Soldiers, Scholars, and the Media

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Since the Vietnam War most military professionals have held a negative view of the American media resulting, in no small way, from their perception that the conduct of the war was taken out of the hands of military professionals and placed in those of TV journalists. These attitudes have been nurtured by the perceived role of the media in reporting such disparate phenomena as terrorist incidents, the invasion of Grenada, the defense budget, and the Iran arms affair. Although some members of the media have responded to such criticism, in the main the views of the military profession have been ignored or minimized by the media on the presumption that they are an aberration and not in accord with the general views of society. Equally important, most members of the media may be convinced that the military profession has little understanding of the media and thus holds distorted and incorrect views.[1] This unfriendly, if not hostile, relationship tends to obscure the importance of more fundamental questions regarding the military profession and the role of the media in an open system. The purpose here is to examine four such questions. Is there a media elite? Is there a media monopoly? What are the characteristics and mind-sets of the media? What do the answers to these questions reflect regarding the US military profession and the American media?

We now have available a number of solid published studies of the media. The weight of evidence revealed by these studies shows that there exists a media elite with a particular political and social predisposition that places it distinctly left of center on the American political spectrum. Further, the media elite enjoys a monopoly on news gathering and reporting, channeled through a corporate structure that gives the media elite and media corporations immense power in the American political system. Although there are contrary views, they pale in comparison to the empirical and analytical bases of these conclusions. As one group of scholars observed,

"There is considerable evidence from other sources to corroborate our portrait of liberal leading journalists."[2]

It is reasonable to conclude, therefore, that the military profession holds views generally in accord with the conclusions reached by scholarly studies of the media. And, in the main, the views of the military are compatible with those of American society. This is true even though military officers may have formed their views subjectively and intuitively. In contrast, the political and social predispositions of the majority of those in the news profession and media elite put them at a considerable distance from mainstream America. What follows is a more detailed examination of the basis for these conclusions.

The Media Elite—Mind-sets and Power

Elites are normally characterized by their perceived status in society, their relative homogeneity, the power they can command, the similarity of their political-social backgrounds, and their commonality of purpose. Underpinning these considerations is the fact that an elite tends to be self-contained and self-regulating. Further, an elite is not necessarily determined by the numbers involved, but more by the amount of power exercised in the system and relative status. While there are some exceptions, those in the media who are at the highest levels of their profession and occupy important positions in reporting the news reflect all of the characteristics of an elite. Indeed, the members of the media elite generally move in the same social circles, read the same literature, and depend on similar sources for news.[3]

In one of the most authoritative studies of the media in recent times, by S. Robert Lichter, Stanley Rothman, and Linda S. Lichter, the authors conducted

> hour-long interviews with 238 journalists at America's most influential media outlets [*New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and the news divisions of CBS, NBC, and PBS]. The result is a systematic sample of men and women who put together the news at America's most important media outlets—the media

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elite . . . . The demographics are clear. The media elite are a homogenous and cosmopolitan group . . . with differentially eastern, urban, ethnic, upper-status, and secular roots.[4]

A number of political implications result from these characteristics:

Today's leading journalists are politically liberal and alienated from traditional norms and institutions. Most place themselves to the left of center and regularly vote the Democratic ticket . . . . They would like to strip traditional powerbrokers of their influence and empower black leaders, consumer groups, intellectuals, and . . . the media.[5]

Some members of the media argue that they are apolitical. The most authoritative studies of the media, however, based on extensive survey research, indicate the opposite. That is, the great majority of those in the media elite and in the profession as a whole tend to be left of center on the political spectrum, with the media elite decidedly so.

Generally speaking, the term mind-set refers to the looking glass through which an individual views the world. It reflects predispositions and norms that fashion perceptions of reality.[6] In this respect, even though some members of the media may claim that the media are not a monolith, the fact is that the media elite displays a homogeneity of views and similarity of mind-sets which considerably influence the entire news profession. The media elite tends to perceive the world through its own lens, and this is reflected in news reports, editorials, and in selecting what is to be reported on the evening news. Although there may be some questions on the linkage between the views of the media elite and the way the news is reported, it seems clear that "leading journalists tend to perceive elements of social controversies in terms that correspond to their own attitudes."[7]

Journalists perceive a world that is "peopled by brutal soldiers, corrupt businessmen, and struggling underdogs."[8] While these views may be more pronounced when interpreting domestic life, more often than not the same attitudes are the basis for interpreting world events. Similarly, this leads many in the media to view the US military in negative terms.

