

THE MILITARY AS EDITORS: CROSSING THE LINES OF CENSORSHIP

Patti Disparte

[Assignment: Write a persuasive essay in which you take a debatable position on a current issue; support that position through references to outside sources; and refute the major opposing point(s) of view.]

(1) All across the world, the news media are a constant and vital source of information. Yet, whether the public likes to admit it or not, the media are constantly manipulating what is viewed, heard, or read. From what types of commercials to air to what news stories to broadcast every night, the media are constantly in control of what appears on television and in print. During a war or other critical event, it is the media's job to report accurately and efficiently what is taking place. It is also the public's right to be informed in an honest and complete fashion. But is the public's right to accurate and full information really being fulfilled?

(2) In the case of the recent Persian Gulf War, the media were restricted by the military and were unable to report the news in a professional manner. The military claims that the restrictions were necessary for the safety of the troops and to protect the United States' national security. And yet the censorship was actually used to manipulate the news that was shown to the public in order to keep morale up for the war effort. Indeed, this censorship actually gave a distorted view of the war. For instance, the reporting stressed U.S. technology and neglected the human side of the conflict. So, in general, it kept U.S. citizens emotionally uninvolved in the events that took place.

(3) Reporters and journalists are trained to do a specific job: report the news. However, because of the strict military restrictions that were placed on them, they were unable to complete their tasks effectively. The decision to censor the media coverage of the war began with the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, Louis A. (Pete) Williams. At the onset of the war, he met with news executives concerning the coverage of the war and took their recommendations to Gen Colin L. Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. When he was finished, he had compiled six pages of restrictions for the press to follow.

(4) "Under Pentagon reporting rules, American military officials decide which American units can be visited by reporters, how long a visit will last, which reporters can make the visit and, to some extent, what soldiers may say, what television cameras can show and what can be written" (Lemoyne). With restrictions such as these, the press was not allowed access to information that was vital to proper coverage of the war. The reporters could not speak frankly with troops or have any intimate contact with them to get the real story of what was happening and how they felt about it.

(5) According to Williams, "Without restrictions . . . masses of reporters would try to wander through the war zone, risking their lives and those of the troops" (Berke). No one would argue that the safety of the

troops is more important than reporters getting a good story. Yet, as the reporters tell it now, there were many opportunities to talk safely to soldiers which were denied because the military deemed it unwise. In the rare instance that a reporter did get an interview, it was quickly screened and edited by Pentagon press officials or military personnel. "Three Pentagon press officials in the Gulf region said they spent significant time in analyzing reporters' stories in order to make recommendations on how to sway coverage in the Pentagon's favor" (LeMoyne). Monitoring such as this undermined the journalists' ability to do their job and therefore masked the information that the public at home received.

(6) The Pentagon press officers were most restrictive of what information was allowed to be shown on television. "At times they staged events solely for the cameras; at others, press handlers would stop an on-camera interview because they did not like what was being portrayed" (LeMoyne). Briefings were scheduled in order to keep the press up to date on the events that were taking place in the gulf. These briefings, however, often withheld information, or gave false information in order to tip the scales in favor of the military. This made it impossible for the press to accurately report exactly what was taking place in the area.

(7) Cheney has stated that "even the most innocent sounding information could be used directly against the men and women whose lives are on the line carrying out these operations" (quoted in Berke). The safety of the troops, however, was not the only factor the Pentagon had in mind when enforcing the censorship policies. Many people believe that media coverage of the Vietnam War had a negative effect on the American public and served to bring morale for the war effort and of the soldiers to a level that devastated the entire operation. The Pentagon realized that this type of media coverage needed to be avoided at all costs, and used censorship to assure that no negative views of the war be shown. "The U.S. military roared into the Gulf ready to overwhelm not only the enemy but the press. It had learned from Vietnam that it must conquer both" (Gergen). The Pentagon realized that it needed to keep the image of the war positive. It did this by centering news briefs around the technology that the U.S. was using to destroy Iraq.

(8) Editor-in-Chief of *US News and World Report*, Mortimer B. Zuckerman, states, "The spectacular visual fireworks of attacking missiles and planes subjected to anti-aircraft fire drew the whole nation into war." Nightly pictures of bombs destroying bridges and weapon arsenals pulled people away from the human side of the war and more toward the Star Wars view of the battle. The first photograph of a wounded American soldier was not released until February 25, over a month after the war had begun. Daily the report of SCUD attacks made the hearts of Americans everywhere beat with fear as they contemplated the damage they could do. When the Patriot missiles proved to be a success in stopping the SCUDs, the U.S. was automatically deemed a hero. President Bush even visited the factory that designed and manufactured the Patriots, and we saw this on television.

(9) Retired Colonel David Hackworth, a veteran in both the Korean and Vietnam wars who was in Saudi Arabia shortly after the outbreak of the

war, comments: "The media made such an overdramatization of SCUDs because there is nothing else to report . . . SCUDs are about as dangerous as firing a BB gun in the middle of a great big stadium, and the chance of getting hit . . . is one out of 10 million" (quoted in Katz 98). The military used the media to focus on the high technology of the war so the reality of the death and destruction that was taking place would not be spotlighted. The war was no longer the real story; the media became the main focus of attention as they were seen "donning gas masks and hurrying to bomb shelters" (Rinsler & Schiffer).

(10) The Pentagon and military wanted the U.S. citizens to support the war effort, but in eliciting this support they undermined an important condition of a strong democracy--the ability of the people to make informed judgments. As Rinsler and Schiffer, journalists for the *New York Times* who covered the war, have articulated: " . . . a distorted picture of events . . . in turn makes impossible an informed citizenry which is, as Jefferson wrote, the best defense of democracy." The view of the war offered to the American people kept them emotionally unattached to the events taking place and kept them from fully understanding the severity of the situation.

(11) Militarists insisted that the National Security of the U.S. was also at stake during the war. "Fears about giving aid and comfort to the enemy . . . are, of course, heightened when the briefings can be watched in Baghdad on Cable News Network broadcasts" (Apple). It is for this reason that information was not made readily available after a significant military move. After a bombing raid on Iraq, Cheney told the press, "Some of you have been critical of us for not putting out information more quickly. But we want to make certain that we don't rush down here with premature success" (quoted in "Journalists in a War"). I will grant that the security of the nation is not something the press would want to jeopardize.

(12) There is, indeed, a legitimate function of censorship by the military. But clearly in this war the censorship was working to other ends. The military set out to present a one-sided, glorified view of war. The nightly news became a military-designed slide show. "The graphics and the pictures and the music, by their very nature, emphasized the upbeat side of the war. It is cheerleader stuff . . . more colorful than the Fourth of July" (Rivers 32). The military presented a war that anyone would be proud of. The military ". . . misled millions of Americans into thinking they were watching a war when they were actually seeing a one-sided representation of it" (Katz 93). In the words of Katz:

It began to seem as if Vietnam were the aberration and the Gulf war a return to the rightful order of things, as if the country that invented the light bulb, the airplane, and television had regained itself and its innate technological superiority over the rest of the world. Our sense of ourselves as a morally superior people who have to occasionally take the wood to savage and troubling cultures was being reaffirmed. (100)

So the nation felt completely victorious and never confronted the destruction and loss of lives.

(13) The censorship of the Persian Gulf war deceived the people and denied their right to know the full truth. As a commentator said, "The Allies have taken Winston Churchill's advice: 'In wartime, the truth is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies' " (quoted in Dewar).

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