Simon Warstler — War as an Instrument of National Policy

WAR AND MEDIA COVERAGE

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Carl Von Clausewitz writes that the most fundamental understanding of how to properly wage a war is the comprehension of the tripartite relationship between the government, people, and military. Much like the mathematical laws that allow a triangle to take a variety of forms, this three-way relationship described by Clausewitz can be molded or shaped to fit the political situation at hand. If pressure is applied to one side of the structure, then the other sides must be fortified enough to keep it intact. Politicians and military leaders are well aware of this and attempt to find their enemy’s pressure point in the hope that they can effectively dismantle any resistance. Leaders also try to find their own potential weaknesses and either eradicate or minimize them so as to avert the destruction of the delicate balance they have created in bringing the nation to war. Obviously, leaders on one side have to miscalculate offensively or defensively or wars would never end.

Of the three components of Clausewitz’s triangle, the most likely to be the variable is the people. The government and the military can change during a war, but the will of the citizenry is usually more fluid (at least in the United States, which is the focus of this paper). Considering this, it is imperative to understand how the people as a whole are moved and persuaded, especially in a free society where governments supposedly do not have the option of heavy handed control over the media, and consequently, lose the option of effective propaganda through the popular press.

Examining the last two, major military conflicts of the United States, Vietnam and Desert Storm, shows that the government is acutely aware of the media’s ability to persuade public opinion and the result of such opinion on the Clausewitzian triangle (ultimately the nation’s ability to wage a war). Vietnam serves as an excellent case study on how extensively detrimental the media’s effect can be on the will of the people in war time; conversely, Desert Storm illustrates how beneficial media coverage can be if those covering the action are properly contained (First Amendment issues aside) by the military leaders. Finally, comparing the two conflicts highlights the indisputable realization that the media now is, and forever will be, an integral part of any national war effort.

In the years immediately preceding U.S. involvement in Vietnam and the first few years of actual U.S. intervention, the press served as a mouth-
piece for the government, much like it did during World War II. John G. Stoessinger traces how the portrayal of Ho Chi Minh in the American press, which was dictated by the government's understanding and relationship to Ho, went from describing him as a "sweet man" in 1945 to classifying him as a "Commintern agent" who in turn was in opposition to our national agenda and values.² He continues by claiming that a string of global crises was making the American leadership and the American people ever more weary of the Communist movement and that the ensuing vilification of Ho Chi Minh was not so much a direct result of anything he particularly did, but rather a case of guilt by association or proximity.³ While this is imperative to understand and examine in reference to U.S. policy regarding Vietnam, it is also important to gauge the reasons for the press' evolution in coverage of the conflict and scrutiny of governmental policy.

Previous to full U.S. commitment in Vietnam, the press, for the most part, supported and conveyed the messages that the government wanted them to convey to the American citizenry. After all, the country had decisively established itself as the leader of the free world and the euphoria which was sweeping the nation in every realm of daily life gave little impetus to questioning or second-guessing a seemingly highly effective and powerful government; complete satisfaction does not breed contempt.

As the Red Scare grew, and paranoia followed exponentially, so did the U.S.'s desire to see Indochina remain as Communist-free as possible; however, President Kennedy was still reluctant to commit U.S. ground troops to the growing conflict. When "General Taylor, Secretary McNamara, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) [stated that] the deployment of a U.S. military task force without delay offers more advantages than risks,"⁴ Kennedy did not want to heed their advice, but feared a backlash from the Republicans. His solution was to claim that the U.S. was sending troops to train soldiers in South Vietnam, not to fight directly—an instance that Hallin cites as the "first case of government management of Vietnam news."⁵ Coinciding with the increased Communist activity in Vietnam, President Kennedy became more involved and determined not to allow complete control of the country to Communist forces. Stoessinger contends that while he was reluctant to commit U.S. advisory forces on a broader scale than what currently existed, he had deployed "Close to 17,000 Americans" before his death in 1963.⁶

Once the press realized that the situation in Vietnam was becoming ever more complex and dangerous and that the government was not fully divulging the facts of the matter, they quickly began the transition from lapdog to the government to the watchdog of the people. After Kennedy's assassination and Johnson's election to office in 1964, suspicion amongst the press rose parallel to the Johnson-led U.S. involvement in Vietnam.
Johnson's tactics of understating how many soldiers would actually be deployed and not telling the whole truth prompted the press to begin searching out the facts for themselves. It is important to remember that the press/government relationship is symbiotic and that the press is forced to give a forum to the government simply because they constitute news, but they also retain the responsibility to be as objective and honest as possible—a feat that cannot be accomplished without intense investigation and examination when the government refuses to fulfill their end of the relationship by supplying the facts of the case at hand.

