

The First Major Media War

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The term 'Media War' as used in a defence and security studies context first appeared in the middle 1970s, but it only became established in the aftermath of the Gulf War 1990-91, becoming common in defence writings by the end of the 1990s, by which time almost all serious books and papers on the Gulf War made some mention of the media war. This was in recognition that the Gulf War included a new and significant change within mature democracies in the long-standing political relationship between the conduct of a war by armed forces, and the role of the civilian mass news and communications media in that war. This was particularly true of the United States, where the media enjoys special protection under the constitution, and an equally special status within the concept of democracy.

'Media war,' as it became recognised as a result of the Gulf War, should not be confused with propaganda, or with developments in the exploitation of the media by armed forces within defence and security thinking that have occurred since the start of the 21st Century. Propaganda and deception had long been part of warfare, and so had battlefield reporting and the military-media relationship in democracies. But after the Gulf War, the term 'media war' went beyond those existing aspects of warfare, to reflect a new interaction between the military-media relationship and other more fundamental aspects of defence and security thinking. The media war came to be increasingly understood to rank in importance with even the ground war or the air war in determining how wars were to be fought.

The term 'media war' was a description of a changed set of circumstances, rather than a defined military doctrinal term in any country's armed forces, and it remains easier to describe than to define precisely. It is therefore best explained and illustrated by a case study of one of the most important events of the Gulf War: its politically controversial ending with the decision by President George H.W. Bush to declare a unilateral coalition halt to hostilities after 100 hours of the ground war. This decision and its consequences both influenced, and were influenced by, the way in which both the air war and the ground war in the Gulf were being conducted and reported by the media, with consequences that were not expected or predicted by the United States' government. Once the ground war started on 24 February, after the first 48 hours fighting it was clear that the Iraqi forces were collapsing in a rout. A large convoy of about 1,500 Iraqi vehicles, chiefly commandeered civilian cars, seeking to escape Kuwait City northwards along the highway towards Basra, was in the process of being attacked and destroyed by coalition aircraft in the al-Mutlah gap, creating a five-kilometre trail of wreckage reported as the 'Highway of Death.' At 9.00pm local time on 27 February, General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, commanding CENTCOM, gave a press conference (popularly known as the 'mother of all briefings') at his headquarters in Riyadh, strongly implying that the main Iraqi forces could not

escape encirclement and destruction.¹ Shortly afterwards, in Washington DC where the time was eight hours earlier, President Bush met with his senior advisors including the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin Powell. Despite later disputes as to details, all published accounts agree that high among the factors leading to Bush's ceasefire decision, made at that meeting, was the growing media attention to the Highway of Death, resulting in concern that next day television would broadcast the full extent of the destruction, and determination that the complete military victory achieved by the coalition should not be portrayed in the media as a massacre or even a war crime.² Nevertheless, the claim that the destruction on the Highway of Death, and the entire coalition campaign, was so overwhelmingly one-sided as to constitute a war crime was made almost at once by prominent critics of the war, notably the radical commentators Noam Chomsky and Jacques Derrida. Post-war analysis by the United States military showed that many of the Iraqi vehicles on the Highway of Death had been abandoned by their occupants, who had largely survived.

This political decision to call a ceasefire, at least in part out of concern for what the media might do with the story, rather than what was actually happening at the time, contrasted strongly with the inevitable chaos of a complex and fast-moving night-time air and land battle spread over hundreds of kilometres. CENTCOM ground forces had planned to start their double envelopment west of Kuwait at 5.00am local time, about an hour before dawn. Once the decision had been taken in Washington, combat units were instead first alerted in the course of the night that it was the ceasefire that would start at 5.00am, followed at 2.00am by a change in these orders, so that the ceasefire would come into force at 8.00am (midnight in Washington). In fact, exchanges of fire between American and Iraqi forces continued for some days, but about 100,000 Iraqi troops with over 20,000 armoured vehicles were able to escape northwards. Saddam Hussein's response to the unexpected cease fire has been described as one of jubilation, broadcasting to the Iraqi people that his forces had destroyed the aura of invincibility possessed by United States.³

