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# Media Handling of Sensitive Military Information

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Abstract of  
MEDIA HANDLING OF SENSITIVE MILITARY INFORMATION

The recent war in Southwest Asia has once again raised the controversy over media coverage of military operations. Through an examination of seven significant military actions since 1980, including Operation Desert Storm and two hijackings, this research paper will focus on one aspect of military-media relations, that is, has the media endangered security and the safety of American forces by publicizing sensitive information. An extensive review failed to identify any instance in which it could be unequivocally established that a member of the media deliberately disclosed sensitive information, knowing that it would or could endanger American lives. However, on a number of occasions both the media and the government should have exercised a greater degree of restraint and discretion. Several examples are also provided of situations in which the media possessed sensitive information that it did not disclose. Finally, while continuing to subscribe to the public's right to know, more members of the media and their sources in government should also recognize there is no mandate that the public must know everything or learn about it immediately.

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Extra!...Extra!...Read all about it! So goes the age-old cry of the merchant seeking to sell his quota of newspapers. In this age of instantaneous media\* coverage, there is a concern that not only the American public but also real and potential adversaries closely scrutinize the news for items of interest and intelligence value. The fundamental issue--the public's "right to know" versus the government's responsibility to protect its forces--is not new and has been the subject of often heated debate for many years.

In 1944, General Dwight Eisenhower made the following comment to the media:

The first essential in military operations is that no information of value shall be given to the enemy. The first essential in newspaper work and broadcasting is wide-open publicity. It is your job and mine to try to reconcile those sometimes diverse considerations.<sup>1</sup>

Live television coverage of combat areas during Operation Desert Storm raised this controversy once again.

This paper will focus on one aspect of military-media relations, that is, has the media endangered the security of military operations and the safety of American forces by publicizing sensitive information. A review of media coverage of seven significant military actions since 1980, including Operations Desert Shield/Desert Storm and two hijackings, failed to

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\* The term media includes print, radio, wire service, photojournalism and television.

identify a single instance where it can be unequivocally established that the press deliberately reported a story, knowing that it could result in American casualties. That said, this study found many occasions where poor judgment was exercised, either by the media, the government, or both. Finally, a substantial number of instances were noted where the media was aware of, but did not disclose, sensitive information.

The data gathering phase of this research project included a review of more than 1,100 media pool reports filed during Desert Shield/Desert Storm, hundreds of other news story transcripts, numerous books, and 35 interviews with active duty and retired military officers, historians, and members of the media. The focus was on the following questions:

- (1) Has the media publicized news stories concerning military operations, in advance, identifying the plans or timing of deployments, the tactics that would or might be used, the targets that were selected, or vulnerabilities or deficiencies involving or affecting American forces?
- (2) If so, did the airing of this information jeopardize the security of the mission or endanger American forces?
- (3) If sensitive information was publicized prior to, or simultaneously with a military operation, was it deliberately done by the media? Did the government exhibit lax or inadequate security in disclosing the information? Were there other factors, including sheer coincidence?
- (4) Have there been instances where the media deliberately did not disclose sensitive information that it possessed in order to protect national security?
- (5) Does the use of "military experts" by the media pose a danger to, or unnecessarily complicate operational security?

With these questions as a framework, the following military actions will be examined: The Marine Expedition to Lebanon 1982-84; Operation Urgent Fury in Grenada (1983); the interception of the Achille Lauro hijackers (1985); Operation El Dorado Canyon (1986 air attack on Tripoli, Libya); Operation Just Cause in Panama (1989); and Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm in and around the Persian Gulf (1990-91). Also included is a review of the 1985 hijacking of TWA Flight 847 in Beirut, Lebanon.

As these cases are examined, consider the following statement by Major General Patrick Brady: "The First Amendment gives the press the constitutional right to publish without prior constraint--not the right to know....Certain information can jeopardize national security....[but] any information....[that] does not jeopardize national security must be provided.<sup>2</sup>

#### The Marines In Lebanon: August 1982 - February 1984

During June, 1982, the United States deployed a contingent of Marines to Lebanon, in concert with French and Italian forces, to assist in the withdrawal of members of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) from that country. Daniel Bolger maintains that the Marines' mission was never clear--it was not for combat and it was not for peacekeeping, adding that former President Ronald Reagan described their presence as an



"interposition force." 3 Over the next twenty months, the Marines would suffer terrible losses in attempting to carry out a truly "mission impossible."

