NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Newport, R.I.

Military Operations in the CNN World: Using the Media as A Force Multiplier

by

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

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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9 November 1996

Paper Directed By Captain D. Watson
Chairman, Joint Military Operations Department

DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A
Approved for public release;
Distribution Unlimited

19960501 263

DTIC QUALITY INSPECTED 1

Security Classification This Page

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

1. Report Security Classification: UNCLASSIFIED	
2. Security Classification Authority:	
3. Declassification/Downgrading Schedule:	
4. Distribution/Availability of Report: DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A: APPROVED FOR PUBLIC RELEASE; DISTRIBUTION IS UNLIMITED.	
5. Name of Performing Organization: JOINT MILITARY OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT	
6. Office Symbol: C	**7. Address:** NAVAL WAR COLLEGE 686 CUSHING ROAD NEWPORT, RI 02841-1207
8. Title (Include Security Classification): Military Operations in the CNN World: Using the Media as a Force Multiplier (UNCLASSIFIED)	
9. Personal Authors: Leslie H. "Howdy" Belknap, Major, United States Army	
10. Type of Report: FINAL	**11. Date of Report:** 12 February 1996
12. Page Count: 20	
13. Supplementary Notation: A paper submitted to the Faculty of the NWC in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the JMO Department. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.	
14. Ten key words that relate to your paper: Media, Operations, Public Affairs, Information Age, Command, PSYOPS, Deception, Intelligence	

15. Abstract:

The informational media offers the operational commander exceptional opportunities to leverage the vast resources of fourth estate for use in military operations. The commander must consider using the media as a combat multiplier in a wide variety of areas within his operational design -- communicating the objective and endstate, boosting friendly morale, executing effective PSYOPS, deceiving the enemy, and enhancing intelligence collection. In an era where "wars can be won or lost on the world's television screens", the operational commander must be pro-active and innovative in dealing with the media.

16. Distribution / Availability of Abstract:	**Unclassified**	**Same As Rpt**	**DTIC Users**
	X		

17. Abstract Security Classification: UNCLASSIFIED	
18. Name of Responsible Individual: CHAIRMAN, JOINT MILITARY OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT	
19. Telephone: 841-[redacted]6461	**20. Office Symbol:** C

Security Classification of This Page Unclassified

Abstract of

MILITARY OPERATIONS IN THE CNN WORLD:
USING THE MEDIA AS A FORCE MULTIPLIER

The information age media offers the operational commander exceptional opportunities to leverage the vast resources of the fourth estate. This paper examines how the media offers as itself as a potent combat multiplier in a wide variety of areas --- communicating the objective and endstate, boosting friendly morale, executing more effective psychological operations, playing a major role in deception of the enemy, and enhancing intelligence collection.

To better use the media in the operation scheme, commanders must be pro-active and include the media in peacetime training exercises. Second, commanders must integrate the public affairs officers more closely with the staff and support the public affairs efforts within their commands. Finally, commanders at the operational level must educate their staffs and subordinate commanders as to the importance(and advantages) of using the media in military operations.

The media's impact on the operational art in the information age has yet to be fully examined (and leveraged) by the military. In an era where wars can be won or lost on CNN as well as on the battlefield, the operational commander must consider how to leverage the media. Our men and women in uniform deserve nothing less of their military leaders.

Military Operations in the CNN World: Using the Media as a Force Multiplier

INTRODUCTION

The Army's evolving vision of future joint military operations, "Force XXI Operations", concludes that

> information technological advances will ensure that future operations will unfold before a global audience. Access to media will allow global or official audiences to become involved in, or react to any and all events. Consequently, military operations, regardless of their importance, dimension, or location, will be conducted on a global stage.[1]

With regard to the media today and tomorrow, "so what for the operational commander?" Should the media be incorporated in the operational design, and if so, how? Does the media in the information age offer new opportunities or pose even a greater threat to the operational commander? This paper will explore these and other issues relating to the media for the operational commander.

