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GAINING MOMENTUM: HOW MEDIA INFLUENCES PUBLIC OPINION TO PUSH
CIVIL-MILITARY DECISION MAKERS INTO FORMULATING FOREIGN POLICY

by

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Biography

Col Kirk R. Slaughter is assigned to the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB. Col Slaughter, an armor officer, has served in the Nebraska Army National Guard and United States Army Reserves for the last 29 years. He has leadership experience at the company and battalion level. He has a bachelors of arts degree in criminal justice and psychology. Col Slaughter is a graduate of the Army Command and General Staff College.



Abstract

Throughout history, media has played a major role in society. The way media sways people tends to have an impact on the decisions of our civil-military leaders. When analyzing the military engagements from the past, evidence suggest the media or press does have an influence over public opinion, especially during times of war and humanitarian operations, which eventually pushes our leaders into the formation and exercise of foreign policy.

Looking at trends throughout history between the media, public opinion, and decision makers, it appears that a correlation exists between all three. Analyzing and interpreting public opinion polls and surveys can be further deciphered by looking at what the media pushed people towards in times of crisis. Media coverage on the battlefield and humanitarian missions has gained momentum over the last fifty years especially, due to the fact that “the importance of the media is all the greater in times of crisis that are liable to drag the United States into military intervention.”¹

The purpose of this paper is to analyze and compare the impact public opinion has on civil-military decision makers. The positive and negative outcomes of operations over the last fifty years provide evidence that military and decision makers are either making choices for the good of the country, or for themselves. By going back into history where the media first stepped onto the battlefield in Vietnam to where the media is today, this paper will take a look at the impact media and public opinion had on the decisions made by our civil-military leaders in formulating and exercising foreign policy during six U.S. military operations: the Vietnam War (1967-75), Desert Storm (1991), the humanitarian missions of Somalia (1992) and Bosnia (1992-95), Global War on Terrorism (2001), and the Afghanistan War (2001).

Introduction

Foreign policy is an ever-changing condition in the United States. As crises occur, presidents and other civil-military leaders seek to change foreign policy as a result of the crisis. The United States Department of State declares that “foreign policies are established as a systemic way to deal with issues that may arise with other countries.”² When changing foreign policy, two of the biggest influential factors are public opinion and the media. During times of war and humanitarian relief operations, civil-military leaders must make difficult decisions such as whether or not to invade a country, eject a leader or provide humanitarian aid and support. History has proven that foreign policy changes and that leaders must take into consideration that public opinion and the media may provide a large amount of influence over how the nation proceeds.

One of the most influential factors in society is public opinion, which in large part, is shaped by the media. Public opinion can be defined as “the organized, expressed, systematic, and quantifiable voice of American political attitudes.”³ There are “three important characteristics of a ‘public’ in discussions of public opinion: a public consists of people who do not hold government office; it consists of people who are all citizens of the same nation-state; and it consists of all or a large part of those citizens.”⁴ Over the last fifty years, an easy way to measure public opinion has been through public opinion polls and surveys. Most of the time, these polls and surveys can be swayed through the use of the media. Polls allow decision makers to better understand how the public feels about a particular situation, such as what they believe about foreign policy in times of crisis.

Knowing that public opinion plays a significant role in a leader's decision, it must be understood how it can be swayed. Most politicians will deny it but "[public opinion] often determines a president's approach to an issue, setting limits on and ruling out certain options and indicating when to change course."⁵ Media sources consist of not only newspapers but also the television and the Internet, all live and up to date. Freedom of the press and freedom of expression allow people to have ever-changing opinions on matters such as foreign policy. Analyzing how public opinion is impacted by the media, which in effect influences the decision makers to change or create foreign policy, is important. Foreign policy before and after events, as well as what was going on in the media and the public's opinion on each matter, shows a better idea of how our decision makers made their choices. Whether outcomes were positive or negative may also help the military understand what needs to happen in certain circumstances and prepare them for what the next step may be. It is also important to note that media coverage, which started in the Vietnam War, is nowhere near what it is today. By understanding the media's role on the battlefield and the influence it has on public opinion should put into perspective the impact media has on the American people and civil-military leaders.

