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THE INFLUENCE OF THE MEDIA

ON NATIONAL SECURITY DECISION MAKING

IN THE UNITED STATES

by

Napoleon B. Byars
Lieutenant Colonel, USAF

A RESEARCH REPORT SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

IN

FULFILLMENT OF THE CURRICULUM

REQUIREMENT

Advisor: Major Andrew M. Bourland

MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, ALABAMA

April 1994

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ABSTRACT

TITLE: The Influence of the Media on National Security Decision Making in the United States

AUTHOR: Napoleon B. Byars, Lieutenant Colonel, USAF

Accepting the media as a fullfledged participant in national security decision-making is an alarming proposal to policy makers inside the government and to many military officers. Critics of the media claim its sole purpose is to highlight inconsistencies in national policy abroad and undercut public consensus for national defense strategy at home. Those same critics also suggest the media has historically been at odds with national security policy, acted irresponsibly in its effort to inform the public, and therefore should be kept out of the national security decision-making arena altogether. This paper examines this criticism and chronicles the evolution of the media as a fullfleged and influential participant in national security decision-making.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lieutenant Colonel Napoleon B. Byars (B.A. in Journalism, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and an M.A. in Communications, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley) is a 18-year veteran public affairs officer. He has experience at all levels of public affairs from base, to unified command, to Air Staff, to Office of the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff. Additionally, he was a contributing editor to *AIR FORCE Magazine* from 1984-85 through the AFIT Education with Industry Program and has authored several articles on Air Force programs. From 1990-1993 he was Deputy Commander for Operations for *Pacific Stars and Stripes* daily newspaper with headquarters in Tokyo. Lt Col Byars awards include two Defense Meritorious Service Medals, two Air Force Meritorious Service Medals, and the Air Force Commendation Medal. He is a graduate of Squadron Officer School, Air Command and Staff College, Joint and Combined Staff Officer School, and currently in the 1994 graduating class of Air War College.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Several key players occupy the arena for national security decision making in the United States. The goal of each player is to exert influence on and control the process. The President leads the executive branch that fields a State Department team, Defense Department team, along with the National Security Council. Congress, which has the authority to appropriate money for the armed forces, declare war and approve treaties, also fields multiple teams seeking to influence the process through House and Senate committees and subcommittees on defense and foreign relations. However, the dominate player in the national security making process is not elected by the people or sworn to protect and defend the constitution. Additionally, this player is not obligated to serve the best interests of government or promote international harmony among nations. The dominant player influencing national security decision making is the national media.

To understand how the media came to occupy such an influential position one must examine its evolutionary development stemming from experiences in World War II, Vietnam, and in the military's most recent large scale deployment in the Gulf War. A brief examination of the role of the

media in Somalia is also insightful. It's no secret that many senior civilian

and military officers are concerned over the growing influence of the media

on national policy and strategy. Many believe the media exerts a negative

influence on the process by highlighting inconsistencies in national policy

abroad while undercutting public consensus for national defense strategy at

home. Nonetheless, the power of the media in reporting, analyzing, and

capturing images of military involvement around the world must be

considered in the forging and execution of national security decision making.

Failure to appreciate the media's influence will likely result in eroding public

support for national strategy and policy reversals. Although the media is

often portrayed as the villain in national security decision making, it performs

a important role. Reflecting on the power of the media, Harry Summers

writes:

> By its nature the media can be counted on to show the cost of war, and
> the antiwar movement, not surprisingly, will do everything in its power
> to magnify those costs...it is the responsibility of the government to set
> national objectives and in so doing establish the value of military
> operations.[1]

Summers goes on to suggest that in WWII the political objective was survival

of the nation; in Vietnam the objective was never clear; and, in the Gulf War

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[1]Summers, Harry G., *A Critical Analysis of the Gulf War.* Bantam
Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., New York, 1992.

the objectives were expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait, restoration of the Kuwait government, stability in the Gulf region, and protection of U.S. citizens abroad.[2] In each of these wars the media played a key and changing role in national security decision making. It's helpful to examine how and why the role of the media evolved.