I will argue that not only can the operational commander incorporate media considerations into the operational design and plan, but the commander **must** leverage the potential of the media for successful military

operations. To limit the scope of this paper, I will focus on only conventional operations, and avoid the discussion on using the media in military operations other than war(MOOTW).[2] With this in mind, the following pages will first offer **why** the media must be fully integrated into operational considerations, followed by some preliminary thoughts on **how** the media can contribute directly to successful wartime operations.

WHY WE SHOULD USE THE MEDIA AS A COMBAT MULTIPLIER

The information age media offers the operational commander exceptional opportunities to leverage the vast resources of the fourth estate. For example, the media offers itself as a potent combat multiplier in a wide variety of areas --- communicating the objective and endstate to a global audience, executing effective psychological operations(PSYOPS), playing a major role in deception of the enemy, and enhancing intelligence collection. These are only a few potential uses by the operational commander to consider.

However, the notion that the operational commander should, let alone must, use the media is not universally accepted within the military. Therefore, in order to better understand this controversial position, a brief overview of

recent military-media relations will help to explain why this is the case.

Any examination on military-media relations today yields mixed reviews. LtGen Bernard Trainor who served both in the military and media offered the frank assessment following the Gulf War that "relations with the press are probably worse now than at any other time in the history of the Republic.... the credo of the military seems to have become 'duty, honor, country, and hate the media'."[3] On the other hand, the former chief military spokesperson for the UN operations in Somalia offered a more recent and optimistic assessment in that the "overall coverage of Somalia was balanced, as has been coverage so far from Haiti and Bosnia....We may have inherited a tense relationship with the press from Vietnam, but much has evolved since then, including our understanding of the media."[4]

While I tend to subscribe to the latter, friction between the military and the media will persist in future operations. As Professor Loren Thompson of Georgetown University succinctly put it

> Even if the dilemmas of war coverage are fully appreciated on both sides and journalists and soldiers develop a sympathetic view of each other's needs and responsibilities, friction will persist. Tension between major public institutions is inherent in the functioning of democracy, and it is not surprising that such tension is most pronounced in a setting where

> lives are lost and national interests are at stake.[5]

In spite of this inherent "friction" with the media, the operational commander must not ever cede the "CNN battlefield" to the media. Why?

First and foremost, the operational commander today enjoys the trust of the American people and must use this trust to shape his battlespace. According to Henry Allen of the Washington Post, "the military currently has a distinct advantage in generating public support...and is closer to middle America in values and ethical standards than journalists".[6] Repeatedly, public opinion polls support this observation, with the military being near or at the top in terms of the most respected institutions and professions in the country.

Conversely, while the American people tend to believe what they see on TV and read in print, the media as a whole does not enjoy the same level of trust, confidence, and respect with the American people. In these same polls, the media rates significantly lower than the military as an institution. Helping to explain this difference is the criticism of the media emanating from within its own ranks. For example, just prior to the ground war, Allen further observed that his fellow reporters in the Gulf "looked like fools, nitpickers, and egomaniacs: like dilettantes who have spent exactly none of their lives on the end of a gun or

even a shovel; dinner party commanders, slouching inquisitors, collegiate spitball artists, people who have never been in a fistfight much less combat...."[7] Fred Reed, a former Washington Times defense reporter echoes this assessment, finding many of his peers reporting on the military as technically illiterate, intellectually lazy, and generally incompetent.[8]

To waste the opportunity to make his case in the information age where the military is more respected than the media, the operational commander risks having the images of his battlespace presented to the global village, and more importantly to the American people and his troops, in a distorted manner. Inaccurate depictions of operations can have a devastating effect on what is often our strategic center of gravity, the will of the American people, as well as the decision-making process at the strategic level.