Over the last fifty years, the American public has been exposed to military engagements by media outlets, which in turn has affected foreign policy. This paper will take a look at the impact media and public opinion had during six U.S. military operations: the Vietnam War, Desert Storm, the humanitarian missions of Somalia, and Bosnia, the War on Terrorism-9/11, the Afghanistan War. By looking at these wars and the operations other than war, it will be clear the media plays a significant role in shaping the public opinion which in turn has an impact on the United States foreign policy.

Approach/Methodology

Looking at trends throughout history between the media, public opinion, and decision makers, it appears that a correlation exists between all three. Analyzing and interpreting public opinion polls and surveys can be further deciphered by looking at what the media pushed people towards in times of crisis. Media coverage on the battlefield and humanitarian missions has gained momentum over the last fifty years especially, due to the fact that “the importance of the media is all the greater in times of crisis that are liable to drag the United States into military intervention.”⁶

Looking at polls, decision makers are better able to understand how the public feels about the situation at hand, such as what they believe about foreign policy in times of crisis. It is said, “wise presidents use polls to determine when their policies need further explaining. Foolish presidents use polls to justify those policies. Only leaders without a political compass use polls to determine where to go.”⁷ The most difficult challenge when trying to analyze and interpret polling is that people often lack knowledge about whatever the issue may be. The “same opinion polls show roughly 30 percent of the public lack even rudimentary information about foreign policy issues: who is fighting, where, and what the disputes are. Another 40 percent has at least rudimentary knowledge for they read the newspaper headlines, watch the evening news occasionally, and minimally comprehend the issues... That leaves about 25-30 percent who are considered ‘informed’.”⁸ Knowing that only a small percentage of the American public is informed makes it frightening to consider that foreign policy changes are based on 25 percent of people actually having knowledge about the situation.

Reviewing historical timelines and the public opinion throughout history is another way to examine the media’s impact. Looking at the media coverage in each of these six operations, it will be easier to understand how much media has grown over the years. Then, by looking at

public opinion in each of these situations and connecting them to what the media was saying, it can be understood how the two correlate. Finally, by examining the decisions of the leaders in regards to foreign policy in these situations and comparing them to how the public viewed the changes, it may be possible to determine the outcomes and see the positive and negative impacts on our country because of the decision that the leader made. By understanding the correlations between the media and the public, the military and political leaders of our country may be able to have a better understanding of what to do and what not to do.

Historical Review

The best way to further understand the impact media has on the public as well as decision makers is best to look at the events over the last fifty years. It has been said, “only crisis makes the headlines. Moreover, the people and the Press are generally more vocal in expressing opinions against, rather than in declaring support for, and they never initiate anything in the sphere of foreign policy. It is only in times of tension that the public seems to get vociferous about anything.”⁹ To see how true that statement is, a closer examination of the media and public opinion over the past fifty years will be analyzed to help understand the correlation between the two and how foreign policy was affected during these operations.

VIETNAM WAR—1967-1975

Following WWII, America had a sense of superiority. This superiority or superpower stemmed from the Marshall Plan. In the Marshall Plan, the U.S. gave \$13 billion to aid in rebuilding Western Europe and created the World Trade Organization, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund. Most people did not have much knowledge about the events of WWII besides what they heard from newspapers, which mainly portrayed the positive aspects.

When news of North Vietnam versus South Vietnam came about, the public formed an outright opinion that as a superpower, the U.S. needed to help the South. At this time, though, “the public had little information on issues and people did not have thought out, consistent, and firmly-held positions of the matters of public policy.”¹⁰ With Lyndon B. Johnson as president making the foreign policy decisions, “a central component of [his] leadership strategy was to gain public support for his centrist policy of simultaneously committing military forces to oppose Communist aggression and pursuing peace negotiations with the North Vietnamese.”¹¹ Therefore, he took advantage of the public having little knowledge and attempted to sway them to agree to escalate military presence in Southeast Asia.