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[2]Ibid.

CHAPTER II

EVOLUTION OF THE MEDIA

The U.S. media industry grew up in WWII. Unlike today, competing morning and evening newspapers were an integral facet of city life in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles and most major urban centers. Competition for readers was fierce. The print media frequently engaged in newspaper wars--fighting to get the exclusive big story, hyping sensationalism, and even assaulting rival paper carriers on street corners. Radio was also a major part of the daily news scene. Franklin Roosevelt, who was the first President to recognize and fully exploit the power of the media in reaching the American public, is credited with single-handily promoting the commercial growth of radio. In the depths of the Great Depression millions of Americans gathered around their radios during fireside chats to hear Roosevelt reassure the public that better days were ahead. So it was radio and newspapers that brought the WWII to the public in 1941.

SUPPORTING GOVERNMENT POLICY IN WW II

The media's role in national security decision making during WWII was

one of supporting government policy and strategy. Media activity concentrated primarily in three areas--announcing the news; reporting from the front; and, reenforcing what Clausewitz called the remarkable trinity.[3] The latter, as will be discussed later, played to the media's strength of shaping not only negative images of the Axis Powers, but public opinion as well.

In the hours immediately following Japan's surprise attack at Pearl Harbor the media went about the task of announcing the news. Newspapers and radio alerted the public to America's entry into the war. Who can forget the sensational headlines of that time? *The New York Times* led the way on 8 December with the banner double deck headline:

<div align="center">

JAPAN WARS ON U.S.;
MAKES SUDDEN ATTACK ON HAWAII

</div>

and again a day later with,

<div align="center">

U.S. DECLARES WAR, PACIFIC BATTLE WIDENS;
HOSTILE PLANES SIGHTED AT SAN FRANCISCO.[4]

</div>

Additionally, radio broadcasted daily updates on war events in attempts to

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[3]Howard, Michael & Paret, *Peter, Carl Von Clausewitz: On War.* Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1976.

[4]*The New York Times*, The New York Times Company, 8-9 December 1941.

keep the public informed. In *ON THE AIR IN WORLD WAR II* author

John MacVane writes:

> For the first time in United States history, most Americans relied on an electric medium, radio, for their quickest, most immediate knowledge of happenings around the world which were of vital concern to every American man, woman, and child.[5]

Hollywood newsreels announced the news to movie goers and magazines

supplemented newspaper and radio coverage by providing combat

photography. Although news reporting was not always favorable, the media

generally supported government policy by urging Americans to join in the

war effort to defeat the enemies of democracy.

Additionally, the media took on the task of reporting from war fronts in

European and Pacific theaters. Ernie Pyle, the most famous of war

correspondents, brought the fighting up close to the folks back home. Author

David Nichols writes:

> Pyle focused on the individual combatant--on how he lived, endured by turns battle and boredom, and sometimes on how he died, far from home in a war whose origins he only vaguely understood. In North Africa, Sicily, Italy, France, and the Pacific, Ernie Pyle lived with the men he wrote about, six times weekly offering thirteen million stateside readers his worm's-eye-view of what it was like for the American

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[5]MacVane, John, *ON THE AIR IN WORLD WAR II*. William Morrow and Company, Inc., New York, New York, 1979.

fighting in the biggest war ever.[6]

Pyle's journal helped the American public to identify with the sacrifices G.I.s were making in defense of democracy.

Perhaps the most important role the media performed during the war was to help kindle public passion for total war and maintain public consensus behind national strategy. In doing so, the media used its power to shape public opinion and forge stereotypes as never before. Eric Servareid's comments in the forward to *TIME-LIFE Book WWII* typify the media's power to rally the country to arms: "They were on the march now, the glorified gangsters of Germany, Italy and Japan. A *true world conspiracy...It* had to be resisted."[7] Photographs published in the book depict stirring images of Nazi war rallies; U-boat attacks on trans-Atlantic convoys; German atrocities while marching across Europe; and, Japanese brutality of POWs along with other atrocities in the Pacific. These images--reprinted in newspapers, magazines and included in weekly newsreels--helped forge the "gangster" image of the Axis powers. As the war ended the media would

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[6]Nichols, David & Terkel, Studs, *Ernie's War: The Best of Ernie Pyle's World War II Dispatches*. Random House, Inc., New York, 1986

[7] *TIME-LIFE Books WWII*, Prentice Hall Press, New York, New York, 1989.

also capture the horrors of concentration camps and POW torture--again

reenforcing the image of Germany and Japan as inhumane and outlaw states.