Clausewitz states that support of the people is implicit in a successful war effort. Considering the governmental policy of hiding the truth in regards to Vietnam, the media's desire to fetter out what is correct, and the increase in technology in the 1950's and 60's, it is no wonder that: 1) there was increased coverage of the actual fighting in Vietnam and 2) that the coverage almost completely retarded popular support in the United States for the war effort. President Johnson himself said in 1968, "No one can say exactly what effect those vivid scenes have on American opinion. Historians must only guess at the effect t.v. would have had during earlier conflicts." While he does not concede directly that television affects public support, he hints strongly that it does. In 1969, Spiro Agnew lambasted the "liberal establishment in the networks and the prestige press" as though they were sabotaging the U.S. military effort in Vietnam, when in actuality they were reporting what they saw as the truth, without adding much commentary. Government officials criticized the press because they were bringing the reality of war home to the American people on a daily basis. Not to say that there was no member of the press who had a slanted anti-war bias, but on balance the coverage was simply a mirror image of what was taking place in South Vietnam. Hindsight may be 20/20, but questioning whether or not military and governmental leaders made the proper decision to divert attention from the war at its inception, with outright deceit, contributed greatly to the lack of essential popular support among the American people, and ultimately to a perceived military loss (real or imagined, the result was the same) is justified. It also begs the question, "was military action the proper diagnosis for the problem at hand?" Seemingly, it was not.

Kennedy did not want to send combat troops to Vietnam and as was mentioned previously, he was anxious over a possible conservative backlash if he appeared to be neglecting reports from military advisors whom were requesting combat troops. Unknowingly, in his attempt to compromise, yet retain a resemblance of his position, his agreement to send advisory troops to Vietnam actually embedded the United States in Indochina. Johnson continued along the same path as Kennedy when he assumed the presidency. He originally felt as though military intervention was not the solution, but since they were there and he could not pull out,
he felt compelled to give the military leaders what they requested in hopes that they could end the war and the problem would disappear.**11** Ironically, just as the lack of support for Vietnam is attributable to the media, so, in a way, is the original catalyst for our involvement. Both Kennedy and Johnson seemed unfavorably disposed to a military reaction to the situation in South Vietnam; but, the situation was highlighted by U.S. fear of the spread of Communism, an occurrence that must also be at least partially attributed to media coverage. While there was some threat of Communism spreading in various parts of the globe, and the media’s response of magnification of this threat is justifiable, it is not right. If the media had been fulfilling its duty, which they claimed to be doing in the latter stages of Vietnam, of examining all sides of a story in search of the actual truth, perhaps successive presidents would not have felt as though they had no option other than to commit militarily to a war they did not want to fight.

"It became increasingly a policy based on appearances; Vietnamese realities did not matter,"**12**—an unofficial comment in response to the perceived need for military buildup in Vietnam. While Presidents Kennedy and Johnson have both been shown to have neglected an important aspect of what Clausewitz deems necessary for winning a military conflict, their errors are nothing in comparison to the egregious miscalculations and representations which emanated from the military during this specific conflict. Military leaders led presidents to believe that they had no choice but to use weapons such as Napalm, that the South Vietnamese army was actually improving, and that the Vietcong would be easily defeated. They also assumed that the war would be supported by the American people and that they could control the entire situation without too much effort.**13** Sun Tzu dictates that one must know thy enemy and thyself before deciding whether or not to engage another militarily.**14** He also professes that "All warfare is based on deception"**15**, however, the deception is supposed to be of the enemy, not the people who are being asked or expected to support the war effort at home (in this situation, also the people to whom the military leaders are ultimately responsible).

One of the major points of contention between Clausewitz and Sun Tzu is the idea of how much power the military leaders should be granted in the time of war. Whereas Sun Tzu’s theory of giving the military whatever they need seems to have been followed during Vietnam, Clausewitz's idea of not allowing the military leaders to effectively dictate national policy to the political leaders would have arguably been a better course of action than the one pursued.

As was noted previously, and at the risk of using a cliche, *Hindsight is 20/20*. Yes, it is much easier for critics to say thirty years after the fact,
that the military, or whomever, made mistakes in Vietnam. Fortunately for the military, their vision into the past is as keen as anyone's and they are fully capable of rectifying situations that seem to have been troubling or cumbersome in any way, manner, or fashion. The military's handling of the media in the Persian Gulf War is an excellent case in point: not only did the military make absolutely sure that the media would not deter from their effectiveness, they construed a plan to actually employ the media (of course without their knowing) in the arena of keeping public support for the war high. This would not be another Vietnam.

