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THE MEDIA'S ROLE IN COMBATTING TERRORISM

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL GARY P. DRUGLEY
United States Army

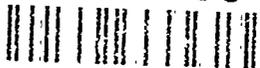
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**THE MEDIA'S ROLE IN COMBATTING TERRORISM
AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT'**

by

**Lieutenant Colonel Gary P. Drugley
United States Army**

**Lieutenant Colonel Larry F. Icenogle
Project Adviser**

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**U.S. Army War College
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania 17013**

ABSTRACT

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The media's coverage of terrorist events has been, for some time, the source of a great deal of discussion, controversy and debate. What the media's proper role should be surfaces after each and every terrorist incident as if it were a new phenomenon. The issues are continually written about, discussed and debated-- but never solved. Technology, with its capability for on the scene instantaneous coverage, has only served to heighten this controversy. This study project reviews the issues surrounding the media's profit motives, first amendment rights, the public's right to know and the authorities/counterterrorist organization's requirement for secrecy. It also briefly reviews the hostages' families' right to privacy throughout the terrorist incident. Finally this study makes several recommendations which could help to bring this aging problem to closure.

INTRODUCTION

TERRORISTS VIEW RESCUE ATTEMPT ON TV: ALL HOSTAGES AND WOULD-BE RESCUERS SLAIN

Could this be next week's/month's/year's lead story on the nation's evening news or a headline in the morning newspapers? It may very well be the feature story of both if media and government authorities do not soon find a way to start talking with instead of at each other. News media personnel and counterterrorist authorities must develop appreciation, trust and respect for each other's roles, duties and responsibilities. Otherwise, we may well experience both a serious and avoidable tragedy. How, when and what to report must be agreed to and understood by both parties well in advance of an actual terrorist event.

The distinct possibility of the above headline becoming reality enticed me into exploring the subject of "The Media's Role in Combatting Terrorism." I do not want to imply, with the selection of my title, that the news media should somehow assume the lead role in fighting terrorism. I do, however, want to propose that there is a way for the media to be as supportive of authorities fighting terrorism as they are now, albeit unwillingly, of terrorist organizations. At the very least, reports of terrorist activities should not cause hostages or counterterrorist personnel undue harm or death.

First, let's try to agree upon a precise definition of terrorism. A universally accepted definition of terrorism does not exist. For one reason, "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter."¹ A precise and

universally endorsed definition of terrorism is, however, not absolutely critical to a discussion on "The Media's Role in Combatting Terrorism." The issues surrounding the media's roles would exist regardless of any given definition of terrorism. For the purpose of this paper, the U.S. government's definition of terrorism will suffice:

"The threat or use of violence for political purposes by individuals or groups, whether acting for or in opposition to established government authority, when such actions are intended to shock or intimidate a target group wider than the immediate victims."²

International Terrorism is further defined as :

"Terrorism conducted with the support of a foreign government or organization and/or directed against foreign nations, institutions, or governments."³

THE MEDIA

To understand the news media's role in combatting terrorism, we must first review the protections it enjoys in democratic societies and examine the primary purpose for the media's existence. Is it the public's government watchdog? Some critics would claim it must be, inasmuch as it has brought down presidents (more recently generals?), changed the course (outcome?) of wars and shaped our political/cultural attitudes. Is the media practicing their first amendment rights and as such simply fulfilling the public's right to know? This is always the first argument to surface when any form of restrictions, censorships or bans are suggested. With the seemingly endless proliferation of media organizations – each with its own agenda, individual beliefs and political persuasion– I would suggest the media is providing a

service for which a significant number of people in society are willing to pay. Thus, beyond public service, profits become an issue. Media organizations are businesses-- sometimes big businesses. Collectively they are doing no more or no less than we in society demand of them as dictated through our reading, viewing and buying habits. That is, the media truly serves the public. Or what the public wants, the public gets from the media.