President Bush's cease-fire decision established for future military thinking that there was a direct and immediate link between the battlefield and the highest political decision-making, based on views and even speculation about how the media might behave. Control of the narrative and how victory was presented to the outside world through the media had become a fundamental of war. Since 1991, every major military operation by the armed forces of democratic countries has included a plan for the media, fully integrated into the overall plan of campaign. This in turn has led to a debate within democracies on how far military battlefield imperatives should intrude into domestic politics and government policy, which in its turn has recently become part of the continuing 'strategy gap' debate over national policy in several

¹ Schwarzkopf's briefing may be seen in full on the open-access internet platform YouTube in several versions including at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKi3NwLFkX4> (accessed 1 July 2021).

² See e.g. George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), pp. 485-7; Colin Powell and Joseph Persico, *A Soldier's Way* (London: Random House, 1995), pp. 519-26 (U.S. title *My American Journey*).

³ Lawrence Freedman, *A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East* (New York NY: Public Affairs, 2008) p. 251; Robert H. Scales, *Certain Victory: The U.S. Army in the Gulf War* (Washington DC: Office of the Chief of Staff, 1993) pp. 308-16.

countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom.

From the perspective of political and institutional history, media war was only part of the 20th century's acceleration of long-standing trends in globalisation and mass society. Just as in the first part of the 20th century, mass public opinion became a force in domestic politics in many countries, as the voting franchise increased, so in the second part of the 20th century the same mass public opinion intruded into diplomacy and military matters in a new and unfamiliar way, including onto the battlefield. The most obvious cause of the new military-media relationship was the major change in civilian electronic communications technology from the middle 1970s onwards, strengthening the trend that television was replacing print journalism as the dominant form of news and commentary. This included electronic news gathering (or ENG) in the form of a new generation of lightweight video cameras, coupled with commercial satellite links that could send either live or recorded images directly onto television screens across the world, plus direct satellite broadcasting, first-generation (or G1) mobile cell phones, and the launch of the Internet in 1983. In parallel with these developments, commercial changes meant that media institutions were more likely to have international staff and agendas, and to take their material from anywhere in the world, weakening the idea of a national media that would be automatically supportive of its government in a war. These changes were exemplified by the launch in 1980 of Cable News Network (or CNN), the United States' first 24-hour satellite news television channel. Even so, it is important to recognise that, in comparison with today, the civilian communications industry and technology of the Gulf War still remained quite traditional. The great majority of Americans got their information about the world in a highly structured way, from radio or television in the morning, from a daily newspaper, and from the early evening television news slot. Since 1991, there have been three further major developments in media technology that have affected the ways in which people get their news. Both second generation (or G2) mobile phones with screens and texting, and the World Wide Web, appeared in 1990-91 coinciding with the Gulf War. Web 2.0 and G3 mobile phones coincided with the second American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, while user generated content (or UGC) and social media platforms appeared a year later. G4 smartphones (networked hand-held computers in all but name) appeared in 2007, greatly increasing the use and importance of social media. Over the same period, the concept of media war has been increasingly merged with psychological operations (or Psyop) to become information operations, strategic communications, and perception management, all routinely conducted in peacetime as well as forming an integrated part of war plans.

