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To what extent was the US military's attitude towards the media during the 1991 Gulf War a product of its experience in Vietnam?

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MACIEJ OSOWSKI, MAR 27 2011

The Vietnam War was a lesson for the USA in many respects, and yet today it is still a puzzle for people who remember those years. One of the many questions asked is: how was it possible to lose a war which was not lost on the battlefield? Although there are many answers to that question, the most plausible one is perhaps that the war was lost because it was first lost at home, in the minds and hearts of the US citizens – when that happened, the withdrawal of US troops and the collapse of South Vietnam that followed was almost unavoidable. Arguably, the minds and hearts of the US citizens were lost because the media coverage of the Vietnam War, watched in millions of American homes, was uncensored, straightforward and highlighted all the cruelties of the conflict.

The media coverage of the 1991 Gulf War was entirely different[1]. What the US citizens could see and hear in this case were materials meticulously prepared by the army personnel, showing successful actions of anti-Iraqi coalition, including direct footage from missiles launched against enemy targets. The propaganda of success was at its most efficient at the time of the Desert Storm operation. This paper will contend that the US military attitude towards the media during the Gulf War was a product of its experience in Vietnam. A number of arguments will be presented in support of this thesis. Firstly, it will be argued that Vietnam was an obvious experience to learn how to handle the media from as it was the most recent US military intervention before the Gulf. Secondly, during the Gulf War, strict censorship was imposed on the correspondents, which was in stark contrast to the situation during the Vietnam War. Thirdly, it will be demonstrated that the treatment of the media by army officials was also radically different from the style of ignorance evident during the Vietnam conflict.

First and foremost, between the Vietnam and the Gulf wars there was no other major military intervention of the US where the army could develop a new approach towards the media. When considering a media strategy for the Gulf, American military must have kept in mind the last major intervention – and that was Vietnam. Admittedly, this argument has come under some criticism. To start with, surely the military does not learn lessons simply from one conflict to another – the learning process must be a continuum. This could be the case also of the first war in Iraq. Although the memory of Vietnam must have been instilled in the military's minds, the nature of the media and the rules governing it had greatly changed over the 20 years separating the two conflicts, and so had the army's perception of them. Secondly, despite the fact that the US army had not been involved in major conflicts over the 20 years period, there had nonetheless been some conflicts during which a strategy for working with the media potentially could have been developed – suffice it to mention the Falkland Islands in 1982, Grenada in 1983 or Panama in 1989. Although this line of criticism is valid to some extent, it can nevertheless be argued that the main lesson for the Gulf War was Vietnam, as the army itself declared on different occasions[2].

Secondly, the fact that Vietnam was an important lesson to the US military as far as media coverage is concerned is reflected in the change that took place with regard to the freedom of speech. While the journalism during the Vietnam War was seen as objective and unbiased, the situation was very much different in 1991: "From the very inception of the Gulf Crisis, the dominant US media failed to fulfil the role of independent journalism. Instead it acted as public

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Written by Maciej Osowski

relations for the State and Defence Departments, assimilating the language, terminology, and the assumptions of the administration, thereby under-mining any critical perspectives upon the conduct of the war"[3].

Here, a question arises why media did follow the state's rhetoric when covering the Gulf War. Was it because it was a comfortable position, to show the state-approved version of events, or was it because they were silenced by censorship? Ella Shoat offers a straightforward answer to this question: "the right-wing hermeneutic reading of Vietnam was that now we should fight without 'one hand tied behind our back', and its media corollary was that the camera must be kept away from body bags, that reporters must be controlled, that censorship is necessary for victory"[4]. Indeed, journalists had limited access to information sources during the Gulf War. On January 7, the army issued a set of rules requiring reporters working in Pentagon-selected 'pools' to report on the war, to travel with military escorts at all times and to comply with censorship requirements in news management[5]. It was but one of several steps aimed at silencing journalists that the American army took during the conflict, and similar ones were taken by British and French authorities. It seemed that the Vietnam lesson was drawn by all members of the anti-Iraqi coalition. The Gulf War was supposed to be much different from the Vietnam one, and so it was. Vietnam was not to be repeated, and the military and political leaders knew what to do to present another major conflict in brighter light: "Political and military leaders continually compared the current crisis to the Vietnam War. The tenor of the comparison consistently reassured us that this crisis was not a replay of that 'unhappy conflict in Asia'; this war was not going to be another Vietnam"[6].