A commonality of media attitudes was also the conclusion reached in an earlier study: "Because the *New York Times*, CBS Television News, NBC Television News, the *Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, and *Time* exercise such inordinate direct and indirect influence over opinion, it is especially significant that they tend to convey the same general viewpoint."[9]

As noted earlier, the media elite mind-set and the way that elite perceives the world are sharply different from the mind-set and perceptions of the public in general. This difference is also reflected in the attitudes of many editors and reporters. For example, the results of a survey conducted by the *Los Angeles Times* are particularly revealing. The survey indicated

that the views held by about 3000 newspaper reporters and editors selected randomly from about 600 newspapers around the country were at a considerable variance from the views held by a slightly larger number of adult Americans. The portrait that emerged is one of journalists who "are emphatically liberal on social issues and foreign affairs, distrustful of establishment institutions (government, business, labor), and protective of their own economic interests."[10] Interestingly enough, the survey pointed out that there was only a slight difference between the views of the newspaper staffs and those of the higher-ups responsible for setting editorial policy. One is led to conclude that many positions taken by the media throughout the United States reflect those held by the media elite.

According to some studies, the media elite is obsessed with power.[11] But the media are also ambivalent toward power. They tend to ignore their own power, even belittle it, while being zealous in their criticism of other power-holders. This self-blindness is well documented in one study and referred to frequently in others.[12] The power of the media tends to be underestimated by the media elite and overestimated by some segments of society. In any case, it seems clear that the media have a substantial role in affecting the public. As one study concluded,

> To control what people will see and hear means to control the public's view of political reality. By covering certain news events, by simply giving them space, the media signals the importance of these events to the citizenry. By not reporting other activities, the media hides portions of reality from everyone but the few people directly affected . . . . Events and problems placed on the national agenda by the media excite public interest and become objects of government action.[13]

Another study notes, "A small number of people who work for a very small number of news organizations exercise very great influence over the news of national and international affairs received by all Americans."[14]

The ability to shape the public's image of reality and to affect its attitudes is surely a fundamental component of power. This power is reinforced by the lack of consistent and effective counterbalancing forces within the media elite. Pluralism in the American political-social system is a major factor in counterbalancing forces and in checks and balances—a basic democratic characteristic. However, the media seem to be generally free from such internal forces. This concentration and centralization not only add to the media's power, but strengthen its corporate character.

This is not to suggest that there is no internal conflict in the news profession. There is a high degree of competitiveness, including commercial competition. However, it rarely becomes institutionalized to the point of threatening the power of the media elite as a corporate body. Nor does this conflict crystallize into effective counterbalancing forces within the media.

The power of the media is considerably broadened and also strengthened with the introduction of new information technology. On that score, one report concludes,

> Essentially the same people who own and manage newspapers and television now control the new technologies. They are guided by the same elite-sanctioned values, the same desire for profit. New journalistic . . . practices and effects will flourish, but technological innovations are unlikely significantly to disrupt the structure of power or undermine its legitimacy.[15]

Media power is not a new phenomenon, of course. Writing in the middle of the 19th century, de Tocqueville observed that even with some restrictions, "The power of the American press is still immense." He went on to write, "When many organs of the press do come to take the same line, their influence in the long run is almost irresistible, and public opinion, continually struck in the same spot, ends by giving way under the blows."[16] In a modern version of de Tocqueville, one scholar describes this phenomenon as "pack journalism."[17]

The Media Monopoly and Media Miscues

The obsession with power, the character of the media elite, and the commercial nature of news reporting combine to create a media monopoly. According to Ben Bagdikian, this leads to considerable harm to the concept of fair and balanced news reporting:

> The continuing violations of the ethic of independent journalism over the years has an important message for the future: The unstated rules will be respected until they represent a threat to the power of the media corporations. When the status of . . . media corporations . . . is in jeopardy, or when the corporations believe their status is in jeopardy, no conventions, no professional ethics, and no individual protests by angered journalists will prevent corporations from using their prerogatives of ownership to protect their power by altering news and other public information.[18]

Moreover, regardless of the existence of these conditions and power relationships, Bagdikian states that "there persists the illusion throughout American journalism that it operates as a value-free discipline."[19]

In sum, there is overwhelming evidence that there is a media elite that has a monopoly on the media function in American society. Further, the media elite exhibits political and social predispositions clearly separating it from mainstream America. This raises a whole series of questions regarding access to information networks by political actors, groups, or individuals who are not part of the elite and who do not share the media

Courtesy DOD Photo Archives

Walter Cronkite of CBS interviews Professor Mai of the University of Hue shortly after Tet 1968.

elite's political and social predispositions. Can such political actors gain access to the vast media network? Can they expect to be treated fairly and objectively by the media elite? One is led to believe that the answers to both questions are likely to be in the negative.