The media covered the Marines throughout the time they were deployed in Lebanon but the volume of the reporting, and the attention the public gave to it, largely coincided with major events, such as the actual evacuation of the PLO and the aftermath of the bombing of the Marine barracks on October 23, 1983. Of the scores of stories filed by the media concerning the Marine presence throughout this period, very few raised hackles.

Richard Halloran notes that a wire service report disclosed a "Marine fire direction team's position" in the mountains overlooking Beirut. He maintains that the report "jeopardized the operation and perhaps the lives of those Marines, and it should not have been reported." 4

Adding further details, Admiral Brent Baker notes that a reporter discovered there were still some Marines in the mountains above Beirut who were engaged in gunfire support after he had been told the Marines had pulled out. Believing that this would would embarrass the Administration, the reporter filed the story. Baker contends that the reporter "didn't think of the safety of those Marines. Because as soon as he went with his story....they started taking fire." Baker notes that in

his 27 years of association with the media, he "never had a reporter do anything to endanger a life knowingly," but in this instance, a young reporter, perhaps eager to win a Pulitzer Prize, failed to realize the implications of his story.<sup>5</sup>

John Cooley writes that Marine Colonel Timothy Geraghty "often permitted newsmen...to watch and record skirmishes in the nearby hills from the roof of BLT building. Once I watched a U.S. Army officer visually spotting artillery targets and relaying the information on a hand-held walkie-talkie, apparently to Lebanese Army outposts."<sup>6</sup>

According to CBS News correspondent Douglas Tunnell, who filed a report on the Marine forward observers, the American people had been told that all Marines had been pulled out of Lebanon; however, a French language newspaper in Beirut, L'Orient Le Jour, had printed a story disclosing the presence of the Marine observers prior to the CBS News report. As a result, Tunnell said, all of Lebanon knew about the Marines but the American people did not. In this instance, while media reporting may have endangered the troops, it appears the wrong reporters were criticized. Furthermore, the government erred when it assumed that after claiming all of the Marines had been removed, no members of the media, even foreign, would discover the truth.<sup>7</sup>

## Operation Urgent Fury

On October 25, 1983, the United States launched a military operation to rescue American citizens in Grenada. During the initial phases of the actual operation, formally known as Urgent Fury, the media was denied access to the combat area. Later, limited numbers of the media were allowed to visit the island but their movements were closely controlled by the military. The government maintained that the decision to exclude media coverage was based on a concern for operational secrecy. As an example, on November 14, 1983, an Army Times story reported that military sources cited the presence of the Army's Delta counterterrorist unit in Grenada as "one of the major reasons for the exclusion of the press from the early phases of the operation."<sup>8</sup> However, according to Lieutenant Colonel James O'Rourke, a second reason was "the desire for an absence of real-time press scrutiny of command decisions and battlefront operations."<sup>9</sup>

Throughout the engagement, the media howled that it had first been misled and then denied access long after the element of surprise had disappeared. Indeed, many contend that secrecy had been breached days before the invasion. These arguments have some merit, in light of the following items:

According to Lou Cannon, when White House spokesman Larry Speakes was asked about a report that there was an invasion in progress, he responded that it was "preposterous."<sup>10</sup> In fairness to Speakes, he hadn't been informed of the plans;

On October 30, 1983, Washington Post Patrick Tyler reported that news of U.S. military planning for the operation was known in a number of Caribbean capitals and, by extension, by Grenada's military leaders and the Cuban garrison, at least three days prior to the execution of the military operation. Indeed, on October 23, the "state-owned Radio Free Grenada issued an 'important announcement' accurately detailing which Caribbean countries had voted to support an invasion and the composition of the invasion force."<sup>11</sup> Such reporting suggests that Grenada was aware that a decision had been made to use force, if necessary, but it offers no hint as to when or how this would or could be accomplished;

On October 23, Washington Post correspondent Edward Cody reported Grenada's ruling military council had "placed its armed forces on alert and called up militia reserves in the face of what it said was an approaching threat of U.S. invasion."<sup>12</sup> This information suggests that government officials in Grenada were concerned about the threat of an invasion; again however, the media coverage offers no clue as to actual American intent, tactics, or timing;