In August of 1990, well before the war was actually underway, Navy Capt. Ron Wildermuth devised a plan called "Annex Foxtrot" in regards to military public relations policy while troops were in the Gulf. The main thrust of the document was the point that, "News media representatives will be escorted at all times." Unlike Vietnam, there would be no unauthorized interviews with soldiers in the field, no "live" pictures of those wounded in battle, and no deviance from what the military deemed as appropriate and what was confidentially off-limits. On December 13th, 1990 the plan for press control was taken a step further with the release of the DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, CONTINGENCY PLAN FOR MEDIA COVERAGE OF HOSTILITIES, OPERATION DESERT SHIELD. Essentially what this plan consisted of was the institution of the pool system. Media companies were allocated a certain number of seats to fill with their journalists. Those who were not lucky enough to get a seat were forced to rely on the information they could pry from those who actually had access to the press briefings. Although journalists complained in the beginning, they really had no option but to comply with the military's ground rules. Immediately or instantaneously, the military gained almost complete control of what the American people would hear, see, and read of the events transpiring in the Gulf.

Comprehending how the media affects public opinion is most easily done by examining Agenda-setting, Priming, and Framing. Agenda setting is the ability the media has to focus attention on what consumers or individuals feel is "important." Priming is the relationship between an event and the political leader who controls it—in this case George Bush. Quite obviously his approval rating skyrocketed because of the intense, favorable coverage of the Gulf War. Framing deals specifically with the relationship between media coverage and public support (negative or positive). Since Vietnam, public interest in military affairs has become very high. After a tragic war, in this situation with many American and Vietnamese casualties, any major military endeavor is obviously going to be the focal point of national attention. With or without the press in the Gulf, the war would have been the main topic on the national agenda—they just enhanced the coverage and consequently (because of the military's ground rules) the
amount of public support for a war which was not indisputably of the utmost vital interest to the United States.

Maintaining public support for the War in the Gulf was one of the major priorities of the political and military leaders of the United States. Members of the press were not bent on embarrassing those in charge or decreasing the efficacy of the U.S. military. What they wanted, was to have the ability to seek the truth without military interference. Marvin Kalb writes, "In the age of television...passions and patriotism can easily be aroused, critical faculties can easily be suppressed."19 From a constitutional standpoint, the reporters and journalists who covered Desert Storm have an excellent point: the U.S. military was indefensibly oppressive in their censoring of news as pertaining to the war. Soldiers were known to step in front of journalists' cameras, take what they were writing, and stop journalists from seeing things they were not necessarily prohibited from seeing. Would a more lax policy of media coverage have led to a different outcome in the fighting, probably not; but, would a more lax policy have led to a different outcome on public support and the priming, framing, and agenda setting mentioned above—most likely, yes.

In this situation, the press was the loser because the issue of freedom of the press was subjugated to a decisive military victory. From a decidedly military point of view, Lieutenant General Thomas W. Kelly (Ret.) writes, "The truth was quite healthy during the war, the govt. told its story and the American people believed it."20 Whether or not they were infringing on any constitutional rights of the press was the furthest thing from any military man's mind. Vietnam was still fresh in many of the leaders memories, which meant that an inherent distrust of the media was existent. Military and political leaders were also working out of the proper framework of keeping victory the ultimate goal. Realizing that they had to keep morale high, whether or not to censor the media was an easy decision to make. This most definitely would not be another Vietnam.

After the government established a feasible and efficient way to ensure public support for the Gulf War, it was up to them to continue along the properly defined path for waging a successful war (as defined by Clausewitz and Sun Tzu). George Bush knew that he could not go into Kuwait unilaterally; and therefore, worked feverishly in establishing a multilateral coalition that would abide by the U.N. declared objectives.21 Considering what was discussed above in regards to the necessary popular support of a nation at war, can also be applied on an international scale, an occurrence which in itself is rather amazing. Ramifications of media coverage and opinion shaping are no longer confined just to the pertinent country. Operation Foxtrot effectively shaped the opinion of the Allied force member nations. Judging by the way the military confrontations unfolded, the U.N. alliance, led by the United States, knew its own strengths
and its enemy’s weaknesses. They made calculations which were for the most part true. In fact, they probably over estimated the ability of Saddam Hussein to fight off such a powerful coalition. Rationality was a marked sign of the Allied Gulf War effort.