The members of the media elite, as is the case with most political actors, have made serious mistakes in judgment leading to news distortions and monumental errors. Members of the news profession are human, and like all human beings they are imperfect. Errors are to be expected. The members of the media elite, however, are reluctant to admit mistakes, and are not fond of examination by outsiders. Indeed, when challenged by outside critics, the media elite displays a siege mentality. For example, in a recent book by a media professional, the author writes, "The American press has a responsibility to the public. It must help keep Americans free by telling them the truth. It cannot discharge this duty by hunkering down and waiting until its attackers go away. It is time to fight back."[20]

While a siege mentality may be a trait of other professions, it is a conspicuous characteristic of the media elite. What is disconcerting is that media errors and distortions can take on a momentum of their own and become "historical fact." A classic example is the reporting of Tet 1968 during the Vietnam War. In a comprehensive study of that event, journalist Peter Braestrup concluded,

> What began as hasty initial reporting of disaster in Vietnam became conventional wisdom when magnified in media commentary and recycled on the hustings in New Hampshire, in campus protest, and in discussions on Capitol Hill. The press "rebroadcast" it all uncritically, even enthusiastically, although many in the news media should have known better.[21]

The author concluded that "the general effect of the news media's commentary coverage of Tet in February-March 1968 was a distortion of reality—through sins of omission and commission—on a scale that helped spur major repercussions in U.S. domestic politics, if not in foreign policy."[22] For a number of military men in Vietnam during the Tet Offensive, it must have been ironical to win a military victory, have it reported by American journalists as a defeat, and have those reports accepted as fact by many Americans. Military men are likely to agree, therefore, with one observer writing in the early part of 1970:

> During the last decade the media elite has acted, at worst, as if it were waging a studied propaganda campaign against the United States in foreign affairs. At times it has acted as if it viewed itself as a neutral agent between the United States and its enemies . . . . It has largely ignored specific foreign tactics, rather apparently designed to use our own news media against us.[23]

The now famous 1984 case of General William Westmoreland and CBS is another example of media miscues. According to Don Kowet,

> The CBS documentary had charged a Westmoreland-led conspiracy. Just as the military had anticipated, although fifteen years delayed, CBS had gotten the story wrong, by relying on a paid consultant whose account of events was tailored by his own bias, by allowing a producer to avoid or discard interviews with those who might have been able to rebut the documentary's premise, and by ignoring documents in its own possession which tended to cast doubt on that thesis.[24]

Regarding the Westmoreland case, one study concludes, "It shows how a single viewpoint, that of the executive producer, can shape the facts to conform to his own version of the truth."[25]

History is replete with such examples. In the Janet Cooke affair, for example, the reporter had written a heart-wrenching story about "Jimmy," an eight-year-old drug addict living in Washington, D.C.[26] Written in 1981, the story earned a Pulitzer Prize. Subsequently, it was found that the story was a fabrication and the Pulitzer was withdrawn. *The Washington Post* had little choice but to publicly admit its error. But many were left wondering how an error of such magnitude could have occurred in a major newspaper proclaiming professional rigor and close editorial

supervision. This episode was particularly disconcerting given the fact that the newspaper has significant influence in shaping public attitudes.

More disturbing is the view that "the media elite advocacy of certain viewpoints and policies produced an additional new problem. Having diagnosed complex public problems, and having taken unequivocal public positions on them, they apparently wish to demonstrate that they were right. They have substantial journalistic and moral stake in proving their own rightness."[27] Some members of the media have responded to such criticism. One type of response, based on the First Amendment, castigates media critics for their anti-constitutionality. In such instances, the defense of journalists is based primarily on the freedom of the press, interpreted broadly as "the people's right to know." True, some in the media do spotlight the profession itself and try to come to grips with internal problems. As one noted media professional, Robert MacNeil, commented,

> I think there is, frankly, scorn for fairness in some journalistic quarters . . . . There is an attitude common in the media that any good journalist can apply common sense and quickly fathom what is right and what is wrong in any complicated issue . . . . Coupled with this attitude is one in which a reporter or camera crew acts as though their presence, their action in covering a story, is more important than the event they are covering.[28]

Yet, many in the media are inclined to brush aside such criticism by simply saying, "We don't make the news, we only report it."

