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NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
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TELLING THE STORY:
IMPACT OF MILITARY-MEDIA RELATIONS
ON THE OPERATIONAL COMMANDER

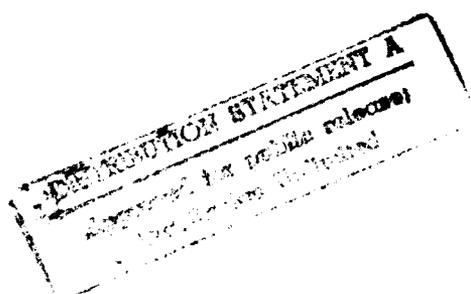
by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Operations Department.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.



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Abstract of

TELLING THE STORY: IMPACT OF MILITARY-MEDIA RELATIONS
ON THE OPERATIONAL COMMANDER

The history of military-media relations began as and remains one of suspicion and distrust. This paper examines the military-media relationship and its impact on the operational commander's planning process in military operations. A brief review of the military-media relationship during significant points in military history is provided. The mistakes and successes observed from history are extracted as a foundation to build the military-media relationship for current military contingencies.

Defining the degree of access that will be afforded to the media will ultimately rest with the operational commander. The operational commander must involve himself when dealing with the media. His direct support will bring positive support in the military-media relationship. Consideration, cooperation, and communication with the media are basic principles that provide the foundation for a good working relationship with the media. The operational commander can significantly enhance his aims by incorporating these principles into his planning process.

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**TELLING THE STORY:
IMPACT OF MILITARY-MEDIA RELATIONS ON THE OPERATIONAL COMMANDER**

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Navy Seals and Marines who stormed the beach at Mogadishu to start Operation Restore Hope in Somalia were met, not by hostile enemy gunfire, but by equally dangerous "live" news coverage. However comical the beach landing may have appeared, it illustrated that recent technological advances have changed the way that the media will cover and report military operations and combat. The Mogadishu beach landing demonstrated the media's ability to be "on scene" and provide live coverage of military operations that can be seen and heard around the world.

Though the media has played significant roles in past conflicts involving U.S. forces, never before has the potential impact been so great. An operational commander in modern military operations no longer has the option of ignoring the power and influence of the media. Operational commanders must appreciate the potent effect the media can have on a military situation and be prepared to work with the media during the conflict to ensure the effect is advantageous to the military.

This paper will focus on military-media relations and the impact this relationship has upon the operational planning and decision making process. This paper begins by examining the

dilemma between a democracy's guarantee of a free press and the military's need for operational security. Next, this paper will analyze the historical impact upon the rules that now govern military-media relations and examines the operational commander's personal role in such relations. Finally this paper provides recommendations for the operational commander and his staff in managing the media in a theater of operation.

In conclusion, the operational commander must recognize the value of planning for media relations and the method of doing so. Future operations must consider, develop and execute a definite plan of action for media relations. A prudent understanding and management of the media by the operational commander can aid in achieving the accomplishment of the military operational objective. In short, good military-media relations are a necessary part of modern military operations.

CHAPTER II

THE MEDIA'S RIGHT TO ACCESS - THE DILEMMA

The military-media relationship has traditionally been an awkward one. Since its inception, the relationship has been filled with skepticism and distrust. It is difficult to pinpoint the source of this discord. However, the parity of media access in a military theater of operation has, in most instances, been the underlying cause of the poor relations between the two institutions.

The media can be seen as the medium that connects the public and the government with the military. The media needs exposure to the military in order to ensure this connection is complete. A 1985 task force on the military and the news media noted:

...the presence of journalist in war zones is not a luxury, but a necessity. Imperfect though it is, our independent press serves as the vital link between the battlefield and the home front, reporting on the military's successes, failures and sacrifices. By doing so, the media has helped to foster citizen involvement and support, which presidents, admirals, and generals have recognized as essential to military success.¹

Unfortunately, this point is not well understood, for many within the military continue to view the media with suspicion and distrust. As the task force discovered, the roots of this animosity began during the Vietnam War:

"No U.S. conflict since the Civil War was to stir so much hostility among the military toward the media as the drawn-out conflict in Vietnam. Indeed, some commentators (and generals) were retrospectively to conclude that the war was lost on American's television screens and in the newspapers,

not on the battlefield."²

This animosity has caused the military to oftentimes restrict the media's access in a military operation. Conversely, the media launches a public campaign against the military arguing that the public's "right to know", implicit in the First Amendment, should predominate over military necessity. The theme of the argument begins with the basic premise that the public must remain properly informed in order for a democratic government to function by the will of the governed. In order that the public remains informed the media, as the public's representative, must have unrestricted access to report upon government actions. An independent press is the only means of providing the public with the information with which to judge government action. Restricting the press, therefore, undermines a democratic government.