In addition to the effect on the American people and higher-level decision makers, an equally important audience for the operational commander to consider is his own troops. Not only does the media reach hundreds of millions worldwide (CNN in the Gulf War was viewed by an estimated one billion people in 108 countries), but it reaches the wardrooms on carriers, the maintenance bays at fighter bases, and even directly into the foxholes at the frontlines.[9] While the operational commander rarely can communicate directly with

but a fraction of those serving under him, the media can. This fact alone should concern any operational commander in the information age. At least one senior commander in the Gulf War regrets not having taken more time with the media for his soldiers' sake. MG Paul E. Funk told a group of journalists the following:

> When I returned from Southwest Asia, I was upset to find that people did not know the 3rd Armored Division and VII Corps had been in a very heavy fight under heavy contact with some of the enemy's first-rate units. The story was not well told enough about the people who did the fighting.... I had requests for interviews the same day we had briefings for the attack, but I felt I did not have time for them. I did not try to avoid the interviews, but on the other hand, I did not seek the publicity either. In retrospect, I probably should have for the division's sake.[10]

Moreover, the commander is responsible to the American taxpayer to keep them informed about their military, especially in times of armed conflict. Our men and women in uniform are the best this nation has ever seen. To help maintain this superb fighting force, especially in an increasingly austere budgetary environment, operational commanders must take every opportunity to showcase our outstanding soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines.

Finally, if for no other reason than self-survival, the commander must forge an effective working relationship with and budget time for the media. Otherwise, in the words of a former JTF commander, the operational commander can

potentially face a situation where "dealing with the press will dominate the commander's time."[11] In short, operational commanders must be pro-active, not reactive, when it comes to the information age media.

HOW TO MAXIMIZE THE FOURTH ESTATE

If one accepts the premise that the potential of the media should be maximized in the operational commander's operational design, how might the commander leverage the media in order to more effectively achieve the operational objectives? The following paragraphs offer a few preliminary ideas on how the operational commander and staff should incorporate the media as another effective weapon in the operational "kit bag." However, before addressing its uses, a brief review of the nature of the media is useful to better understand this potential force multiplier.

Although the individual backgrounds of the media covering a given military operation can range from novice to seasoned veteran, certain truths still apply to the media. First, the media invariably prefers not to participate in a media pool; the military normally insists on one. The entire issue of "pool versus no pool" has been the subject of vigorous debate and frequent charges of "censorship" from the media, but most Americans believe (and many respected

members of the media will concede) that the wartime requirements should and do prohibit the media from wandering the battlefield at will.[12]

Second, and more useful for the operational commander, are MAJ Stockwell's incisive insights on media coverage at the operational level from his experience in Somalia. According to Stockwell, there are three principles of media coverage at the operational level that should be considered: mobility, capability, and responsibility.

For the media reporting in the operational commander's area of operations, mobility is their center of gravity. While mobility is their center of gravity, safety is the media's critical vulnerability (as evidenced by the eight journalists killed in Somalia and the 45 who have died so far in Bosnia). With regard to capability, armed with satellite communications technology, the media often "outguns" the military on the information age battlefield. In fact, one US television network is reportedly developing a satellite to provide live overhead coverage of the future conventional battlefield. This combination of mobility and capability have further complicated the operational commander's challenge to be pro-active in winning(or at least not losing) the "CNN War."[13]

With this superficial understanding of the media's concerns, capabilities, strengths, and weaknesses in mind,

the central issue remains how the operational commander can use the media in the operational design and conduct of operations. The following paragraphs offer some important areas for consideration.

First, the media offers a superb mechanism for the operational commander to transmit his operational objectives and goals, as well as to reinforce strategic policy objectives. Consider, for example, the use of the media by Gen Schwarzkopf in the Gulf War. Our soldiers, allies, the American people, and the entire world repeatedly heard the general communicate the "what and why" of the coalition forces. Similarly, during the initial stages of Operation Restore Democracy, LTG Hugh Shelton quite effectively used the media to clearly explain the Haitian operation to a global audience.