In a free and democratic society, the media (both print and electronic) are in the very competitive business of selling information or providing entertainment. News makes up, in varying degrees, part of what each of these organizations sell. They sell information and news in exchange for advertising dollars with every expectation of making a profit. The idea of serving as society's conscience or the public's government watchdog is admirable. But certainly these idealistic and civic motives are secondary to ratings, circulations and profits. Profitmaking seems the only common thread amongst the existing multitude of diverse media organizations. Interestingly enough, this argument rarely surfaces when the media's proper role is being debated.

The fact that they are in business to turn a profit does not make them any less dedicated or professional. It is most assuredly possible both to make a profit and to fulfill any one or all of the roles attributed to or claimed by them. The media's role in combatting terrorism must, however, be determined in the context of the corporation's/company's ultimate profit motive. The media must continue to exist, unsubsidized by governments. Otherwise, they will have no role to play, adversarial or otherwise, in a free and democratic society.

DOES A MEDIA PROBLEM EXIST?

Certainly not all organizations fighting terrorism are necessarily part of some government. All organizations, private and government, performing their mission of combatting terrorism do, however, face very similar issues when it comes to dealing with the media. I will, therefore, lump them under the titles of authorities or counterterrorist units and address them only from the standpoint of the media's impact upon their actions and organizations.

If you were to ask either media or government authorities whether a problem existed in their professional relationship with the other, you would hear an overwhelming "YES!" Lieutenant General Bernard E Trainor, USMC (Ret.), who worked as a military correspondent for *The New York Times* after his military retirement, wryly observes that "The credo of the military seems to have become 'duty, honor, country, and hate the media'."4 It was clear from my readings that this credo goes well beyond military suspicion of the media. Since there is nearly unanimous agreement that a problem does in fact exist, is the "problem" something more than a healthy and natural adversarial relationship?

In "The Secret Love Affair Between the Press and Government," Walter Guzzardi argues that it is simply a healthy adversarial relationship. He offers an interesting analogy of "As in sex and psychoanalysis, the displeasure of either party (much less both parties) defines the experience."5 He goes on to say that "Government officials must have the media to get across the message, and the media must have the officials, for they are

irreplaceable sources."6 He concludes that "Both press and government are vital partners in the democratic experiment."7

General Trainor, having served in both the government and the media, offers this comparison of military officers and journalists:

"Both are idealistic, bright, totally dedicated to their professions, and technically proficient. They work long hours willingly under arduous conditions, crave recognition, and feel they are underpaid."8

Thus the similarities of the personalities within the professions and their need for each other would appear to make them ideally suited for a long and lasting relationship.

But the issue is surely not so simple. Media critics argue that the problem goes well beyond an adversarial relationship. They frequently call for outright censorship or total blackouts. Some argue that live and real time coverage of terrorist events involving innocent victims places both the hostages and would-be rescuers in unnecessary danger. While discussing the 1985 Beirut hostage drama, a senior White house official said:

"TV probably is going to cost the lives of a number of people in a dangerous situation like this sometime in the future. I think it's awful."9

Henry Kissinger, former Secretary of State, stated:

"It is a humiliation for the United States to have American citizens trotted out one by one, being forced to say they're being treated well. I think what the media ought to consider is not carry anything, including the terrorists."10

Besides noting unnecessary danger, such critics contend that extensive media coverage encourages copycatting, gives terrorists political leverage,

confers status on terrorist leaders, and increases the public's fear for their personal safety. Yet such fears are not altogether without some documented examples. The 1985 TWA flight 847 being the third plane hijacked to Beirut within a matter of just a few days lends some support to the copycat theory. The public's opinion of the PLO and its leaders was certainly changed after the 1972 Munich Olympics Massacre; from then on, the PLO was a force to be reckoned and negotiated with. For better or worse, Yasser Arafat then gained at least dubious status as a "world leader." Media personnel understand these arguments. Sometimes they concur with them. Bob Simon of CBS, during a report on TV's coverage of terrorism, admitted:

" We're part of the problem, we're taken hostage just as the president is taken hostage. The agenda is being set by a bunch of gangsters in the Middle East." 11

Thus, I generally agree with Walter Guzzardi's position that the press and government need each other. Further, their relationship, by its very nature, is at best adversarial. However, when it comes to terrorist coverage, the relationship becomes so intricate that I am convinced the problem goes well beyond their being adversaries. Loss of life as a result of terrorists learning from TV of the actions by would-be rescuers would be tragic. Loss of life as a result of actions taken for the express purpose of improved ratings, increased circulations or a larger profit is likewise totally unacceptable.

Sander Vanocur, after studying the problem, contends the functions of the opposing organizations are so different that "I am unable to provide the assurance many may seek—namely, that the aid of the media can be enlisted in the battle against international terrorism."12 But I am not so pessimistic. I

believe that a solution which is at least marginally acceptable to both parties is attainable. I subscribe to this philosophy: " Real difficulties can be overcome; it is only the imaginary ones that are unconquerable."¹³ I will therefore tread where others have before and hope to offer a renewed sense of urgency and maybe a new insight into resolving a problem which has been debated, studied, argued over and written about – but never solved.

WHY A PROBLEM

If it is true that the media and government need each other, then the relationship between the terrorists and media must be a match made in heaven. The literature detailing the terrorist's need for media coverage has all but reduced this debate to a certainty. One author has gone so far as to claim that "terrorism is so ideally suited to television that the medium would have invented the phenomenon if it had not already existed."¹⁴ Given that a competitive, profit-motivated medium has found itself between two powerful organizations, both vying for its attention, a clash with one or both was all but inevitable. I will address several of the issues which consistently surface, in one form or another, as a result of the media's current coverage of terrorism.

DISTRUST:

Distrust of one profession for the other, for whatever reasons, is the underlying issue which must be resolved if there is ever to be any hope of eliminating the coverage problem. Many indicators of this distrust have been noted in great detail in any number of books, magazines and newspaper articles. Distrust drives media personnel to breach established rules and security, to hound victims' families, to interview terrorists at-length and

eagerly react to each new terrorist demand. The media acknowledges doing some or all of this. They justify their actions with the explanation that the authorities are preventing them from reporting the truth. Thus they must seek the truth outside the established rules. They argue that they are only seeking to verify facts so the *people's right to know* will be fulfilled. That is, they claim they are magnanimously performing a public service.

But having caught the media breaching their security, authorities have become very guarded about what they tell the press. They claim that they are not withholding information, but simply safeguarding the lives of both their people and those who may have been taken hostage. Such authorities are convinced the pressure of a scoop will eventually override even a good journalist's concern for security. In its extreme, this guarded pessimism and skepticism has resulted in calls for limiting access, for banning or for outright censorship of the media. Yonah Alexander thus characterizes the authorities' feelings about the press's actions at a terrorist event:

" In every terrorist incident an inevitable critical relationship develops between the media responsible for reporting the episode and the law enforcement personnel handling the incident. Not infrequently, the media, especially broadcasters, hinder effective police responses to terrorist activities. The media can, for instance, have three detrimental effects in seige-management situations: interfere with on-going operations; exacerbate the pressure on the responsible authorities and contribute to impaired decision-making; and harass relatives of victims by pressing for interviews."15

TRAINING:

To search out the deepest reasons for this distrust, I started looking for documentation on the training these two professions have received on the other's terrorism requirements. Beyond a couple of seminars where selected leaders of each profession have met and openly discussed coverage issues, I found no evidence of an honest effort by either profession to come to grips with the other's needs.