On October 24, the day before the operation, Washington Post correspondent Kernan Turner reported "about 50 U.S. Marines landed here [Barbados] today and immediately flew off in three helicopters." Turner quoted an American Embassy spokesman as saying "What you are seeing could be used as part one of the options to effect a departure of the Americans [from Grenada] and to ensure their security."<sup>13</sup> In this instance, questions of judgment are raised with regard to the comments made by the government spokesman concerning actual troop movements and the subsequent reporting of the deployment by the media;

On February 2, 1984, the Atlanta Constitution's Durwood McAlister reported that Ted Koppel of ABC News had advance knowledge of the invasion and said that if he had been able to confirm it with a second source, he would have put it on the air.<sup>14</sup> If true, such a disclosure, prior to the actual deployment, could have endangered American forces;

On October 21, 1983, CBS News Pentagon correspondent David Martin reported that an aircraft carrier and a battle group had been diverted to Grenada. During an interview with the author, Martin said that, at the time, he had no idea that the mission was anything more than an evacuation of Americans and, were it not for the attention focused on the bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut on October 23, Grenada would have received much more coverage.<sup>15</sup>

It is fully realized that members of the media are employed in a highly competitive industry and that there are compelling

commercial rewards for being first with a story. As James Pontuso writes, some will argue that:

Even when reporters, editors and publishers are not driven by monetary gain, ambition bids them to outdo competitors... In the rush to be first, they will unveil a secret military operation to the world. This...is precisely what occurred when the wire services exposed the presence of...troops on Barbados prior to the intervention in Grenada.<sup>16</sup>

In summary, even though there was widespread speculation regarding a possible military action, and some ill-conceived comments by government spokespersons and media reporting, no evidence was found to positively conclude that this information helped the enemy to determine how or when American troops would intervene or directly contributed to American casualties.

In the aftermath of Urgent Fury, the media sought to ensure that reporters would never again be barred from covering wars. This culminated in the establishment of a panel composed of military officers and journalists and headed by Major General Winant Sidle (Ret.). The panel was charged with investigating relevant actions taken in Grenada and formulating guidelines for media coverage of future military campaigns. The final report, offered eight recommendations, one of which held "that a basic tenet governing media access to military operations should be voluntary compliance by the media with security...ground rules established and issued by the military.<sup>17</sup> These ground rules have been slightly revised over time, but the essence remains basically unchanged: Do not provide any information that could be useful to the enemy.

## Hijacking of TWA Flight 847

On June 13, 1985, TWA Flight 847 was hijacked while en route from Athens to New York. After being denied permission to land in Algeria, the aircraft ultimately landed at Beirut Airport. In the process, the hijackers murdered Robert Stetham, a Navy diver, and terrorized the other passengers. From the start, television dominated the story, interrupting normal network programming to report on the hijacking. Eventually, the networks became active participants in the drama, interviewing some of the hostages at "press conferences" staged by the terrorists. Peter Stoler notes that throughout the two-week ordeal, "the television networks, along with newspapers and magazines, also sought out government officials in an effort to find out what was being done to free the hostages." Stoler added:

The networks reported, early in the drama, that the government had ordered the Army's elite Delta Force...to the Middle East. It made little difference that the reports remained unconfirmed and that the government never said where the Delta Force actually was. Merely mentioning it, they [television's critics] felt, conveyed information to the terrorists that they might not have been able to get elsewhere.<sup>18</sup>

Former Ambassador L. Paul Bremer maintains that efforts by the media to discover and publish reports on the movements of military forces during a terrorist incident constitute a "particularly reprehensible practice." He adds:

Such reporting can only end up one of two ways: either the report is correct and the news organization runs the risk of

having served as an intelligence source for the terrorists; or the report is wrong, in which case it may unduly complicate the resolution of the incident. This subject deserves special attention. Reports on military activities designed to surprise or thwart an armed foe should be just about as secret as things get.<sup>19</sup>

Stoler points out, however, that the media will argue that while the ordeal of TWA 847 was overplayed, it also displayed "more than a semblance of responsibility." For example, "the press knew, but did not reveal, that one hostage was a member of the National Security Agency."<sup>20</sup> In addition, several media organizations endeavored to determine which, if any, of the passengers were military so that their identities would not be disclosed.<sup>21</sup>

Clearly, in the handling of this crisis, the media justly deserves mixed reviews. While there is no evidence to conclude that the media directly contributed to the death of Stetham or the abuse of other passengers, the coverage played into the hands of the terrorists.