Conversely, many military officers hold that the concept of "the people's right to know" is not constitutionally mandated but rather is an invention made up for the convenience of the press.³ Military leaders point out that in certain circumstances courts have ruled that the public's "right to know" can be restricted. An American Legal Foundation evaluation of court cases involving the First Amendment concluded that the courts have not held that the media has as absolute right of access to report on government conduct.⁴

Therefore, the people's right to know is not absolute. National security dictates that the public does not have the

right to know and be told of all government actions. If the publication of material would present a clear and present danger to the U.S., it should not be published and the people should have no right to know about it.⁵

Hence, the fundamental issue becomes how much access should the media have to a military operation and how will the operational commander handle the dilemma of determining the amount of access? Operational security and troop safety are compelling arguments in favor of restricting media access. Courts are sensitive to the need for military secrecy where forfeiting the element of surprise of a military operation can result in greater loss of life or even cost an operation its success. In a long series of cases the Supreme Court has ruled that the liberties of the First Amendment must be balanced against governmental restrictions made legitimate by a compelling state interest.⁶ The trick is to define the limits of national interest and avoid unnecessary confrontation with a media that should be excluded from the battlefield.

The operational commander's primary responsibility is the success of the mission. And if, in his judgement, the success of the mission would be jeopardized by journalists roaming the battlefield, then he has not only the discretion but the duty to exclude those reporters from his field of operation. Where operational safety and troop security are concerns, it should seem clear that the media have no right of access to the military operation.⁷ On the other hand, allowing media access to an

operation can prove to be beneficial. "The media can play many positive roles. One is to inform. Another is to enlighten. A third is to uplift. A fourth is to educate. A fifth is to criticize. A sixth is to help decision makers make better policy. A seventh is to encourage policy makers to become better planners, strategists, and visionaries."⁸ The operational commander needs to recognize these benefits of having an informed media. The potential of the media to convey messages, deceive the enemy, and to gather information can be useful in the prosecution of a military operation.

Whether and to what degree the press should be allowed access depends upon each unique situation. However, an operational commander must consider the impact that the denial of media access will have on public opinion and support. In such circumstances, the military must be prepared to handle the consequences of the media when access is denied. [The role of the media in Operation "Urgent Fury," the invasion of Grenada, clearly illustrates how denying access to the media can create unpopular support for the military. Failure to plan for the media's involvement in this operation was featured as the story rather than the success of the mission.] The operational commander must remember that the media is necessary in a democratic society's ability to wage war. The media can act as a two-edged sword. Without the media, the successes of the military would not easily be brought to the public's attention. Obtaining media support ensures that there is an informed public.

An informed public matters in terms of morale and in terms of the government's ability to sustain public support.

CHAPTER III

MILITARY - MEDIA RELATIONSHIP TRENDS: IMPACT

Historically the military has approached military-media relations in several different ways. Lessons-learned from past situations can provide a workable framework from which the operational commander can build ground rules for future military situations. This section will present a historical review of the changing nature of media coverage of military operations during significant points in U.S. military history.

WORLD WAR I: As soon as the United States entered World War I, restraints on press coverage were imposed. Ten days after war was declared against Germany, President Wilson asserted that any publication providing "aid or comfort" to the enemy would be subject to prosecution for treason. By the time U.S. troops were in Europe, broad censorship of war coverage was instituted and strictly enforced.⁹ Press censorship by the Allies was so restrictive that frustrated reporters sought news from sources they developed elsewhere, including the Germans.¹⁰ Citing troop safety, the military refused to answer media questions, even when the inquiries were general in nature. In spite of the stringent censorship restrictions, the media tended to be heavily patriotic and supportive of the war effort. There was little inclination to question the performance of the nation's political and military leaders because most papers had embraced the notion that