Frequent comparison to Vietnam was aimed at justifying partial censorship introduced. The afflicting picture of Vietnam was strong enough to validate the control of the media – it was a popular Washington opinion that the media were to blame for the lack of home support for Vietnam conflict[7]. Nevertheless, although the media's impact on the public opinion was significant during the Vietnam War, one should be critical of an argument whereby it is the media that were to blame for the Vietnam defeat. Officer "fragging", village massacres, and tens of thousands of dead soldiers – all that was not done by the media. All the same, by the time the Gulf War broke out, the military had realised that the best strategy was to control information sent home.

It can also be postulated, however, that it was not the military censorship that brought the one-sided coverage from the battlefield (or at least not solely it), as it was not only the military approach towards the media that changed but the media itself had evolved since 1970's. The tabloidisation of the media had already started prior to the Gulf War. American TV and news companies at large were looking for a straightforward message from the front which would sell profitably. A message that would sell best was one of success, as Americans desperately wanted success in this war. Hence, it was precisely such message that they would receive through CNN's direct transmissions from supposedly victorious battles in the air and on the ground. In other words, to some extent, it was not so much the lesson that the military drew from Vietnam that led to the toning down of the media coverage during the Gulf conflict, as the actual need of the media itself to project success.

Another important lesson drawn by the military from Vietnam was one regarding casualties. According to official statistics, 58,193 American soldiers were killed during that campaign; over 150,000 were wounded, and at least 21,000 permanently disabled. These were numbers which could perhaps be accepted if that was a war in direct defence of the United States. However, the connection between Vietnam and the supposed communist threat to the US was blurred in the eyes of an average American citizen. That is why it was hard to accept for people that so many American young boys were dying[8]. During the Vietnam War, the number of casualties was delivered to American homes daily, accompanied by the images of boxes containing dead bodies. That was an important lesson for the military. The army must have realised that in a next similar conflict, the bottom line of success should be to limit the number of casualties to the minimum. That is to say, it was more a change in strategy as far as the conduct of warfare was concerned than simply a transformation of the attitude towards the media. As general Schwarzkopf declared: "This is not going to be another Vietnam. We're going to wrap this thing up and get you all home as soon as possible"[9]. Here, the media was used as a tool of this new strategy. While partial censorship of the media can be seen as a viable option, the number of casualties cannot be tampered with in a democratic state. At the end of the day, the media will disclose how big the losses are anyway. The number of casualties in combat during the Gulf War was smaller than the number of road accident deaths over the same period of time, which shows that the warfare strategy did indeed undergo a transformation[10]. What is more, it was also particularly important to keep casualties

To what extent was the US military's attitude towards the media during the 1991 Gulf War a pro

Written by Maciej Osowski

to the minimum since the army was now composed of professional soldiers, not recruits, and so they had to be enticed to join the army as career option – high numbers of casualties would surely do a disservice to this cause. Hence, since the media could not bombard the public with dramatically increasing numbers of casualties, they had to show successes to attract it – and so they did.