The first time media ever became involved in military operation on the frontlines of the battlefield was in Vietnam. With more coverage than ever, people became aware of what happens when one nation intrudes into another’s problems. With media broadcasting the status of the war a less optimistic view of the war began to form in the minds of the public, than what had been portrayed from the nation’s leaders, and the people started to mistrust the civil-military leaders. The media showed images that burned in people’s heads for decades, such as “a Buddhist monk doused with gasoline, squatting... as roaring flames consumed his body. An enemy prisoner grimacing as a bullet fired from an outstretched arm enters his brain. A 9-year old girl, running naked down the road, screaming as her skin burns from napalm.”¹² After the media portrayed these images, people highly disapproved of the U.S. decision to go into the war. A lot of polls “reported that ‘frustration’ with Johnson’s Vietnam policy was eroding the president’s general approval rating. A Gallup poll that was pre-released to Johnson found that ‘dissatisfaction with Johnson’s handling of Vietnam’ was one of the public’s ‘chief reasons’ for expecting Republican victories in the 1968 elections.”¹³ Most of the polls at this time had to deal

with “whether one ‘approved’ or ‘disapproved’ of the way in which the President was handling the situation in Vietnam.”¹⁴ While the public showed approval in the beginning (1963), as the war waged on by 1967, the U.S. public was clearly dissatisfied due to how the media portrayed the war. Because of these horrific images first seen on national television and the declining public support for the war, Johnson looked to get out of Vietnam and change the foreign policy in order to get his approval ratings up.

In this case, “although presidents are generally able to strongly influence opinion on foreign affairs, presidents still need to have a favorable climate of opinion for their actions, especially if the crisis involves casualties or significant military resources. Ultimately, the president must adhere to the boundaries placed on foreign policy by public opinion (Sobel 2001).”¹⁵ During the Vietnam war, for the first time, the people were able to see the truth, which made them want to be more involved, especially in foreign policy. The media was able to convey to the public the need to better understand what is going on with foreign policy because a decision maker’s choice on what happens overseas has a large effect on the public as well. Additionally, the military troops and their families were able to be prepared for what was to come as well. As a result, many aspects came out of this war. The “resolution [of the war] limited the President’s ability to send troops into combat without congressional consent,”¹⁶ which the public largely supported.

Overall, when the media started playing a role in the operation during the Vietnam War, the public became more knowledgeable of the events, therefore having an opinion in which the president had to consider. The startling images of Vietnam and the reactions of the public had an enormous impact on decision makers because their choices were to be made with the public in consideration. The prevailing and widespread domestic public opinion polls had a significant

role in changing foreign policy because the leader, Johnson, felt as if he needed to return troops home from Vietnam in order to get the public's approval back. What the military can pull from this operational engagement is most leaders will make decisions consistent with domestic public opinion. Therefore, military leaders can be prepared for military engagements by looking at public opinion polls in the future.

DESERT STORM—1991-1993

Two decades later, George H.W. Bush was the nation's leader. Following Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, Bush had to make a decision as to whether the U.S. should eject the Iraqi forces. Bush, knowing how important the public support was in the Vietnam war, knew that he had to gain the support and convince the public that ejecting the Iraqi forces from Kuwait was the right thing to do. The public opinion poll before the war had "the country evenly split between attacking and waiting for the economic sanctions to have more impact."¹⁷ With this being said, it "had been running in the high 50% range prior to Monday night's 'ultimatum' speech by President George H.W. Bush, at which time it jumped to 66 percent."¹⁸ Just hearing the leader's final decision through media, more people began to approve of the United States attacking Iraqi forces. The jump in public opinion polls also indicates that "the public support was directly attributed to the manner in which the President 'encountered public resistance at half a dozen turns in the crisis and overcame it, not with soaring rhetoric, but with bold actions, each of which shifted public opinion toward support of his policy'."¹⁹

Through this operation, it is evident that the media has a huge impact on public opinion. It also seems as though the president plays a part in the public opinion as well through media. In this instance, the president was able to be forward with his policy, which gained him support. Clearly, the media can sway opinion in a positive or negative way, but it also has a lot to do with

how the leader handles the situation. While Bush's "approval rating stood at 86% in public opinion polling,"²⁰ he was able to do so by explaining his policy to effect the public opinion through media.