For the record, the media cooperated with government efforts of

censorship during the war. However, it's important to note the First

Amendment character of the media was not completely co-opted. Both

Roosevelt and Truman endured criticism in editorial columns and political

cartoons. Nonetheless, on the strategic level of national security decision

making, the media's role was one of trumpeting the news of the war and

galvanizing public support for government policy and strategy. On the

tactical level reporters filed their stories from the battle front and generally

were accepted on the battlefield. For a military grown accustomed to such a

supportive press, the stage was set for a dramatic change in the relationship

nearly 20 years later during the Vietnam War.

REPORTING ON VIETNAM

Contrary to popular perceptions, the media's tactical approach in

Vietnam was similar to that of WWII. A new corps of young war

correspondents such as Dan Rather, Ed Bradley, and Morley Safer were the

talking heads for media's newest medium--television. Initially they went

about their duties much like Ernie Pyle, reporting favorably on military

operations aimed at the Communist insurgency in South Vietnam. However, as the war dragged on, senior network editors sensed growing public dissatisfaction with the handling of the war. Soon nightly news programs began a tactical and strategic departure away from supporting to questioning national security policy through news coverage.

On the tactical level, correspondents focused their camera lens on troubling images of military operations in the field. On camera, South Vietnamese government and U.S. military efforts to counter the Vietcong insurgency appeared to inflict more harm than good. Television nightly news programs led the way with reports of G.I.s burning whole villages. In *Morley Safer Flashbacks: On Returning to Vietnam*, John Chancellor writes:

> CBS reporter Morley Safer brought Vietnam into our living rooms. His August 1965 coverage of the burning of Cam Ne Village by U.S. Marines shocked the nation--and outraged Lyndon Johnson's White House.[8]

Once television set the tone for this new, questioning, and combative kind of journalism, the media assault was joined by newspapers and magazines.

Why did the media's role of supporting national policy shift to questioning it? Simply stated, the shift came about because news editors

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[8]Safer, Morley, *Morley Safer Flashbacks: On Returning to Vietnam.* Random House, Inc., New York, New York, 1990.

recognized eroding public support for the war. By 1968 the assault had

gained even more momentum as the American public was shocked by reports

of a massacre by U.S. soldiers at My Lai. Conflicting images of G.I.s doing

the wrong things created friction between war correspondents and military

leaders in the field.

At home, the media portrayed inconsistencies in national security policy

on the strategic level as well. George C. Herring, author of America's

Longest War commented:

> No sooner had the Calley furor abated than the *New York Times* began
> publication of the so-called Pentagon Papers, a history of decision-
> making in Vietnam based on secret *Defense Department* documents and
> leaked by a former Pentagon official.[9]

No longer was the media a passive participant in national security decision

making and cheerleader for national policy. Commenting on the surprise

strength of the enemy during the Tet Offensive Walter Cronkite reportedly

said, "What the hell is going on?"[10] In questioning government policies the

media was tracking with public sentiment for a complete reexamination of the

war effort. By 1973 public support had completely eroded as America was

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[9]Herring, George C., *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam [1950-1975]*. Newbery Award Records, Inc., New York, New York, 1979.

[10]Ibid.

defeated not on the battlefield, but through a lack of public will to continue the war. George Wilson, former national defense correspondent for *The Washington Post* places the blame for defeat clearly on the government:

> The Vietnam War was the first in which reporters and cameramen went all over the country and acted more like auditors than cheerleaders. It was also the first time television brought dying soldiers into America's living room. Accusations to the contrary, the press did not lose the Vietnam War. The half-pregnant strategy and dissembling at the top of our government did.[11]

Wilson is not alone in questioning national security strategy for the Many senior military leaders today agree there is much substance to his observation. More importantly, by mirroring and sometimes shaping public opinion on Vietnam, the media was evolving into a full-fledged participant in national security decision making.

