Iraqi soldiers:

Quite a few of the dead had never made it out of their machines. Those were the worst because they were both exploded and incinerated. One man had tried to escape to Iraq in a Kawasake front-end loader. His remaining half-body lay

hanging upside down and out of his exposed seat, the left side and bottom blown away to tatters, with the charred leg fully fifteen feet away. Nine men in a slat-sided supply truck were killed and flash-burned so swiftly that they remained, naked, skinned and black wrecks, in the vulnerable positions of the moment of first impact. One body lay face down with his rear high in the air, as if he had been trying to burrow through the truck bed. His legs ended in fluttery charcoaled remnants at mid-thigh. He had a young, pretty face, slightly cherubic, with a pointed little chin; you could still see that even though it was mummified. Another man had been butterflied by the bomb; the cavity of his body was cut wide open and his intestines and such were still coiled in their proper places, but cooked to ebony.<sup>6</sup>

Pacifists have good reason to rest their case at this point. What more need be said? How can civilized people read such accounts and continue to support war? Should such graphic verbal descriptions fail to deter, is it conceivable that any will retain stomach for the fight after seeing films of such horrors? How many will wish to persevere if these images are broadcast live, nightly, direct into one's home? Few, which makes a dilemma for modern democracies: if the press is permitted to report as in peacetime, the reality of war (including news of predictable bumbling on the part of the military) will steadily erode the nation's determination. Yet forbidding the press to enquire and report as it wishes is to abrogate one of the freedoms basic to the system we seek to defend.

The dilemma is not new, but two otherwise welcome developments in the second half of the 20th century have greatly intensified the problem. First, governments of the Western nations have become infinitely more responsive to broad-based public opinion; second, the technology whereby news is transmitted has been revolutionized. Just when the morale of the man in the street has become as important as that of the armed forces, satellites and computers have made it possible to deliver, with unprecedented immediacy, words and—especially—images likely to shatter that morale.

A principal reason for the military's traditional insistence on a degree of discipline that strikes civilians as draconian is that most people exposed to the actuality of killing will do almost anything to vacate the scene. That response is motivated by fear and revulsion in combinations that vary, presumably, from person to person. (As certain as I was about the justice and urgency of the Allied cause in World War II, I found myself strongly tempted toward pacifism when exposed to the reality of battle while serving with the British 8th Army in the Western Desert in 1942.) It would be surprising if fear is not the predominate emotion for most, but it is also plausible that revulsion alone is enough to prompt many to think the butchery must stop at any cost. If soldiers are to persist in their task, therefore, it is essential that they be so disciplined as to resist acting on their emotions. Civilians too must resist such



DOD Still Media Records Center

**CBS Evening News anchorman Dan Rather, left center, is filmed talking to servicemen at an airbase in Saudi Arabia in November 1990, during Operation Desert Shield.**

impulses if their nation is to persevere in a difficult campaign. It being impossible, in a free society, to instill discipline in civilians as in the military, the alternative is to make it a matter of settled policy that, in wartime, reporting of information likely to undermine the nation's resolve will be limited. That is, censor or otherwise control the press.

The evolution of American journalism over the past quarter of a century, however, has been in a quite different direction, toward an autonomy that puts a premium on the adversarial relationship between journalists and government or other authority. Useful as it is to have the press identify itself as the public's watchdog in time of peace, this evolution courts disaster when the nation itself is at risk in wartime.

According to Arthur Lubow, during the latter part of this century there has been a sea change in the relations between America and its press in time of war:

In this country (and even more in others) the war correspondent has traditionally regarded himself as a loyal auxiliary to his nation's armed forces. In the two world wars American correspondents even wore military uniforms. Although reporters are supposed to be noncombatants, from Richard Harding Davis at Las Guasimas to Charles Mohr at Hue they have carried weapons and joined in assaults. Over the course of the Vietnam War, this partiality to the home team was slowly and painfully eroded. "There gets to be a point when the question is, 'Whose side are you on?'" Dean Rusk told a group of reporters after the Tet offensive. "Now, I'm the Secretary of State of the United States and I'm on our side."<sup>7</sup>

In contrast with Rusk, Walter Goodman, TV critic of *The New York Times*, is one of those who apparently feels that an American newsman has no stake in whether America wins its wars: "A journalist who decides that his job is to help win a war, rather than just to describe it, is better off enlisting."<sup>8</sup>

On 2 March 1991, in the aftermath of the Gulf War, a reporter on a National Public Radio program, his voice quivering with indignation, revealed to listeners that the American military had "used" the supposedly "free and objective" American press to delude the Iraqis about the direction from which the assault on Kuwait would come. What is worse, the deception was successful! He made no mention of the beneficiaries of the ruse, his young countrymen who carried out the assault, many of whom presumably owed their lives to the ruse.