The implications of unregulated live or near-live television reporting from a battlefield became a matter of great political and military concern following the United States' defeat in the Vietnam War, which was also its first war of the modern era fought with largely unregulated media coverage. Successive American governments and their armed forces were convinced of the truth that, in the famous judgement of the Canadian communications scholar Marshall McLuhan in 1975, 'Television brought the brutality of war into the comfort of the living

room. Vietnam was lost in the living rooms of America – not the battlefields of Vietnam.’⁴ The great majority of senior officers believed that near-live reporting of combat in the Vietnam War had been undesirable, and that the media had portrayed the war with an unfair bias, undermining domestic popular support for its prosecution. Virtually all subsequent studies of media coverage of the Vietnam War have shown that this belief was untrue, or at best extremely simplistic, although the issue of the media’s portrayal of what was always an unpopular war remains an open one.⁵ It is also significant that this attitude did not decline with the departure of the Vietnam generation but has increased, forming part of a wider debate about United States’ military culture. This negative view of the media fitted extremely well in the 1980s with wider changes in American policy on warfare, including the ‘Weinberger Rules’ articulated by US Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger in 1984, and the subsequent ‘Powell Doctrine’, articulated by Colin Powell, both of which argued that domestic popular support was essential for any large-scale American war, together with the emerging combat doctrine of ‘maneuver warfare’ which stressed rapid attacks to disorientate and overwhelm an enemy rather than a protracted war.⁶ First demonstrated in the Gulf War, this combination within the United States’ armed forces of a culturally deep suspicion and resentment of the media, together with a belief in their own need – even their right – to create and protect domestic and international popular support for a short and aggressive war, has had ramifications up to the present day.

Although the coalition in the Gulf War was dominated by the United States, a small but distinctive contribution to the media war was made by the United Kingdom. Several British news media institutions still retained global recognition and influence, notably the British Broadcasting Corporation (or BBC), as would be seen again in 1991 by its importance during the failed coup against Mikhail Gorbachev in Moscow that August. The British armed forces also had by far the most experience in the coalition of recent dealing with the media on combat operations, from their continuing counter-terrorism campaign in Northern Ireland known as ‘The Troubles,’ and from the Falklands War, which had involved a hastily improvised pool of British reporters accompanying their task force, in exchange for submitting their material to ‘prior security review’ meaning official checking followed by negotiation if the material contained anything that was considered a risk to security, but not enforced censorship, and also for access to official communications. As a consequence of the Falklands War, the British created specialist military units for media support and handling in overseas deployments, including uniformed escort officers, which later became a widespread practice. Prior security review also became the standard feature of the pool system of war reporting that developed in the 1980s and 1990s among democracies, meaning that in practice reporters and their media companies agreed broad ground rules with governments and armed forces, including about

⁴ This often quoted (and also misquoted or partially quoted) observation by McLuhan first appeared in the *Montreal Gazette*, 16 May 1975.

⁵ A. Trevor Thrall, *War in the Media Age* (Cresskill NJ: Hampton Press, 2000), pp. 45-70; William Hammond, *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media 1962-1968* (Washington DC: Center of Military History, 1988), pp. 385-8.

⁶ For a discussion of these developments see Stephen Badsey, ‘“Bridging the Firewall”? Information Operations and US Military Doctrine in the Battles of Fallujah,’ in David Welch, ed., *Propaganda, Power and Persuasion: From World War I to Wikileaks* (London: IB Tauris, 2013), pp. 188-208.

what should not be made public during a conflict. The British experience of this was largely a positive one for all sides, and although there was no actual legal enforcement of government restrictions in the Gulf War, there was only a small handful of disputes. In 1994, under British influence, NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) renamed its public relations as 'Media Operations' to stress the integration of the media war with military planning, although the United States retained the older term 'Public Affairs.' The pool system evolved into the 'embedding' of reporters with military units in the late 1990s.⁷