In the two decades following the withdrawal of American forces from Southeast Asia, the media continued reporting whenever the military was deployed as an instrument of national policy--in Lebanon, Grenada [despite a news blackout] and Panama. It was also present during the largest conflict involving U.S. forces since the Vietnam War--Desert Storm.

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[11]Wilson, George C., Who Gives the Press the Right to Play God: Air Force Times, Army Times Publishing Company, Springfield, Virginia, 7 February 1994.

GULF WAR JOURNALISM

The technology and sophistication of U.S. weaponry in Gulf War took the media by surprise. With the major military activity devoted primarily to the air campaign conducted over Kuwait and Iraq, reporters were unable to capture the images of war so available during previous conflicts. Freedom to move about the battlefield was replaced with what the media perceived as overly restrictive press pools. Also, restrictions on the use of some media communication equipment for reasons of operational security caused reporters to complain about delays in filing stories. Additionally, film footage of the air campaign, excepting CNN and network reports on the bombing of Baghdad, was exclusively provided by the military--an uncomfortable arrangement at best for the media.

While the military works to glean lessons learned from the Gulf War and apply them to future operations, the media is also re-examining its performance during the war. Some media critics claim reporters have only themselves to blame for not adequately covering the war. In "*Anatomy of War*," a two-hour television program on Desert Storm produced by Screenlife Incorporated in conjunction with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, scenes of the war's destruction, death, and plight of thousands of refugees are

pictured on screen. Bill Kurtis, who narrates the programs remarked the

cameras capture "some of the most stunning and dramatic pictures ever

shot."[12] Why weren't these scenes the staple of news reports during the war?

Watlter Goodman, in a review of the program for *The New York Times*

remarks:

> Several of the analysts and journalists interviewed here lament that
> these and other eye-poppers concealed more than they revealed.
> "Television hid death very successfully," one of them says, and another
> calls television "the perfect blindfold." there is agreement that for most
> of the war, the world was seeing what the Pentagon wanted it to see.
> The daily military briefings, confesses a reporter, turned the army of
> correspondents into "unpaid propagandists."[13]

In the aftermath of the war, a full-blown debate has ensued on the

relationship between the military and the media. The emphasis of the debate

centers primarily on tactical aspects of news coverage and military operations.

Reporters want their freedom of movement restored along with immediate

transmission of stories. Military commanders on the other hand, would like to

restrain media access for OPSEC reasons and for the protection of journalists

themselves.

In short, concerning news coverage of military operations in-progress,

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[12]Goodman, Walter., *In the Gulf War, Cameras Didn't Reveal Everything.
The New York Times,* The New York Times Company, 14 January 1994.

[13]Ibid.

the issue boils down to what reasonable set of rules of engagements can satisfy both media and military concerns? Perhaps there is no ideal solution that will completely satisfy the needs of both sides. Following every major military operation since WWII there has been disagreements on media ROEs. In *Defense Beat: The Dilemmas of Defense Coverage*, Loren Thompson comments "Conflict between the media and the military is not merely unavoidable; it is essential."[14]

On the strategic level, the debate concerning the role of the media in national security decision making is too important to remain unresolved. In an arena where several players seek to control national policy, military leaders would do well to provide as much information and counsel as appropriate to all parties--including the media. This would ensure decisions to use military force are well thought out, consistent with government objectives, and has the support of the American public. The media can be helpful to this end. Sam Sarkesian, retired Army officer and Loyola University professor of political science writes:

> Investigative journalism and adversarial journalism serve a purpose in challenging government officials and policies...The media sometimes emerge as the only visible counter to the government's national security

[14]Thompson, Loren B., *Defense Beat: The Dilemmas of Defense Coverage.* Lexington Books, New York, 1991.