Second, and a close corollary of the first, is the potential PSYOPS value of the media to the operational design. During DESERT SHIELD the media provided the operational commander the means to showcase our military might directly to the Iraqi military and people. According to LtGen Boomer's public affairs officer, the "media access provided us with a means to tell Iraq and the rest of the world that we meant business.... We were showing that our weapons worked as advertised and our Marines were tough and unintimidated."[14] Similarly, if they weren't felt first-

hand, the constant bombardment of destructive images from the air war were seen by Iraq soldiers in Iraq and Kuwait -- again contributing to demoralization of the Iraqi forces when the ground war started. A further use of the media in the PSYOPS role was the decision to allow live reports of the 82nd Airborne Division lifting off from Fort Bragg enroute to assault Haiti. Senator Nunn has often stated that these reports directly led to General Cedras' decision to step down.[15] More recently, the American military welcomed the media to cover the Bosnia pre-deployment training in Germany, again with the intent to send a message to all parties in the Bosnian conflict that American forces were well-trained and ready to use force as necessary. In short, to maximize the potential of PSYOPS the operational commander must consider the media as a primary means of influencing an opponent's actions.

Third, the operational commander must consider using the media as part of the overall deception plan. Again an outstanding example of the operational commander leveraging the media in support of the operational deception plan is found in the Gulf War. GEN Schwartzkopf had no intention of conducting a massive amphibious assault with the Marines to eject the Iraqi Army from Kuwait. However, working closely with a media-friendly subordinate (and former public affairs officer), LtGen Walter Boomer, GEN Schwarzkopf did not take

any steps to discourage the media from devoting a disproportionate share of the pre-ground war coverage to the Marines ashore and afloat in the Gulf. From the Iraqi's dispositions on the eve of the Ground War, one can reasonably surmise that the media certainly assisted in Schwarzkopf's deception plan.

A final area rich with possibilities for the operational commander is intelligence gathering. Within the commander's battlespace, tapping into the media is an excellent open-source for gathering information about the adversary. Although potentially time consuming and challenging, exploiting open-source information must be a priority for the operational commander's intelligence staff. The awareness of the media's potential value is growing. As the former G2 of the XVIII Airborne Corps recently observed, "open-source intelligence will prove an invaluable information warfare tool. Access to the media ... will add a new dimension... to operations."[16] Working with the media to exploit open-source information is one way operational commanders and staff can aide in this challenge.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

The preceding paragraphs have offered some thoughts on how the operational commander can integrate the media into

military operations. However, the focus in these instances were on incorporating the media during pre-hostility and wartime operations. To insure the operational commander maximizes the media in future operations, commanders and staffs must not neglect media considerations during peacetime. The following three suggestions will contribute significantly to this end.

First, commanders and staffs must remember the time-tested adage, "train as you fight." In other words, commanders must be pro-active and include the media in peacetime training exercises. In this respect, the military has made great strides recently. All exercises at the Joint Readiness Training Center and the National Training Center include the media.[17] Similarly, most geographic CINCs integrate the media and media play in their joint training exercises.[18]

Second, commanders must integrate the public affairs officers(PAOs) more closely with the staff and support the public affairs efforts within their commands. From the media's perspective, successful commanders are those who understand that "the most important relationship between a journalist and a PAO is the policy of the PAO's commander. A commander with an open attitude communicates that tone to his subordinates and enables the PAO to do his job."[19] In other words, the operation commander can ill afford to have

the PAO be the Rodney Dangerfield of his staff. Echoing this sentiment from the senior commander's perspective are the observations of MG Funk, who told a group of journalists that "incorporating the media into the battle plan and supporting them should be a priority....the bottom line is that public affairs is a commander's task."[20]

Finally, commanders at the operational level must educate their staffs and subordinate commanders as to the importance(and advantages) of using the media in military operations. They must increase the awareness within their commands about the potential value of working with the fourth estate. If General Trainor is even partially correct in his assertion of a "duty, honor, country and hate the media" mindset, then commanders still face a major challenge. The operational commander must stress, at a minimum, these two points within their commands concerning the media. First, like it or not, the American military is accountable to the American people, and for most Americans, the media serves as their conduit for information about their military. Second, those in uniform should keep in mind these words of wisdom from the former Commandant of the Marine Corps, GEN Carl Mundy, who said, "while we always can't expect favorable reporting, we should expect fair, balanced reporting. The best way to maximize fairness on the media's part is to be fair with them."[21]