In contrast to the British, both before and during the Gulf War the pool system and military-media relations generally for the United States were often marked by mutual antagonism, and by controversy about their respective roles within their country's wider politics. Following media complaints during the United States' military intervention in the Caribbean island of Grenada in 1983, agreement was reached for a pool system, but this broke down almost at once during the subsequent United States' military intervention in Panama in 1989. The root problem was a lack of familiarity with military expectations and culture from otherwise experienced reporters, the relatively few numbers of reporters allowed within the pools, and a lack of goodwill, as each side placed its own interpretation on what exactly had been agreed. All these problems were greatly magnified by the scale of the Gulf War. The United States activated its 'National Media Pool' of 17 journalists on 13 August 1990 to cover its forces' first deployments to Saudi Arabia, but disbanded it ten days later, leaving reporters subject only to Saudi law, to CENTCOM military regulations, and to various institutional pressures. Many reporters, whether assigned to pools or not, were unfamiliar with the practices established by the military-media relationship, and repeatedly denounced any attempts by CENTCOM or the Saudis to brief them with information, or to limit or control their activities in any way, as either 'propaganda' or 'censorship' and therefore utterly unacceptable. The Iraqi government permitted foreign reporters including Americans to stay in Baghdad, subject to censorship and negotiated agreements. By early January 1991, the number of accredited reporters with CENTCOM had risen to about 1,300, mostly attending military briefings at Schwarzkopf's headquarters, or at the coalition Joint Information Bureau at Dhahran, with perhaps another 1,000 uncredited reporters working in the region. On 10 January, the United States' pool system was re-activated, with between 180 and 190 journalists: four or five attached to each division, two for each major warship, and the rest at airbases. Journalists not assigned to pools, or who rejected this arrangement, mostly either remained at Dhahran or Riyadh, or went forward to cover the fighting at their own risk, becoming known as the 'unilaterals.' At the end of the war over 40 unilateral reporters were repatriated from behind Iraqi lines. Despite the almost ceaseless complaints of the reporters, their parent organisations were comparatively relaxed about negotiating arrangements with Baghdad or with Washington, and during the war they used a mix of pool reporters, affiliated reporters and unilateral reporters, together with commentators back in the United States, to cover the war.⁸

⁷ Susan L. Carruthers, *The Media at War: Communication and Conflict in the Twentieth Century* (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 120-31 and pp. 179-89.

⁸ Thrall, *War in the Media Age*, pp. 163-230; Philip M. Taylor, *War and the Media: Propaganda and Persuasion in the Gulf War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).

From the perspective of military-media relations things became worse when the war began with the coalition air campaign on 17 January. Pool journalists with the coalition air forces were effectively sidelined, being able only to report from airbases, while CENTCOM press briefings released dramatic and novel film of smart bombs ('precision guided munitions' or PGM) and missiles. The US Navy was much less attuned to the needs of a media war, and also lacked the technology to provide such images, producing only a small percentage of the material shown on television in comparison with the US Air Force. In this period CENTCOM's chief concern about the media was security, as its US 18 Corps and 7 Corps started their deployment westward into the desert as the essential preliminary to launching their main attack a month later. Although there were some leaks and much speculation, both the pool reporters and the institutions that employed them co-operated in preserving this secret. In addition to providing a distraction for the media from these ground movements, the media focus on smart bombs served a double purpose for CENTCOM. It allowed them to control the narrative in press briefings, and it also distracted media attention from the fact that only about ten percent of bombs dropped were smart bombs used against distant targets. In reality, for the duration of the air campaign the main weight of bombs fell on the Iraqi combat divisions in their defensive positions in Kuwait and southern Iraq, something that General Schwarzkopf was pleased to explain at his 'mother of all briefings.'

One of the great advantages of studying media war as a tool of analysis to illuminate much wider issues in defence matters is that much of its evidence is by definition in the public domain. So while Saddam Hussein's plans once the war started are likely to remain a matter of conjecture and debate for lack of compelling hard evidence, there is no doubt that he also saw the media war as a central part of his overall strategy. Saddam's exploitation of the news media, including that of the United States, together with more traditional forms of propaganda, appears to have been based on two concepts. One of these was the known ability of authoritarian Arab regimes to survive even major defeats, as Egypt and Syria had done in their defeats in the wars of 1967 and 1973 against the Israelis, by presenting small but symbolic victories to their own people and to wider regional opinion, the so-called 'Arab street.' The other belief was based, like the American military view of the media as a threat, on a false belief about the Vietnam War that was nevertheless widely held in the 1980s and 1990s. One of the few pieces of hard statistical evidence about American public opinion and the Vietnam War (and also the earlier Korean War) was a strong correlation, in a protracted war with no obvious military victory, between an increase in friendly casualties and a decrease in domestic public support. One of the United States' government's fears was that if there were heavy casualties in the Gulf War, domestic public support would collapse. A more extreme version of this belief, to which Saddam subscribed, was that American public opinion was highly averse to any casualties on either side, and that the media could be used to turn this public opinion rapidly against the war.⁹

