

UNITED STATES ARMY INSTITUTE FOR MILITARY ASSISTANCE

NATIONAL SECURITY AND THE MEDIA

4934
Mar 74

ADVANCE SHEET

1. BRIEF OF THIS INSTRUCTIONAL UNIT.

This 2-hour conference and 1-hour seminar is to describe and discuss the current relationships that exist between the US military and the collective communications media. Current defense policies of the US will be discussed as they are interpreted by the guest speaker. The role of public opinion in the shaping of US foreign policy and the effect of contemporary communications on that public opinion will both be examined. The impact of adverse publicity on the military and the alienation of the military from society as a result will also be addressed.

2. OBJECTIVES.

a. Lesson Objective. The student discusses the impact of the communications media on foreign policy, national security strategy, and US assistance programs with a media representative.

b. Training Objectives. Using the material presented by the guest speaker, the student must be able to accomplish the following training objectives:

(1) Describe the current image and role of the US military, as outlined in contemporary communications media.

(2) Explain the influence of the communications media in the shaping of public opinion about US defense policies, foreign policy, and US assistance programs, as outlined in the presentation.

(3) Outline changes in defense policy which might improve or damage the contemporary media-military relationship, in accordance with the principles addressed by the speaker.

3. STUDY ASSIGNMENT.

a. READ: Capt. Terry McDonald, USCGR, "The Media and the Military," Air Force Times, 15 August 1973 (Appendix 1).

b. READ: Seminar Guidance (Appendix 2).

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4. SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS.

See Appendix 2 - Seminar Guidance.

5. ISSUED WITH THIS ADVANCE SHEET.

a. Appendix 1 - Capt. Terry McDonald, "The Media and the Military."

b. Appendix 2 - Seminar Guidance.

6. MATERIALS TO BE ISSUED.

None.

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APPENDIX 1 to Advance Sheet.

"The Media and the Military"

Captain Terry McDonald, USCGR

This article appeared in the Air Force Times (Family Magazine), dated 15 August 1973.

THE MEDIA AND THE MILITARY

In 1960 the New York Yankees were a power in the American League. During 1971 they struggled to finish in the first division. Over a 10-year period, regular news accounts described the change. A star retired, a trade worked out unfavorably, games were lost, averages slipped. And the once-powerful world champions became a team of "helpless giants."

Did the news media cause the decline? Did a conspiracy of biased newsmen succeed where the best efforts of opposing teams had failed? It is not likely that any rational man would make such claims, especially since the Yankees seem once again to be a powerhouse. Yet, when we consider the current plight of the armed forces, too many military minds seem ready to lay the prime responsibility for the services' problems on the news media.

Every day we rely on the news media for knowledge of the hard facts about the world around us. The wire services dutifully and dependably relay the daily Dow-Jones averages, baseball box scores, weather forecasts, traffic fatalities and political developments. And around the world, military men and women read, listen to or watch such news without question.

But lately, when the subject of the news concerns the military or naval affairs of the United States, the average American in uniform is prone to think the news media are attacking our military structure. Any adverse report is presumed to be slanted, warped or staged as part of a huge conspiracy to undermine our nation's defense posture. Since this knee-jerk reaction is found in all ranks, it might be well to take a hard look at the validity of such a position and to re-examine the attitude of the armed forces toward the various news media.

There is little doubt that over the past decade there has been an erosion of the military image. The question is whether or not this has been caused by news media, or whether the media have simply reported what they have seen to the American public.

Let's start with the premise that we all agree the First Amendment of the Constitution assures a free press. Not a free press that merely parrots handout material. Not a free press that must clear everything with the government. Not a free press that must operate under threats of shutdown or permanent termination of operations. No, the tradition in the United States is for a free press that may print or broadcast whatever it pleases and be held responsible only after publication. The Supreme Court reaffirmed that tradition last year when it permitted the continued publication of material from the "Pentagon Papers."