America was fighting to make the world safe for democracy."¹¹

WORLD WAR II: This was the first war to be brought "live" to the American public, by radio. Radio broadcasts, along with the print media, greatly influenced public opinion. However, as in WWI, throughout most of the war support remained strong for military action against an "evil enemy". Emerging from an isolationist attitude, the United States' public mobilized and enthusiastically supported the war effort. The media generally sought to report on little more than the progress of the war effort and victories from the front line of American troops. The years between 1941 and 1945 represented the high water mark of cooperation between the military and the media.¹² The media maintained a loyal relationship with the military, honoring their requests for censorship and accepting military practices and policies.

VIETNAM: The Vietnam War saw an evolution in news reporting and marked the start of a new relationship between the media and the military. "The miracle of television that brought the Dallas Cowboys into American living rooms also placed the stench, gore, and tragedy of the Vietnam War right in the laps of the American people. Members of the news media seemed convinced that they alone had discovered that war is ugly and felt compelled to share their discovery with every American Citizen."¹³

As a result of the media's almost total freedom from censorship during the Vietnam War, the military developed an institutional paranoia of the news media that continues till this

day. The relationship worsened as the media suspected that the military was withholding important public information, and thereafter reporters became distrustful of the military and news reporting became more critical.¹⁴ The military felt the media's coverage of the war adversely affected public opinion at home. At war's end the military-media relationship was generally one of suspicion, distrust, and often, outright animosity.¹⁵

POST VIETNAM YEARS: As the nature of military conflict has changed, so too has the military-media relationship. The term "Low Intensity Conflict" was coined by the Department of Defense to describe military involvement in operations such as peacekeeping, guerilla warfare, terrorism and counterterrorism and peacetime contingencies.¹⁶ These types of operations posed challenges for the relations between the military and media. With military actions of short duration, military-media conflicts were often about timely access to operations areas. In many cases, these operations required complete secrecy to succeed, a requirement that did not usually invite media participation.

Compounding the relationship are the rapid advances in news gathering technologies. Modern equipment and technology make it possible to report hostilities in remote locations very quickly. Thus the media might inadvertently, or even purposely, compromise military security through early disclosure of sensitive information and influence the outcome of such operations.¹⁷

GRENADA: A turning point in the military-media relationship occurred after the 1983 invasion of Grenada, codenamed Operation

"Urgent Fury." The military's handling of the media in this operation caused great controversy. Even though the invasion of Grenada was a small operation with a short duration, it was to have a profound affect on the relationship

During the planning phase of the operation and for the first two days of its conduct, the media was not allowed access to the island to report on the situation. On the third day, only a small Department of Defense approved media pool was allowed on the island and it was kept under tight military control. It was not until the fifth day that free and open access to the island was allowed.

NATIONAL MEDIA POOL: The lack of cooperation between the military and the media caused both to reevaluate the their relationship. After the Grenada operation, the Joint Chiefs of Staff convened the Media-Military Relations Panel (known as the Sidle Panel) to determine how best to accommodate the legitimate needs of the media to report on military operations. Specifically, the panel was tasked to recommend answers to the question, "How do we conduct military operations in a manner that safeguards the lives of our military and protects the security of the operation while keeping the American public informed through the media?"¹⁸

The Sidle Panel's final report, issued on 23 August 1983, concluded that military operations should have open media coverage whenever possible. In summary, the panel recommended:

That public affairs planning for military operations be conducted concurrently with operational planning.

When it becomes apparent during military operational planning that news media pooling provides the only feasible means of furnishing the media with early access to an operation, planning should provide for the largest possible press pool that is practical and minimize the length of time the pool will be necessary before "full coverage" is feasible.¹⁹

The panel's proposal of establishing a small pool of media to cover an operation until open coverage could be arranged would ensure operational security while furnishing the media with early access to military operations.

Consequently, in 1985, the Secretary of Defense established the Department of Defense National Media Pool (NMP), a small contingent of media which would remain on alert in Washington and be called upon to cover the initial stages of combat operations. The pool concept aided in solving the logistical problems of getting journalists to areas of military conflict and battle zones. Reporters assigned to the pool could cover a fast developing story in a faraway country until the situation stabilized and open media coverage could be established. Once open coverage was achieved, the pool would be disbanded.