In the event, Saddam's plan for the media war was pitted directly against CENTCOM's

⁹ John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (Latham MD: University Press of America, 1985), pp. 23-41; W. Lance Bennett and David L. Paletz, eds., *Taken By Storm: The Media, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy in the Gulf War* (Chicago Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

plans for the air war. The preliminaries were the careful deployment and concealment of Iraq's few short range ballistic missiles, a variant of the Soviet Union's Scud-B officially known as the Al-Hussein missile, and the decision to allow western reporters to remain in Baghdad once the air war started, including television crews who transmitted back to the United States. A number of important figures, including President Bush, remembered watching these live reports of the first bombs and missiles hitting Baghdad, starting from about 2.35am local time (6.35pm the previous evening in Washington). In fact this was a minor case of false memory syndrome, as the television crews could only broadcast spoken live commentary over still pictures of Baghdad at night. CNN was uniquely favoured by Saddam's regime, with a special communications arrangement allowing it to continue broadcasting commentary from Baghdad even after the first air raids destroyed much of the city's communications infrastructure, including telephone lines. On 20 January, most journalists were expelled from Baghdad, and those remaining (including both the BBC and NHK) had no means of transmission; only CNN could keep sending its spoken reports, shown over existing still pictures. This prohibition lasted until 31 January, after which journalists were gradually allowed to return to Baghdad.¹⁰

The politics and even the legality under United States' law of this decision by CNN prompted a debate which has also continued to the present day. Saddam expected to gain prestige on the Arab street, and to turn the United States' public against the war, by using the media to exploit the expected mass Iraqi civilian deaths. CENTCOM's counter to this was to use precision guided bombs and missiles to limit casualties in Iraqi cities, and to have an efficient bomb damage assessment system linked with their media briefers, enabling them to assess enemy claims of bombing civilians. On 16 February, when an RAF bomb hit a street market in Fallujah, the British rapidly identified the incident and apologised publicly. Iraqi attempts to publicise civilian deaths from coalition bombing, including on 23 January an episode in which they showed reporters a destroyed factory claimed as producing baby milk formula, were too few to make a major impact. But an airstrike on 13 February that destroyed an identified command bunker in the Amiriyah district of Baghdad, killing large numbers of civilians using it as an air-raid shelter, led to Generals Powell and Schwarzkopf revising their targeting lists to exclude Iraqi command centres in urban areas.¹¹

As it turned out, the Iraqi Scud missiles were so inaccurate and ineffective that their use was a political and propaganda weapon rather than a military one. The Scud attacks on Israel, which began on 18 January, together with later attacks on Saudi Arabia, were interpreted by the Arab street as a symbolic display of power over Israel and the United States, with each attack being greeted in Jerusalem by Palestinian cries of triumph and celebration from the rooftops. On 20 January, Saddam released pre-recorded video tapes of captured and obviously coerced American, British and Italian aircrew reading out prepared statements, in another display

¹⁰ Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, pp. 450-1; Paul L. Moorcraft and Philip M. Taylor, *Shooting the Messenger: The Political Impact of War Reporting* (Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2008), pp. 159-60.

¹¹ Powell and Persico, *A Soldier's Way*, p. 513; H. Norman Schwarzkopf and Peter Petre, *It Doesn't Take a Hero* (New York NY: Bantam, 1992), pp. 417-22; Thrall, *War in the Media Age*, pp. 207-8; Taylor, *War and the Media*, pp. 170-81.

of power over his enemies. Political concern over the propaganda exploitation of captured aircrew, which reached its zenith during peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations in Somalia and former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, became an inevitable factor in the present day preference within democracies for armed drones rather than piloted aircraft for use on combat missions.