#### Interception of the Achille Lauro Hijackers

In the seemingly endless cycle of violence in the Middle East, four Palestinian terrorists hijacked the Italian cruise liner SS Achille Lauro in the Mediterranean Sea on October 7, 1985 with more than 700 passengers and crew aboard. The following day, the terrorists murdered Leon Klinghofer, a disabled American Jew, and threw his body overboard.

Bolger notes that when Washington began to receive the first sketchy reports concerning the hijacking, Special Operations Forces were directed to move from their U.S. bases to the Mediterranean. After several additional days of terror, the ship eventually docked in Port Said, Egypt on October 9. The following day, Egyptian President Mubarek announced that the terrorists had already gone. However, "a reliable source insisted that Mubarek was lying and further reports indicated the terrorists were still in Egypt but were planning to fly to Tunis that night." As a result, the Americans developed plans to intercept the aircraft and force it to land at Sigonella, Sicily, where Special Operations personnel awaited.<sup>22</sup> It so happened that on October 10, President Reagan was in Chicago. According to Gayle Rivers, during one of the crisis management discussions that took place, Reagan and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger opted not to use a secure telephone line "because time was of the essence and their coding machines were not compatible without time-consuming adjustments. As a result, a ham radio operator in Chicago was able to monitor the "open-line conversation, told his brother about it, and the brother called CBS News in New York to spread the word." While CBS News did not air the plan, Rivers opined that "the security consciousness of America from the President on down to the ham radio operators needs some rethinking."<sup>23</sup> David Martin told the author that the decision made by CBS News was primarily based on the fact that the reliability of the source was unknown and there was no independent confirmation.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, in this



instance, the judgment of government officials is questioned while that of the media should be commended.

### Operation El Dorado Canyon

A series of terrorist attacks occurred during 1985 that resulted in the deaths of a number of innocent people. On April 5, a West Berlin discoteque was bombed, resulting in the deaths of two Americans. As Bolger writes, American intelligence intercepted messages that implicated Muammar Gadhafi with the terrorists. With this evidence in hand, the United States launched retaliatory air strikes on targets in Libya on 15 April 1986 under the code name Operation El Dorado Canyon.<sup>25</sup>

During an interview with the author, NBC News correspondent Fred Francis said he learned of the operation in advance. NBC News then chartered an aircraft in Rome, Italy to track a carrier battle group while he asked for guidance from the military as to how to handle the story. During the afternoon prior to the raid, Francis said he met with Robert Sims, former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, who told him that the matter was extremely sensitive and therefore, he could not comment but suggested that Francis should let his conscience be his guide. NBC News opted not to disclose this information although a telephone call was made to its correspondent in Tripoli, instructing him to keep the line open.<sup>26</sup>

Elie Abel writes that on April 12, nearly seventy-two hours before the attack, the Hearst News Service published a story by John P. Wallach "quoting a senior administration source to the effect that the British government had given permission for the F-111 strike" on Libya. Abel notes "the administration did not protest this disclosure of highly sensitive information about a military operation that had yet to be launched, nor was there a search to identify the leaker." According to Abel, "Wallach's story had been authorized. The administration at the time was waging psychological warfare against...Colonel Gadhafi, through a series of public and private warnings that an attack was coming."<sup>27</sup>

#### Operation Just Cause

On December 20, 1989, United States military forces intervened in Panama, implementing what was formally known as Operation Just Cause. Both the administration and the military devoted a great deal of effort to ensure the secrecy of the operation. Whether the element of surprise was achieved, however, is subject to different interpretations.