Perhaps everyone does not agree with the premise of a free press. But that is a different argument, one that involves the preservation or erosion of the basic rights guaranteed by our constitutional government. Unfortunately, out of love for the armed forces, or a

Time for peaceful co-existence?

By Capt. Terry McDonald, USCGR

misguided sense of dedication to duty, many people in uniform give the impression they are ready to rip the fabric of our Constitution in order to stop the attacks on the military which have been disseminated by the news media. Sometimes this wrath is directed at particular individuals, sometimes at a particular medium and sometimes at the news media in general.

While we should note that such feelings do exist, let us assume that such views are held only by a small though vocal minority and do not reflect accurately the general attitude of people in the military community. It would be fairer to characterize the majority feeling as one that understands the need for a free press but is frustrated and concerned with how that freedom seems to work to the disadvantage of the armed forces.

In recent years for example, the major news events that concern the military seem to have had a negative impact. Consider the capture of the Pueblo, the My Lai incident and the Calley trial, confusing reports of the Tonkin Gulf attack, the endless years of weekly casualty statistics from Vietnam, the recurring reports of discipline, drug addiction and race relations problems in the armed forces.

Most of the important military stories of recent years have presented a picture of the services that contradicts the heroic stance we would like to see portrayed. We are proud of our history of service and traditions of bold, courageous actions. We cite the nobility of our record—the brave Americans who have fought and died in previous wars have always been the "good guys." We have collected souvenirs while the enemy pillaged. We have wooed and won the fair maidens while the enemy raped and murdered. We have precision bombed only military targets while the enemy destroyed churches and hospitals. Fortified by the repetition of American heroics in war movies and popular novels, and indeed in new media accounts as well, the public has been shocked by reports of American actions that don't fit the pattern. But when the actualities of previous wars are examined, we discover that little has changed except the way in which the image of the American fighting man has been portrayed in the media.

The basic reason for this difference seems to be that in Vietnam, for the first time, we engaged *major* U.S. forces without a declaration of war or national emergency. Without such a declaration, there were no effective government controls on the substance or nature of news reports, and no means of stifling dissent at home. We were deeply engaged before the majority of Americans even paid much attention to the fact. In hindsight, the wisdom of this is questionable, but nevertheless it was a deliberate government decision to maintain a low profile in respect to the war.

When the level of fighting reached a peak during the 1968 Tet offensive, the harsh realities were bitter medicine to an unconditioned public. Without wartime censorship we could not be sheltered from the truth. Vivid television scenes depicted facts we did not want to witness. Timely, colorful and dramatic reports didn't fit the "Hollywood version" of Americans at war. Vietnam quite suddenly became a subject of dominant national interest. Prominent critics of our involvement,

who had been virtually unheard in earlier years, now found broad, growing audiences. Though most criticisms focused on political decisions, the military machine that implemented those decisions bore the brunt of the attack.

Another factor that contributed to the deepening public concern was the policy of rotating American forces after a one-year tour in Vietnam. This brought back to the domestic scene a huge number of eyewitness accounts by military men, mostly draftees, who had not wanted to fight and who carried their disillusionments back to civilian life. In previous wars our troops came home only after the war was over. Then the flush of victory and the joy of homecoming overpowered most traumatic wartime experiences.

Thus, while not solely responsible, events in Vietnam have been a major factor in contributing to the uneasiness of the public in their attitude toward the military. And as the criticism grew, it perhaps was natural that the military should seek a scapegoat.

Unable to recognize our own shortcomings, unwilling to challenge the weight of American public opinion, we chose instead to blame the news media for the deterioration of our image. Beset by carping politicians, unprecedented mass antiwar protests and unpleasant news, we tended to lump the enemy, draft card burners, budget cutters and newsmen into one convenient target. Since the newsman was the most visible and most persistent, he became in many minds the prime reason, the essence of our difficulties. Some blamed newsmen for prolonging the war. Some tried to minimize the dimensions of antiwar sentiments by attributing them to the exaggerations of news media. Others privately chose to "black out" the criticisms by refusing to read news accounts or watch TV news "because they're all liars anyway."