While CENTCOM's plan employed special forces to locate the Scuds, and airpower to destroy them, the United States engaged in another act of media war by deploying batteries of their MIM-104 Patriot missile system to counter the Iraqi missile attacks. The effectiveness of these Patriot missiles, which were intended for anti-aircraft defence, against the Scud attacks has been much disputed, with estimates of successful intercepts ranging from a quarter of all Scuds fired, down to almost none. But in the context of the war, this was less important than the undoubted drama, televised live to the world from Israel and Saudi Arabia, of the Patriot missiles launching followed by the sound of explosions in the air, which was enough to convince most people that they were being protected.¹² The political and propaganda need for an effective anti-missile system has led to the present day Israeli *kippat barzel* ('iron dome') system, first deployed in 2011.

The coalition forces used for the ground war reflected the relationship of each of its members with the United States. The United Kingdom deployed an armoured division with two combat brigades, which they integrated into the American plan to the greatest extent possible, as well as their special forces (the Special Air Service or SAS), used for hunting the Scuds. As an indicator of what could have been more widely done, an agreement made between British staff officers and journalists in Saudi Arabia led to the creation for their armoured division of two 'forward transmission units,' one with each of the advanced headquarters of its two combat brigades, consisting of equipment and specialists carried in two Land Rover light utility vehicles, which enabled live television reporting and high-speed print and image transmission back to London, via satellite. In return, the reporters with these units wore uniform, as a symbol that their role had shifted from normal peacetime impartiality to active support of the troops.¹³ This arrangement, which was unique within the coalition, worked well for both parties, including live television interviews with British soldiers on the battlefield hearing of the imminent ceasefire transmitted back to London by the BBC. The French, whose light armoured division was deployed on the western flank of the American forces, were largely unprepared for the media war, and after several attempts and controversial episodes they were still negotiating about a media pool when the ground war began.

In contrast to the British, as the ground war approached CENTCOM announced that there would be a complete news blackout for the first 24 hours, provoking about 300 journalists to threaten turning unilateral and driving into the battle zone. The ground war began in the early hours of 24 January, and under political pressure from Washington, CENTCOM re-instated its briefings on the following morning. But plans for United States' military transport to get

¹² Arthur Kent, *Risk and Redemption: Surviving the Network News Wars* (London: Viking, 1996), pp. 130-52; Taylor, *War and the Media*, pp. 67-76.

¹³ Stephen Badsey, 'The Media War,' in John Pimlott and Stephen Badsey, *The Gulf War Assessed* (London: Arms and Armour, 1992), pp. 219-46.

the pool reporters' material back to Riyadh or Dhahran for onwards transmission back to the United States broke down almost completely from the start. It was at most about an eight hour journey from the pool reporters with United States' military formations by road and across country to Riyadh or Dhahran, and much less by helicopter. But none of their reports reached Riyadh or Dhahran in less than 24 hours, just over 70 percent took more than 48 hours, and the rest took days or were lost completely. Most scenes filmed on the first night of the attack were not aired on television in the United States until the ground war was virtually won. In this way, something close to a news blackout had been achieved, although it was not officially sanctioned.¹⁴ As well as further souring military-media relations, this episode had an important and unexpected consequence. Getting little news of the ground war, the media instead had little choice but to focus on the accounts and images of the Highway of Death coming from the airbases and aircrews, which CENTCOM had itself already done so much to promote. The failure of military-media co-operation in the ground war, as well as the attention paid to the air war, also contributed to President Bush's political decision to cease hostilities, between them establishing the media war as a major factor in the Gulf War's outcome.

¹⁴ Thrall, *War in the Media Age*, pp. 193-4.