According to a story in the February 27, 1990 edition of The New York Times, correspondent Michael Gordon stated that Army Lieutenant General Carl W. Stiner told reporters "security breaches had given Panamanian forces several hours advance

warning of the attack and resulted in increased American casualties." Stiner responded to the security breach by moving up by 15 minutes an attack on General Noriega's headquarters and some assaults by Special Operations forces. According to Gordon, Stiner was not certain as to how security was breached but offered three possible explanations. One was a report that a State Department official had telephoned an official at the Panama Canal Commission alerting him to the coming attack, but Stiner said he had no direct information to confirm this report. The second possibility was that "the Panamanians had been alerted by a burst of encoded Cuban radio transmissions." The third possibility was that news reports of troop movements in the United States during the evening of December 19 might have alerted the Panamanians.<sup>28</sup>

During June, 1990, Stiner elaborated on each of these possibilities in an interview with Robert Wright. Concerning the telephone conversation, Stiner said he was told by ranking visitors from Washington that a message had been intercepted involving two Panamanians. One of them, a Panamanian civilian, warned the other, a military officer, that the Americans were coming that night, and that he had learned this from a friend, who reportedly received it "from someone in the State Department." From another intercepted telephone conversation, Stiner said he learned that the same Panamanian officer alerted another military commander, telling him "the ball game starts at 0100 hours; get your troops out and get them ready."<sup>29</sup>

According to a February 27, 1990, story by Richard Sia in The Baltimore Sun, State Department officials "reviewed allegations about possible security breaches and were 'not aware of any basis in fact that any State Department personnel jeopardized Operation Just Cause.'" As to the second possibility, Sia noted that Stiner said the "National Security Agency detected a Cuban high-speed 'burst broadcast' toward Nicaragua and Panama, possibly about the pending U.S. strike."<sup>30</sup> However, during the interview with Wright, Stiner said he had received subsequent information that indicated "the transmission came out of Panama toward Cuba, and [that] it was not related."<sup>31</sup>

As to the third possibility, Stiner said additional warning came from U.S. television news reports that airborne assault troops had left Fort Bragg, N.C."<sup>32</sup> However, Stiner also stated "such reports would not have told the Panamanians that the attack was scheduled for 1 A.M."<sup>33</sup> During an interview with the author, Wright noted that WTVD, a local television station in Fayetteville, North Carolina, aired film of military aircraft taking off from Pope Air Force Base on the evening of December 18, accompanied by a story that suggested that the 82d Airborne Division was deploying to Panama. Cable News Network also reported the arrival of troops in Panama during its 10:00 P.M. news hour the same evening.<sup>34</sup> General Stiner noted "The Panamanians watch television....Many...that were captured said they saw this, and called each other...and discussed in great detail what they should do."<sup>35</sup>

In the February 27, 1990, edition of The Wall Street Journal, John Fialka reported that Stiner said the "breach in secrecy," possibly caused by the telephone call to the Panama Canal Commission, a Cuban transmission, or U.S. television broadcasts, "added to casualties among the 3,900 U.S. paratroopers, who jumped onto the cement runways at the airport from airplanes flying at 500 feet,....to reduce their exposure to the hostile Panamanian forces who were waiting for them."<sup>36</sup>

In addition to the possible breaches of security already noted, there were other sources of concern. On January 17, 1990, Washington Times correspondent Bill Gertz reported "PDF [Panamanian Defense Force] troops overheard two U.S. soldiers talking about 'H-Hour' some three hours before it occurred" and that Mike Harari, "a former Israeli intelligence operative and a reputed security advisor to General Noriega was tipped off to the intervention some six hours before the operation began."<sup>37</sup>

Public affairs officers in the Pentagon alerted media pool bureau chiefs at 1930 hours, local time, December 19, 1989.<sup>38</sup> Fred Hoffman notes that Time magazine broke secrecy rules, after the staff was notified at a Christmas party about the call-up of the media pool, adding "the breach resulted from an open discussion at the party about who would go for Time--an assignment that should have been established by the bureau chief in advance." Hoffman states that the Time bureau chief:

Acknowledged that 'more people knew than should have known' but the secrecy rule violation likely could have been avoided if the Time bureau chief had been notified at his office during normal business hours--something made impossible because of the high-level Pentagon decision to delay the callout until after the evening news broadcasts on TV.