Such reactions are common human behavior, and I am not suggesting that newsmen were selected as scapegoats through a carefully contrived Pentagon policy to swerve the tide of public criticism. But in any case, the antipathy between the military community and the world of news media developed and was nourished by repetitive anti-press comments from military sources. Stung by what they considered unfounded attacks on their professional conduct, integrity or patriotism, newsmen renewed their efforts to report on the military establishment.

The historic role of American editors is not to seek the popular cause or to publish only the palatable news. On the contrary, they have a long tradition of exposing incompetency or abuses in our system. John S. Knight, chairman of the Knight newspaper chain, has said, "The unvarnished truth is frequently unpleasant reading since it so often differs from the reader's preconceived notions of what the truth should be."

Unfortunately for the military image, when the policies and practices of the armed forces came under the intense scrutiny of news media, too often the "unvarnished truth" was indeed "unpleasant reading" for military men. Kickbacks at post exchange, cost overruns on the C5-A, surveillance of politicians by military investigators, high level officers involved in black markets and drug traffic—such stories have certainly been damaging to the esteem of the armed forces.

But what were newsmen to do? Were they to ignore events and write fairy tales? Should they have stayed in their editorial offices and meekly accepted the handouts of public affairs officers? Should they have sanitized their reports to avoid critical accounts? Such is not the proper function of the news media in our free society, though it is common practice in authoritarian regimes. (It is ironic that even in South Vietnam, where we have fought for that country's freedom and self-determination, our ally has never relaxed rigid controls

on the press. It is a sad commentary on the state of our American heritage.)

So when doubts about the Vietnam war were in the air, American newsmen began to report far more from the scene. That these stories should be unflattering to the military should have been no surprise. Consider the circumstances.

American forces were engaged in a bloody war halfway around the world, in an area virtually unknown to the American public. We were a major power engaged in a conflict with a nidget, a heavy-weight whose nose was bloodied by a pugnacious kindergarten kid. Our casualties grew until they exceeded any modern conflict except World War I. We bombed the enemy with more total tonnage than we had used in all of Europe in World War II. Long years of war were a serious drain on our economy, and our professional military machine had to be supplemented by draftees to carry the brunt of the fighting.

With ill defined goals, a lack of public understanding of objectives, an escalating involvement of hundreds of thousands of Americans, it is little wonder that news reports—particularly after Tet, 1968—helped create a growing public dissatisfaction with the progress made.

The unusual nature of the guerilla conflict was also a factor. Results could not be measured in terms of geography. Enemy casualty figures were largely guesswork, and the whole war picture was vague as our forces appeared to be bogged down in jungle mire. To try to relate the story, newsmen had to focus their attention and their cameras on vignettes: weary GIs slogging through tropical forests, frightened refugees fleeing from burning villages, wounded Americans being rushed into helicopters for evacuation.

In stark contrast we were given glowingly optimistic reports by leading military and civilian officials who predicted early solutions or spoke of the splendid progress being made ("the light at the end of the tunnel"). And we saw scenes depicting prosperous South Vietnamese merchants profiting from the growing American payroll. At home, we saw unprecedented demonstrations by war protesters.

That some of these accounts contained inaccuracies could hardly be denied. But that is a hazard of the news business, not an indication of irresponsibility or vindictiveness on the part of newsmen. Even official military reports are often found to be inaccurate on occasion, and there have been instances when omissions or misstatements have been found to be deliberate. In short, news reports are no more infallible than military reports prepared under similar circumstances.

To put the news media in proper perspective we should consider the scope of the industry and the nature of the perishable product it markets. Because news must be fresh, the industry is fiercely competitive. And because it would be a physical impossibility to report every event that happens around the world, or even all those that happen in a single country, the news system has developed a high degree of selectivity. This competitiveness and selection process requires some explanation.