CONCLUSION

The media's impact on the operational art in the information age has yet to be fully examined (and leveraged) by the military. While this paper has presented only some preliminary conclusions on how the operational commander should consider using the media as part of his operational design, the potential for the media to be a combat multiplier strongly suggests that the operational artist should view the media from the "half-full" perspective. They should keep in mind this advice from GEN Sullivan, who wrote that "success in the information age will go to those who challenge themselves, who constantly innovate, learn, and adapt as they go."[22]

Are there risks for the operational commander associated with the media? Absolutely. Should the media have access to all aspects of military operations? As GEN Schwarzkopf's masterful deception of the majority of the press (and the enemy) with the massive "left hook" revealed, absolutely not. However, to perpetuate a "keep them at arm's length" or "button up" mentality wastes a valuable opportunity to leverage the fourth estate for future military operations. It also risks an uninformed media becoming suspicious and alienated, resulting in inaccurate

or biased reporting. In an era where "wars can be won [or lost] on the world's television screens as well as on the battlefield", the operational commander must be pro-active and innovative in dealing with the media.[23] The American people, and most of all the men and women in uniform, deserve nothing less of their military leaders.

NOTES

[1]TRADOC Pamphlet 525-5, "Force XXI Operations" 1 August 1994, 2-10.

[2]Although the following discussion of the operational commander's use of the media also applies, to some degree, to MOOTW, to limit the scope of the paper I will focus only on conventional military operations.

[3]Bernard Trainor, "The Military's War with the Media: Causes and Consequences" in Defense Beat: The Dilemmas of Defense Coverage ed. Loren B. Thompson (New York: Lexington Books, 1991), 73.

[4]David Stockwell, "Press Relations: Lessons Learned," Army Times, 29 January 1996, 51.

[5]Loren B. Thompson, "The Military Versus the Media" in Defense Beat: The Dilemmas of Defense Coverage ed. Loren B. Thompson (New York: Lexington Books, 1991), 56.

[6]Richard F. Machamer, "Avoiding a Military-Media War in the Next Armed Conflict," Military Review, April 1993, 46.

[7]Ibid., 45.

[8]Fred Reed, "A Culture of Incompetence; Why the Daily Press Covers Defense So Poorly," in Defense Beat: The Dilemmas of Defense Coverage ed. Loren B. Thompson (New York: Lexington Books, 1991), 124-131.

[9]Stephen Aubin, "Media's Impact on the Battlefield: SA Review Essay," Strategic Review, Winter 1992, 55.

[10]Paul E. Funk, "Accommodating the Wartime Media: A Commander's Task," Military Review, April 1993, 79.

[11]Robert D. Chelberg, "EUCOM - At the Center of the Vortex," Field Artillery, October 1993, 15.

[12]John M. Shotwell, "The Fourth Estate as a Combat Multiplier," Marine Corps Gazette, July 1991, 76. The author cites a Times Mirror poll that showed 78% of the those surveyed believed that the military was telling the public as much as they could during Desert Shield/Storm. This same poll showed over 50% thought the military wasn't exercising enough control over the Gulf War media. Similarly, a Time/CNN poll showed nearly 90% of Americans polled supported some censorship of the press during wartime conditions.

[13]Stockman, 51.

[14]Shotwell, 75.

[15]I traveled with Senator Nunn on two occasions in 1994/5 where I heard him relate to audiences the effect of the media reporting that "the 82nd Airborne was in the air" and the resultant remarkable shift in GEN Cedras' attitude about stepping down from power.

[16]Richard F. Riccardelli, "The Information and Intelligence Revolution," Military Review, September-October 1995, 86-87.

[17]Funk, 80.

[18]Chelberg, 15.

[19]Richard Halloran, "Soldiers and Scribblers: Working with the Media," Parameters, Summer 1995, 160.

[20]Funk, 80.

[21]Carl Mundy, Jr., "Commander's Responsibility to the PA Mission," While Letter 13-92, 2 September 1992.

[22]Gordon R. Sullivan, "Winning the Information War," Military Review, April 1994, 61.

[23]Alvin and Heidi Toffler. War and Anti-War (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), 147.

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