Once established, the NMP was activated for "dry runs" during major military maneuvers to help improve efficiency. The pool was also used during the Persian Gulf naval tanker escort operation in 1987, and although there were some complaints, it seemed to work adequately.²⁰

PANAMA: During Operation "Just Cause" in Panama in December 1989, the NMP was called to cover its first true combat deployment. Yet because of improper military planning the

results were not encouraging for the NMP concept nor future military-media relations. Planning for public affairs aspects of the deployment were not conducted concurrently with operational aspects. As a result, the media pool did not gain access to the military action until the second day of operations, after other media assets were already in country. Members of the media pool were left to wonder the value of participating in the pool.

As Grenada and Panama demonstrate, operations that are military successes can be media failures. Regardless of the degree of military cooperation the media will report on the operation. Without a plan to allow timely media access, the press will focus on the military secrecy. With proper media planning, the focus can be kept on the mission and its successful execution.

DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM: The U.S.-Iraq Gulf War was a more successful test of the NMP concept and military-media cooperation. When Desert Shield began the NMP was activated, but it was soon disbanded as the numbers of media personnel in the area increased. As troops were moved into the area of operations, so were media personnel. By war's end, over 1600 correspondents were in the area.²¹ To handle the large number of media personnel the military created a modified pool system, forming up to 20 small pools of varying size.²² These pools were then assigned to certain areas accompanied by an escort officer. The military and the media established rules for media access ensuring fair coverage as well as operational security and troop

safety. The media was required to pool their reports. Pool reporters allowed into "sensitive areas" had to share their information with other media personnel. To assist news people in their effort to cover the military operation, a Joint Information Bureau (JIB) was established to act as a focal point for military information and as a support center for news media representatives. If there was a questionable call by the media escort officer on a security issue, the JIB reviewed the story for sensitive security information prior to release for publication. If a story did not meet the JIB criteria, it was forwarded up the chain of command. The final decision of whether a story was published rested with the editor of the news organization. Very few articles were questioned during the operation.

In Desert Storm the military began to appreciate the value of good military-media relations. Yet questions arose regarding the effectiveness of incorporating the media into pools. What direction was the military-media relationship headed?

CURRENT SITUATIONS: Desert Shield/Desert Storm has shown that the flexibility and freedom journalists have gained from advancing technology will make it difficult for the military to persuade media organizations to accept broad censorship. The media realizes that such restrictions will likely be impossible to enforce and that medialess operations are no longer possible. Everyday, the influence of the media on military operations is being seen.

Operation Restore Hope in Somalia is the most current example of the media's influence upon public opinion. With on location reporting and "real time" coverage, the media has been reporting the ongoing activities of this humanitarian assistance operation. The media has also been invaluable in conveying the U.S. message that the military forces in country is one of peace - to provide humanitarian assistance. Moreover, media accessibility to the operation has been a public relations treasure for the military.

Still the military-media relationship remains one of suspicion and distrust. The military continues to worry that the media will compromise security while the journalists continue to resent efforts to limit their ability to cover military operations. The creation of media pools and ground rules by the Sidle panel was thought to be a solution to existing relation problems. However, problems remain in the relationship and finding ways to reduce the friction must be explored.

CHAPTER IV

OPERATIONAL COMMANDER'S ROLE WITH THE MEDIA

Regardless of mission, be it peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, or a war, the operation will be subject to media scrutiny. Coverage will inevitably exert strong influence on the opinions of those citizens concerned with the success or failure of the mission. The operational commander must personally understand the importance of managing the military-media relationship. It is most important to strike the right balance between operational security and "the public's right to know" from the onset of the operations so that the media finds no need to question military secrecy. The operational commander must energetically manage the media to keep attention focused on current operations and to spotlight the professional accomplishments of the men and women of the Armed Forces.²³

Rear Admiral Baker, formerly the Navy's Chief of Information, in his Media Survival Guide, outlined recommendations to guide an operation commander's management of the media. Among his recommendations are:

- 1) Deal honestly and in a timely manner with the media. If not, critics will eagerly play upon your hand.
- 2) Understand the media's perception with speed, and through daily contact, keep working to win the battle of the first media perception.
- 3) Take time to articulate your position to the media. They must be short, simple language that the media will use and the public will understand.