A broader concern among journalists, perhaps, centers on manipulation. The media has been wary of being used or manipulated by various political actors, particularly in government. The use of leaks and testing the waters by "unnamed sources" is a common technique. Various administrations have been noted for such manipulation. But there are a variety of reasons for leaks, ranging from those prompted by disgruntled bureaucrats to those from opposition members in Congress. Members of the media elite are quite conversant with these methods and many times allow themselves to be used. There is also some evidence to support the notion that members of the media themselves manipulate the news. As noted earlier, members of the media elite tend to interpret events as fashioned by their own political and social dispositions.

The role of the media during the Kennedy Administration is a case in point. According to an authoritative chronicler of the Kennedy era, John H. Davis, the media virtually idolized the Kennedy family, with distortion the result: "Kennedy's phenomenal grace and charm belied an administration whose style was hardly peace-loving. The discrepancy between image and reality was due principally to the press."[29] In the aftermath of Kennedy's assassination, the media seemed to be out of touch with reality. Davis notes, "Along with the glorification of John F. Kennedy, there went

also his continued idealization and sentimentalization. If the press had gushed over John Kennedy before, it now became downright maudlin. The canonization had begun."[30]

Economist Holmes Brown makes a particularly strong case with respect to news distortion and manipulation. In the article "TV Turns Good Economic News into Bad," he concludes: "The national economy improved dramatically during 1983—but you might not have realized it if your only source of information had been the nightly news programs of the three major television networks."[31] Similar conclusions were reached in an earlier study showing how media coverage of the 1968 presidential campaign and US policy toward Vietnam, among other matters, was slanted to conform to the general views of the media.[32]

The sources referred to here do not exhaust the list of available studies, nor do their interpretations and conclusions necessarily preclude others. Yet, these sources provide powerful support for the notion that the media are far from being the virtuous profession claimed by their elite spokesmen, and far from being balanced and fair in news interpretation and presentation. Though without deliberate design, the media critics tend to reinforce much of the military professional's own view.

With respect to the disapprobation of the media expressed by military officers, it may well be that it goes much deeper than the familiar concerns of suspect patriotism and irresponsibility in operational security matters. Rather, the real concerns of military officers rest on the more fundamental questions of news balance, fairness, compassion, and sincerity. Military men see these qualities missing in today's military reportage, in stark contrast to the situation prevailing during "the Ernie Pyle era" of World War II. In this deeper sense, then, their concern is not with levels of news coverage, but trustworthiness on the part of newsmen.

The question of trustworthiness was measured by a Gallup Poll taken in July 1986. The poll assessed the public's trust and confidence in ten key American institutions. The military was rated highest, with 63 percent of the respondents giving it a confidence rating of "a great deal" or "quite a lot." In sharp contrast, the American people showed much less confidence in television and newspapers, with ratings of 27 and 37 percent respectively. While such polls may change over time, the 1986 poll left no doubt about the public's confidence with respect to the military and the media. Six institutions out of ten were rated above newspapers, with television rated tenth—that is, last—in public confidence and trust.

Beyond the Surface, Beyond the Front Page

Clearly, there is more to the media and their role in American society than addressed here. Further, there is a great deal more to explore regarding the view of the military profession. One does not have to meet or

know a reporter or TV journalist, however, to assess the political consequences of news reporting. Reporters and TV journalists are met everyday by anyone who reads newspapers and watches the nightly TV news. Of course, any serious effort to examine the media must include a critical reading of the existing literature. Such examination must include, for example, a study of the First Amendment and its application to the media, and the concept of "the people's right to know." The issues of US national security and media responsibility also deserve detailed study.

Similarly, to understand the military, with its special responsibility, requires a serious study of the military profession. This cannot be achieved simply by serving a few years in the Army or Navy while waiting to get out. It requires critical mastery of the important literature as well as thorough and continuing practical knowledge of the national and international security arenas, the military professional, military life, and the military system. Too few of the media elite have accomplished this.

Solutions to problems arising out of the relationship between the military and the media require understanding the challenges, dilemmas, and responsibilities facing both the military and the media. Understanding may be better achieved by not expecting a "solution," since this presumes that there is a fixed answer, relevant for all times, and that there is a beginning and an end to a particular problem. The dynamics among political actors in American politics and the constantly changing political climate make the search for solutions to a "proper" media role elusive, if not misguided. The most one can expect is a dynamic relationship, with episodic attention to power relationships and demands for accuracy and balance.