Another important indicator of the army's different attitude during the Desert Storm as compared to Vietnam was its military information strategy. During the Vietnam War, the army was not very well prepared to selling war to media correspondents. Reporters were invited to attend nightly MACV conferences covering everyday events that became known as the "Five O'Clock Follies"[11]. The Saigon news bureau chiefs were also invited to closed meetings at which presentations would be made by a briefing officer, or an official from the embassy who would present background information on the upcoming military actions or Vietnamese political events. The briefings were originally designed to provide reporters with clear summaries of widely scattered action. Gradually, the "Five O'Clock Follies" evolved into a show that satisfied no one. They were always aimed to provide less information rather than more. Partly as a result of reporters' demands for precision, briefers began to give them body counts and other statistics which eventually proved to be of dubious value. As time passed, the more enterprising newsmen boycotted the Follies[12]. Unfortunately for the military, almost everything reporters obtained in the field was distorted (certainly most of it was left out of the "Follies"). More importantly, the US military was usually willing to transport reporters to the action. They were taken wherever they wanted to go, to see whatever they wanted to see, to the extent that it was easier to cover the war than the less violent stories in parts of Europe[13]. As can be seen, in Vietnam not only did the military allow the correspondents to travel without limits or censorship (or, indeed, helped them with that), but it also unintentionally encouraged reporters to seek real information by providing them with dubious military propaganda presented in most uninteresting manner.

The situation during the Gulf War was markedly different, precisely as a result of the Vietnam lesson drawn not only by military but also by the State Department and White House. In the Gulf, not only were reporters under strict censorship while on the front, but information was also prepared and delivered by the army in a radically different way to one used in Vietnam. It was the first "television war". For the first time, people in America and all over the world were able to watch live pictures of missiles approaching their targets and B-2B bombers targeting Baghdad. Allied forces wanted to demonstrate the accuracy of their weapons, and how "civilian friendly" the operation was in contrast to the Vietnam conflict[14]. As this was a revolutionary step in presenting military operations, it was widely accepted first by the news agencies and then the citizens who could thus feel as if they were in the middle of a battlefield.

Furthermore, in the Gulf most of the press information came from briefings organised by the military. Indeed, the army was the only source of live information. Information on meetings was presented in an interesting way, and was often uncritically accepted by the journalists – frequently it went to the public not analysed, straight from the army's press room[15]. It was an altogether different practice from the hated "Five O'Clock Follies". This way the army strategy towards the media was arguably successful, and certainly more effective than in Vietnam.

In short, restricted in their freedom of movement on the battlefield, correspondents were largely limited to always optimistic communicates from press conferences prepared by the military. In this atmosphere, their reports were obviously biased: "The euphoria at the beginning and the end of the Persian Gulf War bracketed one of the most disturbing episodes in U.S. journalistic history—a period in which many reporters for national media abandoned any pretense of neutrality or reportorial distance in favor of boosterism for the war effort".[16]

From a critical point of view, it is not entirely certain that the media euphoria during and after the Gulf War was the effect of careful planning done by the army officials responsible for contacts with the media. It must be kept in mind that the media was widely blamed after the Vietnam War for creating opposition at home. To avoid similar accusations of a lack of patriotism in the Gulf, correspondents might have been biased from the very start in favour of the war, especially as it was declared to be just (in defence of a small oppressed nation), well-prepared (big, UN-authorized coalition of states) and unavoidable (preceded by a long coercive diplomacy processes). Therefore, it could be argued that it is not so much the military attitude towards the media that changed after Vietnam, leading to their bias, as the media itself.

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Written by Maciej Osowski

This paper has postulated that the US military's attitude towards the media during the 1991 Gulf War was a product of its experience in Vietnam. Several arguments were presented to support this thesis. When the Gulf War broke out, Vietnam had been the most recent major intervention, so it was an obvious experience for the military to learn from. What is more, as opposed to Vietnam, strict censorship was introduced in the Gulf, in particular for the correspondents on the battlefield. Finally, the military's attitude towards the media changed from the ignorance represented by the "Five O'Clock Follies" to putting the media in the centre of the army's attention during the Gulf conflict. In sum, to paraphrase Walter Cronkite, it is not necessarily exactly to be the way it was, but it is believed that the lesson derived from the Vietnam War changed the military's approach towards the media during the Persian Gulf War.

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To what extent was the US military's attitude towards the media during the 1991 Gulf War a pro

Written by Maciej Osowski

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