In the end, Bush went with the public opinion to eject Iraqi forces from Kuwait. The operation proved to be a success because in the "wake of the cease-fire, Bush received the highest job approval rating any president has received since Gallup began asking the question in the 1930s."²¹ Therefore, it seems that when decision makers and the public are in agreeance to what is going on, the mission is more likely to be a success. When Bush gave his ultimatum speech, the media was able to affect the public in a positive way, which proved to be very helpful for the military's intervention in Kuwait and the ejection of Iraqi forces.

SOMALIA—1992-1993

The Somalian humanitarian operation started as a result of the media showing starving people in Somalia who needed the help of a larger nation. The Somalia mission "marked a new era in which American military forces were increasingly deployed for the purpose of trying to prevent violent behavior between conflicting side in a civil conflict, while protecting intergovernmental and nongovernmental organization representatives engaged in field-level humanitarian operations."²²

During the beginning of this humanitarian support mission, "the American people gave their unqualified support for the intervention in Somalia, when the mission was perceived as a quick, low-cost undertaking aimed at providing relief."²³ Therefore, the leader at the time, Bush, had full support of the American people. Since the events in Somalia happened to be one of the most closely followed news stories, the media played an enormous role in Bush's decisions. At

first, the media portrayed this operation as, a good one, helping people in need by providing millions with food and aid. However, as the situation developed further the local population turned against U.S. forces because of autocratic and corrupt dictators. What started as Somalian's happily greeting U.S. troops turned into Somalian's dragging dead soldiers down their streets. When media showed this side, Americans immediately wanted the troops home.

With the images of American troops being drug in the Somalian streets the media portrayed the mission as negative resulting in troops immediately being withdrawn. One enduring outcome from this experience was a Presidential Decision Directive 25 (PDD-25), enacted on May 3, 1994, which "precludes American involvement in most types of peacekeeping and humanitarian missions."²⁴ If Bush were to leave the troops in Somalia, his approval rating would have likely declined. Along with that, Clinton made it clear by enacting the PDD-25, that humanitarian missions were not the best idea in order to keep the troops from danger that is not warranted. Therefore, the negative press from the media caused the leader to make an immediate retraction. By doing so, it is evident that media affects public opinion, which in turn, affects foreign policy changes.

TURMOIL IN THE BALKANS—1992-1995

Turmoil in the Balkans started when the six republics of Yugoslavia began to secede. Extensive media coverage took place during this event, which showed the ethnic cleansing going on throughout Bosnia. With Bosnia being one of the most ethnically divided of the republics, people feared for their lives because of the innocent and senseless unlawful confinement, murder, rape, and beating of Bosniaks (majority Muslim) and Bosnian Croats (majority Catholics). In this instance, "sixty-seven percent [of the American public] agreed that ethnic cleansing 'is a form of genocide and the U.S. should take strong steps to stop it.'"²⁵ At the

beginning of this intervention, the nonintervention policy stood in place; therefore, President Bush stayed out of the controversy.

By 1995, the events over in Bosnia were deemed a genocide. With major media outlets covering the atrocities in the Balkans and the recent success stories of the Gulf War, the public began to believe the United States needed to intervene. It was said, “American attitudes toward Bosnia intervention did not crystallize until late because Americans were focused elsewhere and buffered by events and changes in U.S. policy. Shifting pronouncements from the White House about the nature of the conflict, inconsistent UN policies, and multiple peace proposals, threats, and cease-fires all contributed to the inconsistency of American public opinion.”²⁶ With the help of the media sending images throughout the world of innocent victims dying and the request for assistance by the United Nations, the Clinton administration was able to make the intervention seem more humanitarian than warlike.