In the modern era, with all its technological innovations, the media elite will surely play an even greater role in agenda-setting and in shaping public attitudes. At the same time, opportunities will increase for news distortions and political biases in selecting what to report. The media elite will be increasingly vulnerable to such conditions, and these conditions will place an increased burden on the news profession. It is a profession wrought with challenges and dilemmas, and increasing pressures for balance and fairness. It is difficult, indeed impossible, to achieve absolute objectivity, particularly when individuals are trying to gather and report news under pressures of time and events. But at the minimum, we should expect—and demand—that the members of the media elite recognize their own characteristics, predispositions, and weaknesses, the commercial imprint on news reporting, and their influence over the news profession.

In the final analysis, it is well to remember the words of de Tocqueville: "I admit that I do not feel toward freedom of the press that complete and instantaneous love which one accords to things by their nature supremely good. I love it more from considering the evils it prevents than on account of the good it does."[33]

NOTES

1. See for example, Richard Halloran, "Soldiers and Scribblers: A Common Mission," *Parameters*, 17 (Spring 1987), 10-28. See also Daniel F. Gilmore, "In the Barracks, Scorn For the News Business," *The Washington Post*, 26 August 1986, p. A15.
2. S. Robert Lichter, Stanley Rothman, Linda S. Lichter, *The Media Elite* (Bethesda, Md.: Adler and Adler, 1986), p. 39. See also pp. 39-44; and see Dan Nimmo, *Political Communication and Public Opinion in America* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Goodyear, 1978), pp. 192-93.
3. Lichter et al., p. 299.
4. Ibid., pp. 20-21, 23, 294.
5. Ibid.
6. See for example, Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*, 2d. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), pp. 40-42.
7. Lichter et al., p. 295.
8. Ibid., p. 95.
9. Peter B. Clark, "The Opinion Machine: Intellectuals, The Mass Media and American Government," in Harry M. Clor, ed., *The Mass Media and Modern Democracy* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1974), p. 48.
10. As quoted in Lichter et al., p. 43. See also Sam C. Sarkesian, *The New Battlefield: The United States and Unconventional Conflicts* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp. 264-65, 283, n. 20.
11. Lichter et al., pp. 110-14. See also Thomas E. Patterson and Robert D. McClure, *The Unseeing Eye: The Myth of Television Power in National Elections* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1976), p. 75; and Ben H. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), pp. 3-28.
12. Lichter et al., pp. 103-08, 120.
13. Patterson and McClure, p. 75.
14. Clark, p. 41.
15. David L. Paletz and Robert M. Entman, *Media Power Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 1981), pp. 253-54.
16. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1969), p. 186.
17. Doris Graber, "Media Magic: Fashioning Characters for the 1983 Mayoral Race," in Melvin G. Holli and Paul M. Green, eds. *The Making of the Mayor, Chicago, 1983* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1984), p. 68.
18. Bagdikian, p. 224.
19. Ibid., p. 133.
20. Peter Stoler, *The War Against the Press: Politics, Pressure and Intimidation in the 80s* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1986), pp. 207-08.
21. Peter Braestrup, *Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1977), I, xxxiii. For another journalist's view of the Vietnam War, see Michael J. Arlen, *The Living Room War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982).
22. Braestrup, p. 184.
23. Clark, p. 76.
24. Don Kowet, *A Matter of Honor: General William C. Westmoreland versus CBS* (New York: Macmillan, 1984), p. 301. See also Renata Adler, *Reckless Disregard: Westmoreland v. CBS et al; Sharon v. Time* (New York: Knopf, 1986).
25. Lichter et al., p. 153.
26. See Janet Cooke, "Jimmy's World," *The Washington Post*, 28 September 1981, p. A1; Editorial, "The End of the 'Jimmy' Story," *The Washington Post*, 16 April 1981, p. A18; and David A. Maraniss, "Post Reporter's Pulitzer Prize is Withdrawn," *The Washington Post*, 16 April 1981, p. A1.
27. Clark, p. 71.
28. Robert MacNeil, "Why Do They Hate Us?" *Columbia Magazine* (June 1982), p. 17.
29. John H. Davis, *The Kennedys: Dynasty and Disaster 1848-1984* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984), p. 464.
30. Ibid., p. 609.
31. Holmes M. Brown, "TV Turns Good Economic News into Bad," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 11 March 1984, p. 6.
32. See, for example, Edith Efron, *The News Twisters* (New York: Manor Books, 1972).
33. De Tocqueville, p. 180.