4) Use the media to inform the public proactively, not to just react to critics.

5) Play the media game. Understand there are times for a low profile, but more often, a media opportunity to tell your story should not be lost because of fear. The media will allow us to tell the people what we are about.

6) Don't be thin-skinned. Not every media engagement will be a winning one, but it allows the military to communicate to their own people and the public.²⁴

The operational commander must also ensure that an operation has an active public affairs strategy with the staff Public Affairs Officer(PAO) intimately involved in the operation's public affairs planning process. The PAO should be assigned as the main point of contact for public affairs planning and management. Most importantly in the public affairs planning process, the operational commander must carefully consider the necessity of timely media access. Proactive and honest media relations are a necessity in today's operational environment.

CHAPTER V

EFFECTIVE MEDIA MANAGEMENT

A key point in analyzing the history of military-media relations is the recognition that no two conflicts are alike. Early in the history of American military-media relationship military conflicts were fairly large-scale wars, generally supported by the public under official declarations of war. More recently military operations have been described as "low intensity conflicts" conducted without official declaration of war and subject to increasingly open and hostile political and public debate.²⁵

It is impossible to predict when the next contingency will occur, how the public will react, how much support it will have, and how accessible the area will be to the modern press and its advancing technology. The extreme differences in the planning and logistics for an operation like Desert Storm, a large land and sea undertaking and Grenada, a short term land-based operation, demonstrates the need for flexible planning in preparing for future media involvement.

Yet basic principles are common to many military operations. First, the commander and his staff must consider the media in the formations of operational plans. Military commanders must appreciate that the press plays a central role in a functioning democracy, and reporting on military operations is a part of that

role. The timely employment of a media pool is a critical consideration in public affairs planning. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff supports the National Media Pool concept. Since the issuance of the Sidle Panel's report, a public affairs annex has become a necessary and required part of all operation plans. The Department of Defense now requires that media coverage and pool support requirements be planned simultaneously with operational plans.²⁶ The media pool is now fully endorsed as the approved method to cover specific military operations, especially in remote locations or where space is limited.²⁷

Second, a successful military-media relationship requires cooperation. The press must recognize the benefits of cooperation; noncooperation will seriously undermine access. Less understood within the military are the benefits of cooperating with the media. American citizens have the right to remain informed about military operations to the extent allowed by military security or troop safety considerations. Moreover media support can positively influence popular public opinion and troop morale. In May 1992, the Department of Defense adopted nine principles for battlefield media coverage of U.S. military combat operations. (Appendix I)²⁸ These nine principles establish a framework of military-media cooperation. This is an essential element in the process of improving and maintaining a sound relationship.

Third, the military and the media must continually communicate. Each must understand the needs and requirements of

the other to cooperate effectively and accept that neither will be totally comfortable with the guidelines and ground rules governing war coverage. However, the military and the media must adopt methods to make those guidelines work.

With operations categorized as low intensity conflicts, the preferred approach to managing the media will emphasize some form of voluntary restraint on the part of the media rather than the military imposing extensive censorship. The military must clearly delineate guidelines governing media reporting and willingly assist the media where guidelines may not be clear. Daily press briefings are an effective forum that can foster confidence and trust with the media and establish military credibility. Daily briefings can also positively influence American public opinion. Such briefings also provide limited opportunities to implement deception and other psyop techniques.²⁹

Observance of three principles; consideration, cooperation, and communication; will help lessen the historic suspicion and distrust between the military and the media. However, there is no way that these tensions can be completely eliminated. Friction between the military and the media is inevitable and unavoidable in a democracy; and distinguishes a democratic government from a dictatorship.³⁰

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

The military-media relationship has historically been one of suspicion and distrust, with the dominate problem being the media's right to access in a military operation. The media's reporting of military operations is an essential element in a democratic society. The press is the primary means of relaying information from the battlefield to the public and can have a major impact on public opinion. Instantaneous broadcasting capabilities make the media's potential influence even greater. The ability of the operational commander to plan for the media in a military contingency is essential in ensuring favorable public opinion.