When a nation has put the lives of its citizens at stake by embarking on military action, can it in conscience permit members of the press to report as they will, knowing bad news or graphic exposure to the horrors of war may undermine its people's resolve and help the enemy prevail? I think not. A nation at war, especially a democratic one highly responsive to public opinion, cannot afford the luxury of unfettered reporting from the front.

It is curious that this is not obvious to citizens of a society in which propaganda, in the form of advertising, plays such a crucial role, a society that can fairly lay claim to having invented the artful science of public relations. For instance, it is an article of faith with many that nothing more substantive than clever manipulation of sound-bites put George Bush in the presidency. Business and industry could not exist, as we know them, without advertising to create and expand markets. Political action groups and organizations of every description from oil companies to AIDS-research advocates expend billions annually in the struggle to mold public opinion. As a nation we have no doubt that popular opinion matters immensely and that it can be manipulated by controlling what the public sees and hears. Reporters know this and do not doubt it is true in war as well as peace.

Christopher Hanson, writing under the pseudonym "William Boot," makes my point:

From the start the Gulf War had a strong psychological dimension. The Pentagon evidently saw control of the news media as an essential element in its psywar strategy—keeping the public united behind the war until the will of the Iraqi army was broken. Mounting casualties had been a major factor in turning the American public against the Korean and Vietnam wars, so casualty reporting was an important p.r. challenge. One of the Pentagon's first moves was to end ceremonies at the Dover, Delaware, Air Force base to which corpses in body bags are delivered.

He goes on to explain the seeming paradox that while the public wanted news of the war in the Gulf, and applauded the job done by the media, most also believed "the military should impose even tighter restrictions on war coverage." Why? Because they wanted the war to be won "quickly and cleanly" and believed the media "could hamper the war effort and undermine prospects for speedy victory"—sentiments of no concern, apparently, to Hanson/Boot. He concludes that "the Pentagon's rules should be broken at every opportunity in order to get accurate, independent accounts of the war." By so doing, reporters "shall have acquitted themselves with honor," albeit "the public might hate them."

Arthur Rowse, former associate editor of *U.S. News and World Report*, similarly attests to the power of the press to shape public opinion and the course of events. Deploring the extent to which, in his view, the media had tilted toward the President's position in the prelude to the Gulf War, he explains:

By the time the media assumed a more aggressive and skeptical posture, however, it was too late; the die had been cast. President Bush had gotten the backing of many nations. . . . There can be no doubt that the news media played a major role in driving up Bush's approval ratings in the beginning when press coverage was so favorable. It was during those early weeks, too, that the chimera of war moved from possibility to probability. From there it was only a short step to necessity.<sup>10</sup>

The idea of a free press ranks so highly in our pantheon of values that we are exceedingly loathe to interfere with it for any reason. But the fact of being at war creates a circumstance comparable to that arising from the possibility of fire in a crowded theater. As the need to protect lives of patrons in the theater implies limiting guarantees of free speech, so the need to sustain the national resolve in wartime justifies a similar limitation.

The immediate objection is that a democracy cannot function if the community is denied information relevant to choices it might make. It must be remembered, however, that no more in peace than in war do we espouse

---

***When ethical imperatives clash, which should demand the reporters' first allegiance—those of their country, or those of their trade?***

---

direct democracy. We favor a representative system, in part at least to ensure that government can pursue policies temporarily unpopular. We have purposefully devised a structure that protects the ship of state from heaving and yawing with every zig and zag of public opinion. Quadrennial presidential elections, staggered legislative terms, multiple levels of authority, the courts and constitutions (state and federal), all insulate policy from excessive dependence on popular whim. This enables us to pursue many worthwhile objectives, foreign and domestic, that much of the public disapproves much of the time. For instance—taxes to reduce deficits, busing to integrate schools, trade policies that hurt domestic industries, race discrimination to overcome racial inequity, long-term aid to unpopular foreign regimes, et cetera. In none of these instances, of course, would anyone suggest the public should be denied full information, quite the contrary. Ordinarily, the problem is to persuade the citizenry to pay attention and understand the implications of different choices.