At this time, it seemed as if media was going back and forth between showing the horror of ethnic cleansing and showing the unfortunate events in Somalia. While many people did not like the idea of ethnic cleansing, it was hard for people to agree to take part in a war in which they had no vital part. Therefore, when the media revealed differing views by going back and forth between the two atrocities, it made it hard for the public to form a solid opinion. Both Bush and Clinton had a difficult time deciding whether to intervene. In the end, it seemed Clinton made the correct choice because “even on the touchy question of U.S. ground troops, three polls found that an average of 64 percent of the American public favored the idea of Americans participating in a U.N. peacekeeping force and invading Bosnia.”²⁷

GLOBAL WAR ON TERROISM - 9/11

On September 11, 2001, when terrorists took over American planes and attacked multiple buildings in the U.S. killing thousands of people, there was no doubt that foreign policy was about to change. During this time media coverage was all in real time and live. People watched as the twin towers burned to the ground, and Americans were in fear. Through this fear, the media made people want action right away. During a rally at the site of the attack in New York, President Bush gave a speech broadcasted by media. He ensured the people that the United States was strong and would stand together and fight. Through this use of media, Bush made the people believe in him and used the media to convey to the people fighting was the best option. The public's overwhelming support of his speech was evident in a public polling in which "Gallup first asked Americans about U.S. intervention in November 2001, one in 10 American said U.S. involvement there was a mistake, while 89% said it was not a mistake."²⁸ For it to be that high, it was clear that Bush successfully conveyed a strong message to the American people through the media.

AFGHANISTAN—2001-Present

The decision making process to go into Afghanistan was a very short one. To this date it still stands as "the only intervention after the Cold War for which the public overwhelmingly supported a full-scale intervention with high risk of casualties."²⁹ With the attacks being on American soil, it was imminent that people would insist that we fight back. The live media broadcast seen on every news network was as strong as ever showing images of American troops fighting and being blown up by improvised explosive devices. Embedded media journalists were on the front lines with the troops showing some of the most horrific footages of war.

As time went on, the media started to portray Afghanistan as if it were Vietnam. The public believed, like Vietnam, the U.S. had invaded yet another country when that country

should be figuring out their problems by themselves. People became impatient for the troops to get back home, making the approval rating of going into Afghanistan decrease. However, by conveying to the public that the media was incorrect, Bush was able to keep his approval rating up as long as he kept getting results. At the end of Bush's term, though, public opinion polls and support for the war in Afghanistan began to decrease.

In 2008, Obama was elected President and conditions in Afghanistan continued to deteriorate. The death toll and casualties of American troops continued to rise and were the focus of attention in America with images of loved ones being displayed on the nightly news showing the most recent service members killed in action. There "was much evidence from public opinion polls that the majority of Americans believed the war effort to be failing and are keen for US troops to withdraw."³⁰ Therefore, Obama took control and decided "on a middle course for the war, lowering the objectives and the troops needed and publically announcing a timetable for the troops' withdrawal. As a result, public opinion impacted the means for the war and the deadline for the US effort, two important components of military strategy."³¹ This decision was most likely enforced since the public opinion so highly weighed towards doing so. After 7 years of fighting, people were ready for troops to come home, and Obama did so to stay on the good side of the public.

Therefore, it is shown through 9/11 and the Afghanistan War that media plays an influencing role on swaying American public opinion. In 9/11, as people watched the terrorists mass murder people on U.S. soil, they wanted immediate action. With Bush's speech, the public became supporters through his confidence. He used the media in his favor, which gained him support. In the Afghanistan War, the confidence started to decline. As the media made the war out to be like Vietnam and begged for the troops to come home, people swayed in the opposite

direction which caused Bush's approval rating to decline. During this time, he also became less confident with his decisions, which the citizens detected as weakness.

Over the past fifty years the increase and exploitation of media coverage in war and operations other than war has played a significant role in changes being made to foreign policy. When the leader takes control of the media and uses it to his or her advantage, the mission generally turns out to be a positive outcome because the public tends to be more supportive of the choice. When the leader lets the media control his opinion, a negative outcome usually occurs. This tends to be because only about 25 percent of Americans are actually knowledgeable enough to make these decisions; therefore, sometimes the media can persuade them in the wrong direction.

Summary

In the Vietnam situation, where the media first played a large role, they portrayed the operation and president very negatively. The recommendation here would be for the decision maker to provide the whole truth in order to get people to support him. If the leader fails to do so, people will be distrustful in him. He should also use the media to his advantage to gain support. A good example of this can be found in Desert Storm when H.W. Bush used the media in his ultimatum speech to convince the public it was a good idea. By being straight forward and strong, the public had confidence in him, and the mission was deemed successful by most.