Since no military operation is exactly the same, individual operations must be evaluated on their own merits and with an open mind as to the degree of access and military restrictions necessary to meet the media needs and to achieve the U.S. objective. Nonetheless, history provides us with useful insights and reveals recurrent problems that arise in a military operation. Operation Desert Storm stands as a positive example to the flexibility and ingenuity of the operational commander in dealing with the media. Equally important, Operation Desert Storm demonstrated the ability of the military to adapt quickly when changing circumstances required new rules and relationships.

Flexibility and adaptability were critical to the successful performance of military-media relations.

Proper public affairs planning will ensure operational security and troop safety but with no loss of media access to the situation. The operational commander must understand and appreciate the dynamics of the military-media relationship. It will be the operational commander who will set the courses of action in dealing with public relations matter.

Consideration, cooperation, and communication are fundamental to ensure accurate balanced reporting of military operations and serve to foster positive relationships between military and media representatives. The Sidle panel recognized the need to improve the relationship between the military and the media by allowing the media as much access as possible. The Department of Defense's principles for news media coverage confirm the importance of fostering good military-media relations through cooperation with the media.

Even though a plan may not always work as stated on paper, working with the media provides a viable means for the media to inform the public while maintaining a cooperative spirit with the military. No plan is perfect, but flexibility and adaptability incorporated into the plan will help the military-media relationship to survive and improve. The guiding principles formed by the Sidle panel and Department of Defense will ensure that the truth does not become lost between the needs of the military and the desires of the media.

APPENDIX I

DOD PRINCIPLES FOR NEWS MEDIA COVERAGE OF DOD OPERATIONS

1. Open and independent reporting will be the principal means of coverage of U.S. military operations.
2. Pools are not to serve as the standard means of covering U.S. military operations. Pools may sometimes provide the only feasible means of early access to a military operation. Pools should be as large as possible and disbanded at the earliest opportunity -- within 24 to 36 hours when possible. The arrival of early-access pools will not cancel the principle of independent coverage for journalists already in the area.
3. Even under conditions of open coverage, pools may be appropriate for specific events, such as those at extremely remote locations or where space is limited.
4. Journalists in combat zone will be credentialed by the U.S. military and will be required to abide by a clear set of military security ground rules that protect U.S. forces and their operations. Violation of the ground rules can result in suspension of credentials and expulsion from the combat zone of the journalist involved. News organizations will make their best efforts to assign experienced journalists to combat operations and make them familiar with U.S. military operations.
5. Journalists will be provided access to all major military units. Special operations restrictions may limit access in some cases.
6. Military public affairs officers should act as liaisons but should not interfere with the reporting process.
7. Under conditions of open coverage, field commanders should be instructed to permit journalists to ride on military vehicles and aircraft whenever feasible. The military will be responsible for the transportation of pools.
8. Consistent with its capabilities, the military will supply PAOs with facilities to enable timely, secure, compatible transmission of pool material and will make these facilities available whenever possible for filing independent coverage. In cases when government facilities are unavailable, journalists will, as always, file by any other means available. The military will not ban communications systems operated by news organizations, but electromagnetic operational security in

battlefield situations may require limited restrictions on the use of such systems.

9. These principles will apply as well to the operations of the standing DoD National Media Pool system.

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21. Ibid. p. 57.
22. Ibid. p. 56.
23. Gordon I. Peterson, "Joint Operations from a PA Perspective," PA Communicator, Vol.4, No. 3, May/June 1992, p. 3.
24. Brent Baker, "Decisions at the Speed of Satellite," Proceedings, U.S. Naval Institute, August 1991, p. 71.
25. Thompson, p. 163.
26. CJCS Message 182305Z May 1990. DOD National Media Pool Planning Requirements.
27. "Pentagon Adopts Combat Coverage Principles," News Release, Office of Assistant Secretary of Defense, No. 241-92, May 21, 1992.
28. Ibid.
29. This topic is not thoroughly discussed because it is an issue this is lengthy and sensitive to cover. However, an example of the use of the media for deception was during Operation Desert Storm. General Schwarzkopf denied access to many of the combat assembly areas prior to the onset of the ground campaign. He was able to withhold from the press the fact that he had moved massive forces in positions for the great single envelopment toward the north and east. Also, he never discouraged the interest of the media in a Marine Corps amphibious operation, an envelopment from the east to the west.
30. Thompson, p. 56.

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