Hoffman concludes by stating, "so far as I could determine, the Time violation did not compromise the operation."<sup>39</sup>

Gertz also reported "another media pool member violated secrecy rules by contacting a member of Congress hours before the operation, prompting one lawmaker to call the White House in search of more information...An administration official said the breach 'seriously undermined the mission.'" <sup>40</sup> However, according to Hoffman:

This report reached...Bush when he spoke to...Speaker Tom Foley about 7 hours before the attacks opened. It did not check out. A top aide to the Speaker said he is convinced a newsman's probing call to Foley was prompted by reports on TV and news wires of military movements...in the United States and Panama, not by any leak from the pool.<sup>41</sup>

What impact did all of this actually have on the Panamanian leadership and readiness? Consider the following:

According to John Fialka, Stiner related that Panamanian Defense Force commanders were "issuing arms to their troops and preparing them for the invasion" but "they didn't tell Noriega." In addition, Noriega's "aides continued to feed him reports dismissing signs of a U.S. invasion as rumors;"<sup>42</sup>

Retired Army Lieutenant General Thomas Kelly said "some journalists may have been tipped off to top-secret military plans of the intervention in Panama hours before the action began...but noone reported it before troops began landing....The press had a pretty strong indication about...what was going to happen, and they didn't run it."<sup>43</sup>

Retired Marine Lieutenant General Bernard Trainor writes, "Whether anyone in the press knew for certain that an assault was about to take place is in doubt, but if it was known, nothing was disclosed publicly...Our government itself actually contributed to the 'leak' with its cute reply to newsmen's questions about the unusual air movements."<sup>44</sup>

In conclusion, it appears that once again both the government and the media made errors. False and misleading statements, airing of speculative information, and misuse of the "need-to-know" principle by both entities threatened the security of the operation. What is not clear, however, is whether any or all of the foregoing actually caused, or directly contributed to, a security compromise and resultant American casualties.

#### Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm

On August 2, 1990 Iraqi forces invaded neighboring Kuwait, thereby touching off the largest American military action since Viet Nam. From the end of the first week of August until January 15, 1991, United States combat forces deployed to the Persian Gulf area to deter further Iraqi aggression as part of what became known as Operation Desert Shield. Forces from a number of other "Coalition" nations subsequently arrived to assist in this effort. On January 16, the Coalition's offensive campaign to liberate Kuwait, known as Operation Desert Storm, began with a massive air assault. This phase was followed by a

ground attack which began on February 24, and concluded 100 hours later with a decisive Coalition military victory.

During the conflict, thousands of news stories were written and each of the major television networks deployed multiple crews who provided many hours of graphic film. On February 16, 1991, Pete Williams, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, noted that approximately 761 written reports had been filed by members of the press pools since January 16. Of that total, only five were submitted for Pentagon review, and four of those were cleared. Only one, which dealt with intelligence sources and specific methods, necessitated a formal request to the editor-in-chief to review the story. This was done, and the objectionable material was deleted. Williams said the correspondent "may have accurately reported precisely what the intelligence officer in the field told him." While military officials must use discretion in talking to reporters, "putting reporters in the field is based on the concept that [they] will not simply report all they see and hear but will, instead, use their discretion and comply with the ground rules on sensitive information." 45

Throughout the crisis, there was much speculation, some more educated than others, as to when, where, and how both the air and ground campaigns would be mounted. Some have argued that this provided Iraqi forces with valuable information while others contend that the sheer volume of often different



projections, coupled with Saddam Hussein's intense suspicion that the stories were part of a deliberate disinformation campaign, offered no assistance and may have confused the enemy.

Of particular concern to several military officers interviewed for this essay was the reporting of large-scale movements of troops, armored elements, and other equipment to western Saudi Arabia and the emphasis on bypassing the intricate array of obstacles the Iraqi army had constructed along the Kuwaiti and Eastern Saudi border. Some members of the media acknowledged that "secrecy rules" precluded identification of their precise location but then went on to describe their proximity to an east-west highway (there are only a few in Saudi Arabia), a town, or an oil pipeline. Such efforts to skirt the intent of the security guidelines could have been beneficial to the enemy. Troop strength and readiness were other topics of much discussion, although security guidelines for the media stipulated that this information was not to be publicized.

Navy Captain Ronald Wildermuth, Public Affairs Officer for the United States Central Command, identified more than 80 media reports that his office believed had jeopardized operational security.<sup>46</sup> But other military officers and members of the media interviewed by the author said that virtually all of the pool reports cited were reviewed by military personnel prior to publication and, in many cases, the actual events occurred one or more days prior to the publication of the story.