policy and strategy--the only check on potential government excesses.[15]

And therein lies the most important and healthy outcome of the media's

dominating influence on national security decision making--maintaining

vigilance in the process. In the Gulf War CNN reached an audience of one

billion people in 108 countries and became America's unofficial network for

coverage of the war.[16] In reaching such an enormous audience, the media can

focus public awareness on national security decision making to such a degree

that participants in the process are more vigilant in seeking solutions. When

national objectives are unclear, the media can then facilitate a reexamination

of policies before the nation embarks on enormous and questionable

expenditures of national treasure [military manpower and resources] such as

in Vietnam.

CAMERAS ON SOMALIA

A recent example of the media's dominating influence and ability to

cause a rethinking of national security decision making and strategy occurred

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[15]Sarkesian, Sam C., *U.S. National Security: Policymakers, Processes, and Politics.* Lynne Reinner Publishers, Inc., 1989. Reprinted with permission as *The Media and National Security* in AWC NSDM-NS 623 Resident Studies Readings: Book 1.

[16]Smith, Perry M., *How Cnn Fought the War: A View from the Inside.* Carol Publishing Group, New York, New York, 1991.

following the killing of U.S. soldiers committed to United Nations famine relief operations in Somalia. Critics of the operation claim that national security decision making was left to drift and the U.N. objective of capturing a Somalia warlord was not in keeping with stated U.S. objectives.

In a one-week period of intense and riveting media coverage--highlighted by the dead body of a U.S. soldier being dragged through the streets by a Somalia mob--the President, Congress and DoD were forced to re-access U.S. objectives. On October 18 all three major news magazines--*U.S. News & World Report*, *TIME* and *NEWSWEEK* published cover photographs of helicopter pilot and Chief Warrant Officer Michael Durant, who was captured in Somalia. *U.S. News* led with the headline: "What went wrong?" *NEWSWEEK* followed with: "Trapped in Somalia"; and *TIME*, exercising the full power of the media to question national security decision making altogether, ran the headline: "What in the world are we doing?" More importantly, all three publications devoted considerable space to the Somalia operation, including a historical synopsis on U.S. involvement, along with articles detailing the performance of all parties in the national security decision making process. And other news organizations followed with detailed reports questioning national strategy.

Admittedly, the Somalia operation was big news, but the tenacity of the reporting was also a bold display of the growing power of the media. The evolution of the role of the media in influencing national policy had become clearly evident. The re-examination of Somalia operations faulted a drift in U.S. objectives away from relief efforts. Again, *TIME* put it best:

> It seemed simple at first. There were people in need. America would help. But the mission to Somalia, which began with visions of charity, now puts forth images of horror. While America's attention was focused at home, the goals of the mission shifted dangerously, and now the effort threatens to become a violent standoff.[17]

Although, military leaders survived the government review unscathed, *political leaders inside the beltway did not. In a policy compromise the* Congress agreed to an administration plan that would guarantee the complete withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Somalia by March 31. The agreement avoided a complete reversal of U.S. foreign policy for supporting operations in-country in the short-run. However, on the world stage America was once again painting a foreign policy picture of inconsistency for the longer term. The lessons military leaders can learn from Somalia is not one of who gets the blame. The lessons should center more on accepting the dominant influence of the media as a key player in national security decision making.

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[17]*Anatomy of a Disaster, TIME Magazine.* Time Inc., New York, New York, 18 October 1993.

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSIONS

The role of the media has evolved since WWII and its influence is considerable. It does little good to wish for the days of Ernie Pyle, or to blame military misfortunes in Vietnam on a liberal press. Neither is it wise to assume Gulf War media restrictions will work for the next conflict. There is ample evidence from the media's own self-criticism of Gulf War coverage to suggest it will behave much more aggressively in the future to report the complete story in words and pictures. In short, next time the cameras will go in search of enemy casualties and destruction that are still the by products of warfare. The media evolves with technology and will certainly find ways to circumvent overly restrictive ROEs in order to satisfy a society thirsty for information.