It is human nature to want to be the first to know, and we seek the unusual rather than the routine. Witness how we are glued to our TV sets to see the live action of a key football game rather than waiting to read an account in tomorrow's newspaper. News media cater to our desires by serving up a daily fare of fresh, unusual events.

Consequently, except for an occasional feature article or documentary, affairs such as a local PTA meeting, the retirement ceremony for a sergeant who has served his nation for 30 years, or the annual summer deployment of a Reserve unit, get little if any attention. Too few people are interested in such events—they are not "newsworthy." But using the same

examples, if the PTA president attacked the school principal for preaching atheism, the sergeant was found guilty of pilfering the exchange, or the Reserve unit was found to be training with broomsticks because rifles could not be furnished, there would be a news angle which would appeal to a much larger audience.

Note that the newsman doesn't create a situation even though he often ferrets it out. That is the mark of a professional newsman and it must be understood. He earns his salary by finding a news angle, not by writing platitudes. He earns his reputation by finding stories others may miss. In pursuit of this vocation newsmen have been among the casualties at spectacular fires and explosions, have had their heads bashed at the Democratic convention in Chicago, and have been killed, wounded and captured with American forces in Vietnam and in other wars they have covered. This is not to portray the newsman as a special sort of hero, but merely to indicate that in his zeal to report the facts firsthand, he frequently becomes part of the news himself.

The newsman is trained to be perceptive and skeptical. He must look beneath the surface facts to find out why something happened and who is responsible. Accustomed to dealing face to face with leaders of business and government, he is not overawed by military rank. But his apparent impertinence should not be considered to be antagonistic. It is merely his technique of digging out a story.

A criticism often heard is, "Why don't they report the good things about us as well as the bad?" Frankly, the best answer is that so-called good news is quite boring and there is little or no market for it. A television station in Roanoke, Va., experimented with a 30-minute evening "good news" program. More than 60 percent of listener responses were complaints. One wrote: "I felt I was in Russia where they get only good news. This is not a fairy tale world!"

America's system for the gathering and distribution of news is probably the most efficient in the world. The two major national wire services, the Associated Press and United Press International, are the foundation of this system. They collect and distribute hundreds of thousands of words and hundreds of photos every day. With information fed by correspondents around the nation and throughout the world they correlate reports from numerous sources, select those judged to be newsworthy, and flash concise, accurate accounts of the events to their subscribers.

The subscribers, who include some 2000 newspapers, 6000 radio stations and nearly 700 television stations, in turn select those stories deemed to be of interest to their local audiences. The national wire service stories are supplemented by local and regional stories gathered by the immediate staff of the publisher or broadcaster. There are also special correspondents, syndicates, columnists and freelance news teams who make their contributions. And the major broadcasting networks field their own teams of newsmen in search of a competitive advantage.

So, just as our cities are linked by broad highways that stretch from coast to coast, they also are joined by wide electronic avenues carrying an endless two-way traffic of the nation's news. For the thousands of wire service subscribers also serve as gathering points which feed news back to the wires. News focal points such as the White House, the Pentagon or the New York Stock Exchange are covered by specialized staffs.

The result is a daily volume of news far in excess of the requirements of any single outlet. So every news editor has to make hundreds of judgements to select that small fraction that he can fit into his publication or broadcast.

It is quite apparent that news editors shoulder a heavy burden of responsibility. The news they discard

and are likely to never reach the public are buried today in the trash of the news business. There is a constant input of fresh news for tomorrow's headlines. Daily, weekly news media, with more time to make decisions, could salvage news that daily media might miss. But remember, the weeklies must select from an entire week's news flow, a staggering amount of material that must be crammed into relatively few pages.