Journalists— typically young, conscientious, energetic professionals— are encouraged and rewarded for being aggressive and unrelenting in their investigative reporting of government fraud, waste and abuse. Verifying facts and figures and being as thorough as possible when investigating the expenditure of our tax dollars are journalistic virtues encouraged by all of society. If the investigation embarrasses or costs some authority figure his job, the public applauds it as well deserved. The media corporation breaking the story will be elated at such good fortune and anxiously await the release of the next ratings and profit-and-loss-statements. In a peaceful and bureaucratic setting, where no lives are at stake, a profit-motivated corporation could serve no higher role in our free and democratic society than to expose inefficiencies and corruption, thereby protecting our tax dollars.

Now put this young, hard charging journalist, who has been rewarded for being tough and unrelenting in his quest for a story, as the first on the scene of a terrorist event and his role takes on a whole new dimension. Terrorist events rarely occur in the same locations of the world. This is not a profound observation, but it does have a direct bearing on the problem surrounding the media's coverage. When the terrorist event does occur, the

journalists at the location are frequently placed in the position of covering their first terrorist event. They are, for the first time, faced with circumstances where other people's lives may very well rest on what they report and how they report it. Journalists who until this time have been rewarded for their aggressiveness are now hustling for the scoop while at the same time perhaps unconsciously making decisions about someone else's lives.

They are often unaware the information being provided may be detrimental to the situation in general and to the hostages and/or rescuers in particular. The seasoned editor— who is responsible for what gets aired and who in the past has withheld detrimental information— has all but been eliminated from the news reporting system. With the advent of "live" reports, the senior editor's reduced role has placed even greater pressure on the young journalist at the scene to get it right the first time. A senior editor can certainly fire, after the fact, an irresponsible reporter. I would suggest, however, that this would serve as little consolation to a victim's mourning families. A couple of the numerous documented examples should serve to underscore the seriousness of the problem.

"The most damaging case concerned the TV reporter who caught sight of a basket, lifted up by rope, to the fifth floor, where, the world later learned, some people evaded the round-up and barricaded themselves in a room. Their presence apparently was not known to the gunmen, who held their prisoners on the eighth floor but patrolled the lower floors until late Wednesday afternoon. The gunmen were probably informed of the TV reporter's scoop by their fellow Hanafis who monitored the news media outside the captured buildings. Fortunately the gunmen did not break through the door."16

A second example shows how careless reporting perilously exacerbated a hostage situation:

" One prominent Washington newscaster called Khaalis a Black Muslim. Khaalis, whose family was murdered by Black Muslims, flew into a rage and stormed into the room where we hostages were held. He declared that he would kill one of us in retaliation for the newsman's words. The police, meanwhile, advised the newscaster to promptly issue an apology, and Khaalis was eventually mollified."¹⁷

Media blunders have led to even more tragic results. In one case the media, in all likelihood, caused the death of an airline pilot when they reported he was transmitting messages over his cockpit radio.¹⁸ Thus it is obvious that terrorist reporting is extremely sensitive business. The people's right to know must be balanced with others' rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Satisfying these apparently conflicting demands is worthy of nothing less than our collective best effort.

On the other hand, local authorities at the scene of any given terrorist site are, like media personnel, untrained and probably involved in their first such situation. Not only is the terrorist event new to them, they are also breaking virgin ground when it comes to dealing with the media and its reporting requirements. Units charged with neutralizing of terrorist events are, in fact, very specialized and highly trained for their counterterrorist missions. They are not, however, highly trained in dealing with the media; in some cases they may even be forbidden from dealing with the media. Given the inexperience of local authorities and the lack of cross-training for both the media and specialized units, you have all the ingredients for a true disaster. Clearly training for terrorist reporting should be something more than the existing on-the-job training conducted at the barricades.

CREDIBILITY:

To remain credible, all journalists must publish or report information which can stand the test of time and careful scrutiny. Information later found to be inaccurate may hurt ratings and therefore profits; ultimately, inaccurate journalists are given the opportunity to seek employment elsewhere. For this very reason, journalists prefer to view firsthand the subject or situation on which they are reporting. If they cannot personally view the events, they strive to get reliable sources to corroborate the facts. If in the process of corroborating the story they receive what they perceive as conflicting information, more aggressive actions generally result. Again, this absolute need for accuracy drives reporters to breach security, hound families and deal directly with terrorists. In reaction, authorities call for bans, blackouts and censorship.