Perhaps the only sign of insufficiency in the post-war assessment is that Saddam Hussein is still in power. Before the Allied states went into battle with Saddam they declared that the objective was to make him remove his troops from the Kuwait lands—they never intended to depose Saddam Hussein directly. Leaders of the movement such as Bush, believed that he would not be able to sustain leadership in a war shattered Iraq, but these assumptions proved false. In one of the few rifts between the American leaders, General Schwarzkopf was forced to retract a statement that relayed the general theory of Clausewitz’s idea of completely destroying one’s enemy, he wanted to take Baghdad. President Bush was riding a tidal wave of approval at more than 90%, was an advocate of sticking to the pre-dawn U.N. resolution, and had no intention of risking a well planned operation by changing the objective. If the media had not been so pervasive in their coverage of the “awesome” American fire power in the war, George Bush’s approval rating would probably not have been as high, and he instead may have chosen to take Baghdad when the aggregate risks/benefits were weighed against decent, but not unprecedented presidential approval ratings. Whether or not this is good remains to be seen, but the fact that the media played at least some role in the decision is arguably clear.

The presence of the media is an influential and increasingly important aspect of foreign policy, especially in armed conflicts. Contrasting the effects of the media on Vietnam, The Persian Gulf and their subsequent outcomes brings the realization that a successful war effort relies on extremely careful, intricate planning of even the most minute details. It also highlights the question of whether or not military action was the correct response, considering that it is only one extension of national policy, with screaming clarity.

As a result of intense media scrutiny in Vietnam, the leaders of the United States learned a well needed lesson: a nation cannot fight a war without the support of the people and win. Regardless of the actual outcomes of the battles in Vietnam, the repercussions the war had on American society were as though the nation received a bitter and sound defeat. Much introspection has occurred because of the “televised” aspect of the war and in a net assessment of the media, in relation to the conflict of South Vietnam, their presence was generally productive. To military leaders whom would disagree with the idea that the media actually helped the country in the long run by covering Vietnam in the manner they did,
one would simply suggest the idea that if not Vietnam, then where? Poorly determined or “irrational” decisions to go to war, according to military philosophy, are simply wrong—a painful, yet pointed lesson that the media helped to teach.

Resulting from the friction between the military and the media in Vietnam was the strict policy of military control over what was communicated. In working toward a goal that was more clearly defined in the Gulf and had international support against an obvious aggressor, the military remedied many of the potential drawbacks that could have been attributed to the media before the war’s inception. Although the media was not fully able to examine and question the motives of the military and the international goals set forth by the U.N. while in action, they were able to relay vital information and helped keep support for the war high. Obviously this was not their intention, but any aspect of their performance, with which they are displeased, in covering the war, rests in their own hands not the military’s. Just as the media are supposed to allow citizens to be aware of the happenings in the government (including the military), the military has the responsibility to achieve its goals by all legal means necessary.

With the advent of hyper-increasing technology and an ever-shrinking global village, the media will continue to gain power and the military will be forced to deal with them in different fashions. Military leaders would like to keep the model set forth in the Gulf War as the normal operating procedures for war coverage; however, a wounded press is bound and determined not to let this happen again. Members vehemently vow that they will focus with much greater scrutiny on issues such as justice, proportionality, and prescription (is it the best means) rather than soldiers saying “Hi Mom!” in the next armed conflict. Foreign policy will never be the same because of instant communication and the camera’s ability to bring painful scenes and atrocities into everyone’s living room. Vietnam is a testimony of media magnification in a highly negative context, while the Persian Gulf War shows what can be accomplished if war is rationally declared and the media bring light to that fact.

The tripartite relationship described by Clausewitz describes how the will of the people is imperative for a successful war. One must wonder, that if Clausewitz were writing his theory today, would the geometric metaphor of the triangle be transformed into a square, with the fourth side being the media.
Works Cited


3Supra. 82.


5Daniel Hallin, supra. p. 31.

6John G. Stoessinger, supra. p. 90.

7Supra. Daniel C. Hallin.

8Supra. Daniel Hallin, p. 104.


11Supra. John G. Stoessinger, p. 94.

12Supra. John Stoessinger, p. 93.

13Supra. John Stoessinger.


15Supra. Sun Tzu, p. 66.


19Marvin Kalb. *A View from the Press*. *Taken By Storm*. pp. 3-6, supra.

20Lieutenant General Thomas W. Kelly (Ret.), “*A View From the Military.*” *Taken By Storm*. pp. 7-8. supra.