The need for selectivity also has created a peculiar writing style unique in the news business. This is the inverted pyramid which assures that the most important facts—the who, what, when and where—are jammed into a lead sentence. The lead is followed by amplifying details in descending order of frequency and importance. The purpose of inversion is to enable editing from the bottom if space becomes limited. Critics of news media need to understand this technique. They realize that background data which might help explain why something happened are of necessity at the far end of a story and are often cut due to space or time limitations.

But aside from understanding the general mechanics of the news media, it is important that we are aware of the limited span of attention of the general public. Just as space and time limitations require that the news media filter out most of the daily flood of news, so, too, the human mind tends to concentrate on only a limited number of topics.

Each of us is keenly interested in every aspect of the military world. Such topics as our strategic position, next year's budget, new hardware, morale problems, pay levels and our image with the public command a large share of our attention. But to the general citizenry, military subjects are of only peripheral interest. In a complex world where people are beset by personal cares, high taxes, deterioration of cities, increasing crime rates and unemployment or environmental problems, is it any wonder that the average citizen doesn't know or care much about military affairs? The armed forces historically have become a prime and long-lasting interest only when patriotic fervor is at an abnormally high pitch, such as immediately after Pearl Harbor.

But, normally, military affairs are in direct competition with a wide variety of public interests. News media must cater to those interests. Local politics, school affairs, economic and social ills, and athletic events all claim their share of attention. In a subtle way news media may cultivate public interest in a certain subject. But essentially, news editors are not educators or crusaders attempting to sway minds or establish opinions. On the contrary, they are merely purveyors of a product—the daily news. Like the menu in a restaurant, news content is determined by customers' appetites, not by the whims of the manager or proprietor.

So when we are concerned about a lack of military news or what seems to be overemphasis on scandalous or "bad" news, let us realize that the editor is just serving up what the public wants. Scandal is not simply exercising his personal bias or demonstrating an antagonism to the military. With keen competition between the media—and between individual outlets within each medium—there is little advantage for a news editor to slant the news.

A by-product of the multiple interests of the American public is the slow rate of change in public attitudes and beliefs. Because there is no concentration on a single subject for extended periods, attitudes and beliefs are formed slowly and are changed slowly. Usually one has to study public opinion over a period of years to sense the trends that are occurring. Pollsters attempt to measure these changes with repetitive surveys on a variety of subjects. Over a period of six

years, 1964-1970, for example, public opposition to the Vietnam war increased from 25 percent to 58 percent. The Tet offensive probably marked a turning point in public attitudes toward American involvement in Vietnam. Yet, from a month before Tet until three months afterward, the number of Americans who thought the war a mistake increased only three percentage points, from 45 percent to 48 percent. More erratic variations have sometimes been noted in such a short term. In one instance, President Johnson's "favorable" rating spurted from 42 percent to 72 percent after his nationally televised speech on the Tonkin Gulf resolution. But viewed historically, such marked changes fit into long-term cycles that seldom are changed quickly.

In recent years, public appreciation of the military probably peaked after the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. There was a large degree of public pride in the ability of our forces to compel a Soviet withdrawal. Now, more than 10 years later, we may be just past the high point of anti-militarism. But while we can deplore present attitudes, we must remember that it is a situation not unique in American history.

The United States is not a militaristic nation. It is almost instinctive with us to cherish personal freedoms and to distrust any form of regimentation. During the Civil War, there were anti-draft riots. Pacifism was a strong movement in the late Twenties and early Thirties. In 1931 a survey of Protestant clergymen revealed that 62 percent believed churches should refuse to support any future war. Two years later, a poll of college students at 70 campuses showed 39 percent were opposed to any participation in war, and 32 percent indicated they were willing to fight only if the United States was invaded. As late as the fall of 1941, just months before Pearl Harbor, extension of the draft bill passed the House of Representatives by just one vote! Ask an old-timer who was in uniform prior to World War II how much respect he received. The treatment of military personnel — especially enlisted personnel — was shabby and shameful in many communities.