Highly trained and specialized counterterrorist units do not lend themselves to publicity. Simply showing the faces of unit members would at least compromise their usefulness. Worse yet, it could result in their deaths. Covert or counterterrorist clandestine operations by their very nature cannot be filmed. Thus, their plans, preparations and actions are not verifiable by the media. During previous bureaucratic investigative reporting efforts, many journalists experience authorities' stalling tactics. So they insist that all the information should be shared. Such information could then be reviewed by journalists; then they should decide if reporting it would violate security or endanger someone's life. After all, they argue, they would never do anything to jeopardize the mission or intentionally harm anyone. But their strict limitations on *intentionally harm* and *someone else's life* causes me the most concern. If they unintentionally harm an operation or cost someone else their

life, does this somehow make their decisions acceptable? Do we not punish others for unintentionally harming or killing someone? (Consider drunken drivers.)

During the media's coverage of the 1985 Beirut hostage interview incident, journalists crawled over tables of food attempting to get a more advantageous position. Are these same journalists capable of making decisions with the authorities' and hostages' best interests in mind? Think about it for a minute: A journalist approaches you with meat and potatoes on his knees saying "Trust me with all your plans, I would not do anything to harm you". At the Beirut incident, the terrorists were even so appalled by the reporters' conduct that they removed the hostages and threatened to cancel the interview. Afraid of being banned by the terrorists and therefore losing their story (profit?), the reporters apologized. So the interview resumed.

Thus the terrorists, the authorities and the media at the scene all desire to control what the viewing public receives. Reporters, controlling the cameras, are faced with one group providing virtually unlimited information while the other conceals all but the most obvious details of their plans and actions. The terrorists' statements and/or demands are difficult at best to verify through independent sources. The journalists, pressured with the upcoming national time spot, must report something. So they start by simply repeating the terrorists' demands. They go on to explain how authorities will not share with them their plans for dealing with these demands. On the surface, this certainly seems like one-sided reporting. Yet the media "covers" the terrorists' statements and demands without challenge, all the while insisting on knowing in minute detail the counterterrorist's information.

TECHNOLOGY:

The capability of instantly transmitting scenes of a terrorist event from anywhere in the world to everyone's living room has given the media a major role, like it or not, in terrorist events. This ability for instantaneous coverage has caused the most controversy at the barricade. The media claims to be using technology in doing a better job of satisfying the people's right to know. They argue that it helps to prevent panic, dispels rumors and reassures the public of the continuing existence and effectiveness of the state and government. But I believe that their fear of being scooped (translated into ratings and profits), rather than the public's immediate need to know, is the driving factor behind the decision to go with 'live' feeds from a terrorist scene.

The government counters that society would be just as well served if the coverage was delayed for a specific period. The delay would provide time for footage to be reviewed by more seasoned media personnel, those not caught in the heat of battle. The delay would help to insure that information beneficial to the terrorists was not released. Technology, for all the good it has provided, has exacerbated the distrust between the warring parties. However, as L. Paul Bremer III states in Department of States Policy no. 986:

" But we must not fall into the trap of confusing technology with people. The medium is not the message. The message is what reporters and editors decide should be aired, decide what should be printed. What you and I see, hear, and read about terrorism in mass media is the result of multiple decisions made by cameramen, reporters, producers, copywriters, editors, and managers throughout the news industry. When we explore the role of media in terrorism, we are in fact exploring the judgments of dozens of individuals."19

Technology has also provided the terrorist with the capability of introducing unheard of destruction. The fact that plastic explosives have become much harder to detect is the least of the problems created by technology. The terrorist's capability of employing chemical, biological or nuclear weapons must now be considered when reporting future actions. Not only has technology provided the terrorist with the capability for greater destruction, it has also given him the capability to choreograph his own terrorist production. With a portable TV, radio and walkie talkie, he can direct, for the whole world to watch, as he plays out of his political grievances. The hypothetical headline which opened this paper would pale by comparison to the one which would air if a reporter made a blunder on a live feed in a situation involving nuclear weapons.

