

### THE MEDIA AND THE PERSIAN GULF: LEARNING TO COVER WAR AGAIN

By **Everette E. Dennis**

Shortly after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, the idea that the United States might “go to war” seemed both fanciful and unlikely. After all, except for brief interventions in Libya, Grenada, and Panama, US had not been to war since Vietnam, which for many people was a memory that films like “Platoon” and “Born on the Fourth of July” had recently chronicled.

The new media dutifully and competently covered Saddam Hussein’s forces as they drove the Kuwaiti government out of Kuwait City and took over what was typically given the cliched descriptor, “tiny oil-rich kingdom.” Almost at once a multifaceted news strategy ensued involving coverage of action on the ground in the Gulf, activities in several interested and effected capitals as well as diplomatic initiatives and determinations at the United Nations. The “story” had governmental and economic implications and was seen essentially as a distant artifact of public policy until American naval aid and ground forces began to move with greater numbers into the region in early fall.

By the time Congressional debates were in full flower in November, media coverage was echoing the language of war drawn from the speeches of legislators, diplomats and government officials here and elsewhere. Press coverage then became essentially debate coverage—presenting the points of view expressed in the House and Senate as President Bush got permission to proceed with what would become active warfare on January 16.

#### **The Pentagon vs. the Press**

While the administration was developing a strategy of support for its policy through briefings and press conferences, there was in the Pentagon growing sentiment that “never again” would the media be allowed to undermine the war effort as the generals believed it had in the Vietnam conflict. Rules for coverage were promulgated and presented in late autumn. After the press denounced their restrictive and, some said, “Draconian” nature they were modified, but the revisions still met media disapproval. Nevertheless the rules, aimed at preventing the release of information that would interfere with military operations or endanger the lives of troops, were set forth.

Amid questions about “whose side are you on anyway?” the news media, especially the major broadcast and cable networks as well as nationally-oriented newspapers, had to consider practically how (and with what approach)

they would cover the war should one ensue. While media people argue that they are engaged in impartial and objective observation and reporting, they are, in fact, part of a communication system which is essentially national (and sometimes nationalistic) in character and operation. The US media in wartime essentially report on and cover the war with US news sources from an American viewpoint for an American audience.

#### **Vietnam as the Exception**

Contemporary reporters who had not previously covered war, and journalists with little institutional memory, didn’t know, for example, that throughout history reporters have most often been supportive of “their side” in any war, as Philip Knightly’s book *The First Casualty* (Harcourt Brace Javanovich, 1976) amply documents. For most wars in our experience, except Vietnam, war correspondents travelled with the troops and were even assigned to units. Some even wore uniforms. Our images of great war correspondents—from Richard Harding Davis to Edward R. Murrow and Ernie Pyle—were of chroniclers of war clearly sympathetic to our side.

Censorship—except in Vietnam—has been commonplace in all wars and especially in recent years in Grenada, Panama, and in the British-Argentine conflict in the Falkland Islands. While Vietnam was different both in the freedom given to correspondents and in some of their reports that were highly critical, even in that war many correspondents were more the cheerleader than the critic.

#### **Journalists’ Education**

But the media in covering the events leading up to the Persian Gulf war as well as the six-week war itself, had little time to be concerned about history. While they cited the Vietnam war, for the most part they knew little about it. While they are fond of painting a picture of a rigorous, investigative press corps in Vietnam—and while their critics accept much of this interpretation of the press’s performance, in faulting it for undermining the war effort—the picture of a “critical,” investigative press in Vietnam is wildly exaggerated. It is true that late in that war television coverage of military action brought to us conflicting and critical information which was sometimes linked to declining confidence in and eventual public opposition to the war—though survey data show a more complex picture of the public’s views and response. Memorable performances by the press in Vietnam, like those by David Halberstam, were more the exception than the rule.

For the media and later for the public, the build-up prior to the Iraq war and later the war itself was a time of learning that:

—censorship in time of war is readily accepted by the public, if only grudgingly by the media;

—debate over public policy whether in Congress, on the street or on campuses is necessarily complex and requires considerable context;

—war coverage is necessarily multifaceted and complex, requiring stories about politics, economics, geography and social custom;

—new technology associated with the gathering and transmission of news by satellite is both a blessing and a curse. It brings information faster and provides better visual display; but it does not necessarily build public support in or for the media's overall performance; and

—relative newcomers to the news business like CNN could outdistance better-heeled broadcast and print competitors through a competitive edge aided by technology and assured by economics.

These and other lessons of war would condition the media as the war emerged not just as so much jingoistic talk, but as a harsh and inevitable reality.

Ironically, for some media executives early public opinion soundings seemed contradictory. As one editor asked plaintively, "how can 85% of the people support the war; 80% support the president and only 60% approve of us?" The old refrain of "why do they hate us out there?" which led to the media credibility crisis of 1984, was raised anew.

Whether the role of the media in informing the public about the Gulf war and in setting an agenda for understanding it will be found to have had a greater impact and influence than in the past, is something researchers will have to tell us later. But this may be the first important test in our new "age of information," when cities are wired and public communication is more abundant than ever before.

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## **THE WAR, THE MEDIA, AND THE PUBLIC**

**By J. Ronald Milavsky**

The war with Iraq is in at least one respect like all other wars: most Americans know it only as a mediated reality. We learn about it from media depictions and reporting.

Information coming to us about this war is sparse and highly selective. Much of what we might want to see is unavailable to any news media's cameras or human eyewitness, either because of the logistical difficulties in getting to battle and damage sites, or because the military prevents access. The images which do reach us are different than in previous wars. They are "live", the video equivalent of Edward R. Murrow's radio reporting from London rooftops. These bits of live war action and military and civilian press briefings, interrupt an otherwise steady flow of analyses from a very large number of experts, the television news organizations' back-up when live action images are not available.

What has been the reaction of Americans to the way this war has been reported? To answer this, we draw on both television ratings data, to examine the pattern of exposure to the war news, and on survey data to learn about usage of other media and about qualitative aspects of reactions to this mediated experience.

### **Television Viewing**

Within minutes of the beginning of Allied bombing of Iraq, there was a massive turning to television for information. People had been primed to expect something by the UN-imposed deadline of January 15 for Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait. Data supplied by the Cable News Network (CNN) show that during the last full week before the start of bombing, CNN averaged 2.0 rating points for weekdays and 1.7 rating points on the weekend among the 60% of the country's households that subscribe to the network. These ratings were just a little higher than CNN achieved during the same week a year earlier. On January 14 and 15, the two evenings before the bombing's onset, CNN's ratings for the 8 pm to midnight time period increased to an average of 4.2. This means that 4.2% of all those television households were tuned to CNN during the average minute on those nights—almost three times what CNN averaged during the same week a year earlier.

On the 16th, the night the bombing started, news of it traveled mostly electronically. A CBS News/New York Times survey of January 17 found that the great majority heard about the bombing first directly from the media;