Nevertheless, a number of news stories described specific military units, strengths, tactics, locations, vulnerabilities, and other information which, when analyzed by professional intelligence personnel, could assist the enemy. To cite an example, in the January 25, 1991, edition of The Washington Times, correspondent Bill Gertz noted, "U.S. Special Forces commandos have infiltrated Iraq as part of allied efforts to search out locations of Baghdad's mobile missile forces, according to Bush administration officials....Pentagon press officers would not comment...on questions about commando operations."<sup>47</sup> In an interview with the author, Gertz said he had no qualms since the Pentagon was aware that the story would be reported and raised no objections.<sup>48</sup> A similar story by Paul McEnroe in the February 21, 1991, edition of The Minneapolis Star-Tribune, reported that "British commandos operating in Iraq are firing laser beams at targets to signal allied fighters where to drop "smart" bombs."<sup>49</sup> However, the military may have violated its own rules. According to a December 20, 1990 story by Barton Gellman in The Washington Post, Lieutenant General Calvin Waller, the deputy to General Schwartzkopf, announced on 15 December 1990, that U.S. troops would not be combat-ready until "sometime between the 15th of January and the middle of February."<sup>50</sup> Better judgment should have been exercised by both the government sources and by the media.

While not intended to deliberately endanger American lives or jeopardize operational security, several news stories certainly complicated, if not thwarted, implementation of military plans. As an example, for many weeks after the Iraqi invasion, a number of diplomats continued to operate in the American Embassy in Kuwait. Recognizing that they were running low on food and fuel, a resupply plan was developed. In a November 8, 1990, story in the Atlanta Constitution, correspondent Andrew Glass described some of the techniques that are used by Special Operations Forces to deploy payloads from high altitudes and included a graphic sketch depicting how a resupply effort could be conducted. Glass even noted that Pete Williams, when asked to comment, said, "As a rule, we never discuss future military operations and, particularly, any special operations."<sup>51</sup>

Live television coverage of Scud missile attacks was a concern of many since it was assumed that the Iraqi leadership, including Hussein, tuned in to watch the networks, particularly CNN. In a February 1, 1991, story in The Boston Globe, correspondent H.D.S. Greenway reported, "the CNN reporting from Tel Aviv on the first night of the Scud attacks was inadvertantly acting as a forward artillery spotter for the Iraqis."<sup>52</sup> Many of the networks broadcast film footage of their correspondents in Saudi Arabia with a background showing fiery plumes of Patriot missiles or the explosion of a Scud as it struck somewhere in the immediate area. Such coverage, however general, could provide useful targetting information.

An example where fault could be found with both the military and the media occurred aboard the U.S.S Theodore Roosevelt.

According to news stories written by Dallas Morning News correspondent George Rodrique and New York Times correspondent Eric Schmitt, a ranking naval officer told the media that an American aircraft had spotted a group of men, presumably Iraqis, on an island in the Persian Gulf. Using stones, the men had spelled out "SOS We Serrender [sic]." The officer went on to say that these individuals had not yet been picked up by American forces.<sup>53</sup> In this particular case, Waldermuth's memorandum stated "the result of this story was that 20-30 Iraqis were probably killed by fellow Iraqis who saw/heard the report before U.S. forces could rescue them."<sup>54</sup> During a telephone discussion of this incident with the author, Wildermuth said "the security review system failed...The officer should not have briefed the press."<sup>55</sup> In this case, both the military and the media should have exercised greater discretion.

On February 19, 1991, ABC News correspondent Bob Zelnick aired a report that described, in detail, how American aircraft, flying at night, were able to locate enemy tanks by using infrared systems that detected heat.<sup>56</sup> During an interview with the author, Zelnick said that when he asked military sources about the sensitivity of this information he was told that there were only two things the Iraqis could do--bury the tanks deeper or turn off their engines, neither of which would be to their advantage. Zelnick said the chairman of the Joint Chiefs,

General Colin Powell, was quite upset about the disclosure, but he received prior approval to report the story from Pete Williams.<sup>57</sup> However, Pete Williams disputes this claim.<sup>58</sup> In an interview with the author, Washington Post correspondent Rick Atkinson said that his organization was aware of the technique a week before the Zelnick story but did not disclose it.<sup>59</sup>