But the insulation from shifts in public opinion that serves our peacetime needs is inadequate to meet the basically different challenge posed by war. In time of peace, though both sides often insist their cause is of the utmost urgency, long experience teaches us there is always time to back and haul, sometimes completely reversing course. As proponents of a democratic republic, while acknowledging our system may be inefficient, we accept that as the necessary cost for making the citizens' wishes the *raison d'être* of the state. The history of warfare, however, strongly suggests that the nation that is single-minded about its objectives and steadfast in its resolve will triumph over one that is uncertain of its purpose and vacillating in its pursuit. The outcome of the Vietnam engagement offers a recent example.

Because of war's special character, the importance of full debate prior to engagement can scarcely be overstated. Though we necessarily delegate to the Commander-in-Chief power to react quickly and decisively in certain critical situations, the pre-Gulf War argument over his prerogatives vis-à-vis those of the Congress ought to be settled, unequivocally, in favor of the legislative branch. The fact that the Senate was consulted and a majority approved the undertaking in the Gulf was important to the high level of support the action enjoyed. The taking of human lives, our own or those of an



enemy, even on a small scale, is so repellent that the decision to do so should be favored by a large proportion of the population.

Though I believe the argument for limiting press freedom to be sound in the case of extended engagements in which the nation's vital interests are at stake, I think one would conclude differently in the case of minor skirmishes such as the Panama police action and the Grenada affair. Almost by definition, such excursions are over before any political reaction can affect the military situation, while the fact of a fully informed public ensures that political leaders will be held accountable in the near term, as they should be. By way of contrast, the sheer scale of the US deployment in the Gulf War places it in the category of a vital-interest engagement, despite the ease with which we finally prevailed militarily.

With the end of the Cold War, many once-settled questions about our national defense require reexamination. One such is certainly the role of the press in wartime, particularly in view of the fact that the relevant news-reporting technology has outstripped our understanding of its implications. Though we may now be reasonably confident that all-out war between the former Soviet Union and ourselves is unlikely, little else is firmly established. We can be quite sure, however, that we will see a succession of armed conflicts in various unpredictable parts of the globe over the next few decades. Even assuming an increasing role for United Nations, it is likely that the armed forces of the United States will be called upon to act, alone or with allies, in many of these. To succeed, the nation must be able to stay the course. Few will doubt that a high and sustained level of public support is essential to this end. It is similarly apparent that the graphic, instant war-reporting made possible by modern technology puts civilian morale at great risk of rapid erosion, however considered, just, and necessary the purpose of the military action. It is therefore of prime importance that those responsible for our national security—civilians and military, press and public—consider this problem now and work to achieve consensus about the degree and kind of restraint to be placed upon the press when we are next at war.

#### NOTES

1. Michael Massing, "Debriefings," *Columbia Journalism Review*, 30 (May/June 1991), 23-24.
2. Tom Wicker, "Lincoln and the Gulf," *The New York Times*, 13 February 1991, p. A23.
3. Anna Quindlen, "Informed Opinion," *The New York Times*, 10 January 1991, p. A25. For an extended press perspective on the war, see John J. Fialka, *Hotel Warriors: Covering the Gulf War* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1992).
4. Robert Wright, "No Man is an Island," *The New Republic*, 18 February 1991, p. 66.
5. Philip Caputo, "War Torn," *The New York Times Magazine*, 24 February 1991, p. 36.
6. Michael Kelly, "Highway to Hell," *The New Republic*, 1 April 1991, p. 14.
7. Arthur Lubow, "Read Some About It," *The New Republic*, 18 March 1991, p. 25.
8. Walter Goodman, "Arnett," *Columbia Journalism Review*, 30 (May/June 1991), 31.
9. William Boot [Christopher Hanson], "The Press Stands Alone," *Columbia Journalism Review*, 29 (March/April 1991), 23-24.
10. Arthur Rowse, "The Guns of War," *Columbia Journalism Review*, 29 (March/April 1991), 28.