In Somalia, the events were disastrous. The initial decision to help Somalians made sense until it became violent. As soon as the media portrayed the events in Somalia as negative, it began to look negatively upon H.W. Bush when he did not get the troops out quickly. It was hard to know the killings were going to take place, but as soon as the Somalian leaders began to fight,

the U.S. should have made a decision to get out. In Bosnia, intervening helped the people over there, and therefore, made the United States look sensitive and supportive to a country in desperate need of security and humanitarian assistance. It did, although, take an enormous amount of decision making process by our leaders before the U.S. finally decided to intervene. If this decision had been made sooner, a lot of lives could have been saved. In each of these events, media played a different role. While media covered Somalia severely and played an indecisive role in Bosnia the effects were the same in that changes to public opinion and support were swayed both ways (negative and positive) by the media. With these decisions involving humanitarian missions, a decision needed to be made earlier and stronger.

Finally, between 9/11 and Afghanistan, it can be concluded again that if our decision makers stand strong in their decisions and convey their thoughts and policies through the media rather than let the media construe their decisions, the nation will be more supportive. With 9/11, Bush used his funeral speech to portray the nation as strong and ready to fight. By doing so, the public felt safe and supported his choice. As time went on, he lost his confidence, making the public wanting the troops back home. Once Obama stepped in, he had to withdraw troops in order to gain public support. Again, this shows that media plays a huge role in what the decision makers choose to do. By effecting the public opinion, the media has a strong effect on what decision makers do in regards to foreign policy.

Therefore, taking a look at the past is a good indicator of what we should do in the future. By assessing each situation, the decision makers can be successful and the military leaders can be prepared before the decision is even made. In the situations where the decision makers used the media to persuade the public rather than vice versa, they were more successful. With that, this leads us back to the quote: *wise presidents use polls to determine when their policies need*

*further explaining. Foolish presidents use polls to justify those policies. Only leaders without a political compass use polls to determine where to go.*³² Therefore, when the president asserts his power and believes in his policy, more people are likely to get behind him and support him. A supportive nation is a successful nation.

Conclusion

The momentum to push our civil-military leaders to make changes in foreign policy will continue to grow and challenge our leaders in future military operational environments. As proven in the Vietnam War, Desert Storm, Somalia, Bosnia, Global War on Terrorism and Afghanistan the media plays a huge part in the public's opinion. After looking at these missions, it is interesting to see how the media positively and negatively affects the public. When negative opinion is formed, it is reflected badly against the nation's leader. When positive opinion is formed, approval ratings are very high. Therefore, it is clear that a president is likely to make decisions based on public opinion. Since public opinion is clearly run by the media, it can be confirmed that the president will change foreign policy based on public opinion. If public opinion polls continue to influence leaders and media continues to heighten, there is no way of knowing if leaders will ever make a decision by themselves.

The decision makers of the country have to consider public opinion before making any changes in regards to foreign policy. Along with having to decide on whether or not to make a change to a foreign policy they must make their decision and use the media to help gain the support of the public. In the instances in which the leader used the media to get the public's support, the public went along with the leader's decision and the mission was a success. When the media formed the public opinion and the leader went by what the polls were showing, the

mission was most likely failed. As leaders of our nation we expect our Presidents and senior leaders to be strong in their choices and in their decisions; which in turn, will be reflected in the positive public support and confidence from the American people.



Notes

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⁵ Wiarda, 69.

⁶ Auerbach, Yehudith and Yaeli Bloch-Elkon. 2005. "Media Framing and Foreign Policy: The Elite Press vis-à-vis US Policy in Bosnia, 1992-1995. *Journal of Peace Research* 42, no 1, (2005), 83-89, 84.

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¹⁴ Lunch and Sperlich, 26.

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- ²⁰ Newport, "Special Release", 2.
- ²¹ Moore, "Americans Believe U.S. Participation in Gulf War a Decade Ago Worthwhile", 2.
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- ³¹ Dieck, 177.
- ³² Holden, 1.

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