But will graphic news accounts deaths and the thirst for more information cause public support during future wars to wither? Surely the recent U.S. experience in Somalia seems to suggest so. In his book, *The Military and the Media 1962-1968*, historian William Hammond with the

Army's Center for Military History writes:

> What alienated the American public in both the Korean and Vietnam wars was not news coverage but casualties. Public support for each war dropped inexorably by 15 percentage points whenever total U.S. casualties increased by a factor of 10.[18]

Hammond's research implies that if public support is to be maintained, then every effort must be expended to keep casualties low. Surely no reasonable military officer wants to suffer casualties. However, will the requirement for public support at some point in time go from low casualties to no casualties? If so, will America's armed forces continue to be a credible threat and instrument of foreign policy in the future? These are serious questions for debate by national security decision-makers before the cameras turn on to film the next conflict.

A more telling question is "can the media as a fullfledged participant in national security decision-making be relied upon to act responsibly and move beyond the tendency toward sensationalism and the "if it bleeds, it leads news stories?" As American forces prepared for the final pullout from Mogadishu last month, news accounts of U.S. operations in Somalia seem to suggest the answer may be yes.

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[18]Wilson, George C., *Who Gives the Press the Right to Play God? Air Force Times*, Army Times Publishing Company, Springfield, Virginia, 7 February 1994.

For example, in the 25 March issue of *The Atlanta Constitution* a full page of coverage was devoted to the lessons of Somalia. Correspondents Deborah Scroggins and Ron Martz covered in detail the chronology of events involving U.N. military operations in-country. The reporting was both insightful and balanced. The story included quotes from Private Shawn Clyburn, USA, on completing her tour in Somalia:

> "I wouldn't want to go on another one," said the 20-year-old private, who was among the last Somalia veterans to return to Georgia last week. "I was over there and I still don't see what involvement we had there."[19]

In another quote the broader perspective of Senator Sam Nunn, Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee was presented:

> A broad spectrum of American leaders including Sen. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.), believe the U.N. peace operations are the most cost-effective and politically palatable way to deal with many conflicts erupting across the post-Cold War landscape. "If you're putting up 30 percent, it's better than putting up 100 percent," Nunn said. "In the past, we never have undertaken military missions involving combat forces for what I call sympathy reasons. We have to be very prudent and very careful about this trend."[20]

And finally, carrying out the media's role of showing the cost of war, the

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[19]Scroggins,Deborah & Martz, Ron, *Beyond Peacekeeping: Lessons of Somalia,* for *The Atlanta Journal/The Atlanta Constitution.* Published by Atlanta Newspapers, Atlanta, Georgia, 25 March 1994.

[20]Ibid.

article notes:

> The final U.S. cost was 44 lives, 30 of them lost in combat, and more than $1 billion. The results of this humanitarian mission turned small-scale war are far from certain. And yet the odds are that neither Clyburn or the United States is finished with the messy, muddled business of so-called U.N. "peace keeping operations."[21]

The Constitution article goes on to list U.S. forces involvement in U.N. peace operations around the globe. Additionally, it highlights the command structure critics maintain contributed to the casualties suffered by U.S. forces during the October battle in Mogadishu where 18 Americans died and 70 were wounded. Finally, the article explores evolving U.S. policy toward U.N. peace operations as well as the mushrooming nature of peacekeeping missions worldwide. Across the country, during the final days of the pullout from Somalia, print and electronic media reflected with remarkable depth and balance the experience of American forces in the previously little known African nation.

What challenge does a responsible and balanced press present for military leaders?

As military leaders we are obligated to work toward finding a reasonable accommodation of the media on tactical issues such as access to

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[21]Ibid.

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the battlefield. On the strategic level, we must also work harder to understand and appreciate the important role the media plays in national security decision making. After all, the battle for public support for policy is won or lost in the media. If military professionals want the national security decision making process to function properly, we must come to a better accommodation and understanding of the role of media. Having done that, the media and the military can mutually benefit while protecting the national interest—one with the pen, the other with the sword.

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