SOLUTIONS

The difficulties between the media and government authorities are not new. Following criticism of medical care at the civil war battle of Antietam, Surgeon Jonathan Letterman complained to MG. McClellan, CG of the Army of the Potomac that:

"The surgery of these battlefields has been pronounced by some journals butchery, gross misrepresentations of the conduct of medical officers have been scattered broadcast over the country, causing deep anxiety to those who had relatives in the army."²⁰

Despite the long history of the problem, a solution may be no more than a few difficult decisions away. A lot has been written about the role of the media in combatting terrorism. Each new terrorist event renews the debate

of censorship, the first amendment and the public's right to know. To date, however, very little has been done to resolve the problem. The actions taken so far have, for the most part, been initiated by the media in the form of self-restraint guidelines. It is highly unlikely that such guidelines will go very far toward bringing peace of mind to either side at the next terrorist event. As Eleanor Randolph stated, "The call for restraint is one that seems mostly to be recognized as important, then dismissed as impossible."²¹ Edwin M. Yoder Jr. offers the following analogy about the utility of self-restraint guidelines: "Television is about as capable of self-discipline in its chase after good footage, as a dog is in chasing a rabbit."²²

I started my research at the height (Nov 1990) of the debate over the Desert Storm news coverage. This was a different type of war, to be sure. But its coverage raised many of the same issues which surround the controversy of terrorism coverage. The debate between the fighting force's need for security and the public's right to know has not, at any time in recent history, been more openly discussed. It appears, at least to this point, that a majority of the public believes the media is reporting too much and that they may even be helping the enemy. Thus with media procedures as a backdrop, I have developed recommended solutions to the Media's Role in Combatting Terrorism. How violators of established press pool and other rules are dealt with after Desert Storm will dictate the standards for coverage of all volatile events for the foreseeable future. The problem may be dated, but there has never been a better time to seek closure.

Training of selected personnel from both the media and the counterterrorist organizations must be a first step. These people, once trained

and accredited, would form a press pool and be dispatched to terrorist events. They would be responsible, at the scene, for determining the reporting requirements. The pool footage would be fed to all media organizations with the stipulation that a 12-hour delay be implemented before making the information public. There should be no live reports until the event has been neutralized and everyone is out of danger. Reporters not part of the accredited pool should be kept a considerable distance from the scene in order not to distract officials in the performance of their jobs. The government should pay for the training and provide a salary differential to organizations maintaining a terrorist-trained reporter on their staff. Press pool membership will be from corporations of both the print and electronic media; it will be rotated among those choosing to participate. Journalists violating the established rules must be dealt with in a court of law, not unlike others who violate established rules and laws.

In addition to the establishment of a trained press pool, family security units should be established. Such units, again trained in the needs of the media, would be dispatched, by request, to the homes of the victims' immediate families. They would provide basic human rights protection to members of a hostage's family. Thus we would ensure that all victims' families have the same right to privacy as that willingly afforded by the media to the families of the CBS crew who disappeared during Desert Storm.

The media will almost certainly reject any form of restraint as censorship. They will argue that they will not be believable in anything they report if they are restricted in this area. Yet I am convinced the American public understands the need for security and will give up their right to instantaneous knowledge in exchange for safeguarding personnel involved in

neutralization of the terrorist event. Just as they would not have wanted a mistake, intentional or otherwise, to have cost the life of one of their loved ones in Saudi Arabia, neither would they find it acceptable for someone else's loved one to be jeopardized by injudicious reporting from a terrorist site.

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