

Running head: THE MEDIA AND THE MILITARY

The Media and The Military

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### Abstract

Even though the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment gives the media the right to broadcast news without regard to military opinions, the Media must consider the impact it has on the public's perception of the military when they portray an incomplete or sided story. Reporting of this nature has and will have negative impacts on the military's ability to win wars. After looking at the relationship between the Military and the media, it's clear that over time their roles and relationships have changed. This paper will examine the relationship between these two groups starting with the Civil War and finishing with the current conflicts. Then the paper will discuss possible solutions to the problems presented.

## CONTENTS

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Abstract.....                                | 2 |
| Transition from World War II to Vietnam..... | 4 |
| Vietnam.....                                 | 5 |
| Desert Shield-Desert Storm.....              | 6 |
| Somalia.....                                 | 6 |
| Pre-911 Summary.....                         | 7 |
| References.....                              | 9 |

### Transition From World War II to Vietnam

So the question must be asked, if relationships between the media and the military were at an all time high after World War II, what affected their relationship during Korea and Vietnam? The war in Korea would cause many issues for the American public. These issues would have an impact on the nature of the relationship between the military and the media. Where as WW II was considered a unified effort on behalf of America this wasn't true in Korea. During WW II America had a large draft, rationing was in effect, and the American industrial complex was completely geared to the war. By comparison Korea has been called the Forgotten War. Unless a family member was drafted to fight (and these numbers were low compared to WW II), for many Americans the war was something they saw on a news reel once a week at the theater. Life went on as normal for the American public. This perceived lack of interest would cause many in the military to acquire an us against them attitude concerning the war and the American public. Also during WW II America's trust in the military was at an all time high. We were fighting the good fight against a easily identifiable enemy. In Korea we fought against a public enemy (the North Koreans) but we also began fighting against an idea (Communism). Fighting against a concept was hard for many Americans to identify with. During this time Americans would see a military legend (General MacArthur) publicly disobey the president resulting in his dismissal from command. Of course the media had a front row seat at all these events and it would begin to alter the confidence and trust they placed in the military also. Additionally military commanders began to see how the media's reporting on their transgression (read failure to follow policy) could and would result in their dismissal or failure. However at this point the military still didn't fully realize the power and impact the media had on the American public.

## Vietnam

During the Vietnam War the relationship between the media and America's military would reach an all time low. This decline was the result of many issues and events occurring both at home and in Vietnam. During the period of the Vietnam war major upheavals in the status quo of American culture were taking place. Starting with the Civil Rights March and moving into protest against war, the American public was changing their views on many issue regarding day to day life. Large numbers of Americans were also beginning to develop a distrust for their own government. This problem was exaggerated by several public officials lying to the public on a number of issues. During this time the military and the government were seen as one entity by many people. It's true that the military is a large part of the government, but many people would not or could not separate the American soldier from the politician. The line between those who make policy and those who enforce it was blurred in most Americans minds. This would cause a deep split between the military and the public they were suppose to support and defend. Some would say it caused the military to circle their wagons and fully develop the us against them attitude which started during Korea. This problem was made worst by the fact that many military leaders didn't understand the nature of the conflict in Vietnam. This failure would result in them over stating the progress being made by their commanders on the battlefield. When these exaggerations or lies were brought to light, many reporters would develop a loss of confidence in the truthfulness of the military. Overtime this lack of trust would result in the press losing some of their unbiased and actively doubting the military statements on the air. An outstanding example of this can be seen on the reporting during the Tet Offensive in Vietnam. History has shown us that this offensive resulted in a huge loss to the North Vietnamese, but since the military leadership had lied so many times in the past reporters refused to accept the

claim of victory made by the U.S. military. The media's and public distrust of the military would result in the military claiming that the media didn't support them during the war. However this claim is untrue. The hard facts are that the military lost the media's trust by their mishandling of ethical issues that arose. As stated earlier in the paper, during previous conflicts the media trusted the military commanders to do the right thing and punish the guilty. But examples like the My Lai massacre would show that the military was unable or unwilling to enforce standards (Bilton, 1992). Changes in technology would also result in the media being able to report to the public directly from the battlefield. This would cause Vietnam to be considered our first television war. Once again the military failure to understand the impact of nightly television newscast would cause problems (Online News Hour, 2000).

#### Desert Shield-Desert Storm

The next major conflict that resulted in daily interaction for the military and the media was Desert Shield and Desert Storm. During this war media access to the soldiers was tightly controlled by higher authority. The common reasons given for limiting this access was the very real problems of operational security and the lesser problem of lack of trust in reporters. One of the lessons the military learned from the Desert Storm conflict was that by controlling the media's access to the war the military could help influence America's support for the conflict (Media Report, 2001). However the military did receive some criticism for their heavy handed tactics in denying media complete access. This criticism would result in changes to the military's media policy during the next conflict.

#### Somalia

Both the media and the military realized the need for change after Desert Storm/Shield. The military had re-learned an appreciation of the positive role the media could play in military

operations. Furthermore the media pools also realized that the military had enormous power to limit access to the war zone. By limiting this access the military could cause news media groups to lose market share by making their coverage weak or irrelevant. By the time of the Somalia conflict the military was allowing the press more access to daily operations and information. However this trust was violated by the press setting up cameras on the beaches of Somalia and spotlighting Navy Frogmen as they cleared the benches for the incoming Marines. Another lesson that the military and the American government learned from media coverage in Somalia was that positive coverage could win over public opinion for military operations on the home front. The pictures and live coverage of young children starving to death would leave a lasting impression on America's public conscious (Minear/Scott/Weiss, 1996). The lesson was also driven home that pictures of dead soldiers could also cause the public to demand changes by their government. In retrospect both the media and the military came out of Somalia with a newfound respect for each others power to influence events. This respect would result in a new business relationship being developed for use during combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

#### Pre-911 Summary

Over the course of our nation's history the relationship between the media and the military has undergone many changes. The changes have been influenced and reflected by the changes our society has undergone. New technology and the demands of the public for more current and immediate gratification for their news needs have resulted in major changes in the media industry. The military also realized their need for public support, but was slow to realize the role media played in this support. Over the last 15 years both groups have developed lessons learned and explored new ground. The challenges leading up to current military and media

relationships was for them to develop the respect and mutual cooperation's they both enjoined prior to Vietnam.



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