Fred Francis acknowledged what he considered to be the one breach of security by NBC News during the crisis. He said that he was aware of the general battle plan, including the flanking maneuver, during late November or early December. Using this information, he crafted several maps. About one week prior to the start of the ground war, someone in the New York headquarters displayed the map on television without his knowledge for about two minutes until he was able to have it removed.<sup>60</sup>

There were also many instances in which the media did not divulge sensitive information. For example, during an interview with the author, Wall Street Journal reporter John Fialka said his organization obtained details of the ground campaign, including the so-called "Hail Mary" flanking movement, two days before it began, but did not publicize this information.<sup>61</sup> Others had also concluded what was likely to happen weeks in advance but did not disclose it.

During a telephonic interview with the author, retired Air force Major General Perry Smith said that CNN decided early in the war that it would report the actual weather in the Gulf region but would not provide forecast information.<sup>62</sup>

Marine Brigadier General Thomas Draude told the author that after the air campaign had begun, but prior to initiation of the ground war, Marine elements conducted a series of artillery raids on Iraqi positions. Draude said a journalist, who was deployed with the Marines, prepared a story about the activity; however, when the Marines expressed concern that the article was too specific in describing the size and location of their unit, the journalist readily agreed to rewrite the applicable portions of the story.<sup>63</sup>

During an interview with the author, Army Colonel James Fetig noted that prior to initiation of the ground war, The New York Times developed a map of the theatre, indicating where the newspaper believed Coalition forces were deployed. The Army was asked to review the map prior to publication to determine if the information would pose a security problem if published; it did not.<sup>64</sup>

Retired Army Colonel Ralph Mitchell told the author that two days before the ground war began, CBS News possessed detailed information concerning the general battle plan for the Army's VII Corps but, recognizing that airing this information could

well lead to casualties, did not publicize it. As operations subsequently confirmed, "the information was 85 percent accurate." Mitchell added that prior to the ground war, an officer aboard the U.S.S. Kennedy briefed the media with a detailed map in the background that showed the battle plan; although this was filmed and transmitted back to New York, CBS News did not air the tape in order to deny this information to the enemy. 65

Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Michael Warden told the author that during the air war, one of the pilots shot down and captured by Iraqi forces was Air Force Colonel David Eberly. The media was aware that he was the Deputy Commander for Operations for the 4th Tactical Fighter Wing (Provisional) and, as such, was privy to intimate details about the entire air war strategy but did not disclose Colonel Eberly's position.66

Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm was the first major military action in which the media prominently utilized former ranking military officers and other experts to provide an analysis of recent events and predictions regarding future courses of action. The prevailing, but not unanimous, view of those individuals interviewed during the course of the research for this essay is that operational security was not jeopardized by the information that these individuals provided. However, General Smith said Army General Norman Schwarzkopf was angry with an analysis offered by retired Marine General George Crist,

maintaining that he correctly described how the campaign would be waged.<sup>67</sup> On the other hand, several sources said that at least two of the experts took deliberate steps to ensure they did not disclose actual plans. The prevailing view is that the use of such experts is here to stay and, at least in the case of Desert Storm, it was preferable to have many different opinions since Saddam Hussein was extremely suspicious and did not know if any, or all of these experts, was deliberately providing false information.

### Conclusion

National security self-censorship, even at the expense of scoops, has a long history. Journalists accept it because, as citizens, they are also concerned with national security; and as journalists and citizens, they do not want to contribute to the possible loss of American lives. Even when they are not convinced that the national security is at stake, they may give the government the benefit of the doubt, if only to discourage criticism that they are unpatriotic."<sup>68</sup>

The evidence suggests that the media has not deliberately disclosed information concerning military operations, knowing that it could endanger lives. In fact, the media has generally acted in a responsible manner. There are numerous instances wherein the media protected sensitive information, even when it was certain to make the headlines. Nevertheless, there have been many cases where sensitive information was publicized, however unintentionally, that could have proved useful to an enemy. This study also found many situations in which the



government and the media should have exercised greater discretion. Finally, both the government and the media need to work even more closely together to keep the public informed while ensuring that the safety of our troops is not jeopardized.

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G. Miscellaneous

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