So what we are experiencing today is not a modern phenomenon but a recurrence of a latent feeling deep-seated in American attitudes. Tempering those attitudes, and improving our public image, are essential because our whole military structure relies on broad public support. Somehow we must convince the American public that strong defense forces are a valuable asset and not a liability.

How can we do it? How can we earn the respect and recognition we know are deserved? How can we claim our rightful place in American society and a fair share of the national budget?

First, we must exercise a high degree of patience and understanding. Our critics are fellow Americans—our friends and neighbors—not a foreign foe. They are entitled to the same respect from us that we expect from them. Attacking their motives or challenging their patriotism may give us some self-satisfaction, but it certainly won't help change anyone's attitude. We should make a calculated effort to answer charges and

if possible, state our own public services so that they can be seen to reveal our own shortcomings and the corrective actions that are being taken. If we don't, we will be on the defensive constantly, trying to explain why we didn't act with more dispatch.

Second, we must remember that public attitudes do not change suddenly but only over the long term, if at all. Like a stampeding herd of cattle, public attitudes are swerved gradually rather than met head-on. It is too big a job for public affairs officers alone. All levels of command must be aware of the problem and must participate in the solution. Even the smallest unit can make a positive contribution by making a good impression in the community where it is stationed.

Third, we must project a more human image of our military organization. We are not robots. We are not mechanical monsters bent on the destruction of the world. We are Americans—grandfathers and sons, mothers and fathers, wives and husbands—craving a peaceful world every bit as much as our fellow citizens. Yet it is our job to insure that good fighting forces are always ready for the defense of our national interests.

We can do that in a human way without the stiff formality that is reminiscent of a military junta. We must speak and write plain language. Military jargon or clever euphemisms intended to obfuscate should have no place in our communications with the American public. Visually, too, we can adopt a down-to-earth attitude. Photos of the relaxed, friendly smiles of our leaders in open-neck shirts should replace the formal portraits that often make them appear as set-jaw tyrants in huge leather executive swivel chairs.

Fourth, we must realize that American news media provide the only *effective* means we have of communicating with the public we serve. Of course, there are other means—public speaking tours, direct mail, or other forms of paid advertising, for example. But to be realistic, the broad avenues of the news media offer our only method of frequent access into the millions of homes we must reach.

Whenever possible, we should get acquainted with newsmen on a person-to-person basis. We can learn their interests, resolve their doubts, answer their questions with complete frankness. Sometimes such informal visits will spark their interest in providing beneficial coverage of some aspect of our operations. At the least, the newsmen will know they have a contact ready to provide prompt and reliable answers when there is a military news event in the area. And we must remember that sharp, probing questions from newsmen are not an indication of bias but simply their means of getting at the facts quickly.

We can—we must—learn to appreciate the necessity of American news media. We must treat them as friends rather than adversaries. When we do, we will discover that the world's greatest mass communications system is helping us re-establish favorable public attitudes toward our military organizations. □

Capt. Terry McDonald is a public affairs officer in U.S. Coast Guard headquarters in Washington, D.C. The view expressed here are his private opinions, not to be construed as the official position of the U.S. Coast Guard.

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APPENDIX 2 to Advance Sheet

SEMINAR GUIDANCE

1. SEMINAR OBJECTIVE

This seminar is designed to provide students with an opportunity to discuss further the impact of the communications media on foreign policy, national security strategy, and US assistance programs.

2. SEMINAR GUIDANCE

a. What is the contemporary image of the US military displayed in the majority of the public media? Is it flattering/unflattering; fair/unfair; correct/incorrect? How would you change it?

b. What is the desirable role of the media in informing the US public about the intricacies of US foreign and/or defense policies? What interpretations or explanations should be allowed? What qualifications should a Washington correspondent have?

c. Is there a diversity of opinion between newspaper and radio/TV comment on the military? Should there be?

d. How does the military react to criticism? How would you respond to the article by Capt. Terry McDonald?