



# The Media Effect

Influencing government & politics from LBJ to Dubya

# Watchdog still has bite

- *“All I know is what I read in the newspapers.”* – Will Rogers, American humorist.
- OK, but what **effect** does that have?
- A few examples will get us rolling.

# FX: Injured vets

- **The year: 2007**
- The issue: Medical treatment by military hospitals of returning U.S. soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan.
- The media report: The Washington Post, Newsweek, and ABC all do major stories on substandard treatment of injured vets in America.
- The reaction: A two-star general in charge of Walter Reed Hospital is fired soon after, and the next day the Secretary of the Army is fired. Later, the Senate votes more aid to veterans' medical treatment.

# The Post story

## **Soldiers Face Neglect, Frustration At Army's Top Medical Facility**

By Dana Priest and Anne Hull

Washington Post Staff Writers

Sunday, February 18, 2007; A01

Behind the door of Army Spec. Jeremy Duncan's room, part of the wall is torn and hangs in the air, weighted down with black mold. When the wounded combat engineer stands in his shower and looks up, he can see the bathtub on the floor above through a rotted hole. The entire building, constructed between the world wars, often smells like greasy carry-out. Signs of neglect are everywhere: mouse droppings, belly-up cockroaches, stained carpets, cheap mattresses.

This is the world of Building 18, not the kind of place where Duncan expected to recover when he was evacuated to Walter Reed Army Medical Center from Iraq last February with a broken neck and a shredded left ear, nearly dead from blood loss.

# And the Army's reaction

- **Walter Reed Stories Factual But Unfair, Medical Chief Says**
- By Steve Vogel  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
Friday, February 23, 2007; A03
- The Army's surgeon general yesterday criticized stories in The Washington Post disclosing problems at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, saying the series unfairly characterized the living conditions and care for soldiers recuperating from wounds at the hospital's facilities.
- "I'm not sure it was an accurate representation," Lt. Gen. Kevin C. Kiley, chief of the Army Medical Command, told reporters during a news conference. "It was a one-sided representation."
- The Medical Command oversees Walter Reed and all Army health care.
- Until now, the Army had not challenged any aspect of the Post series.

# Bob Woodruff's special



# FX: Sarajevo

- **The year: 1994**
- The battleground: The central market district in Sarajevo.
- The media report: A mortar shell is fired into the crowd, killing 68 and injuring 200 civilians. Carnage is everywhere, and it's all covered in real-time on TV.
- The reaction: President Clinton immediately calls for an end to the U.S. policy on non-involvement in the Balkans. That leads to an international coalition to find a diplomatic solution to the Bosnian violence.

# FX: Nayirah

- **The year: 1990**
- The event: A Congressional caucus on Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.
- The media report: A 15-year-old Iraqi girl named only as “Nayirah,” describes Iraqi soldiers killing babies in Kuwait. It is covered wall-to-wall by U.S. media.
- The reaction: Americans are infuriated, and the issue of going to war with Iraq is reduced largely to this one girl’s tragic story. The first Gulf War (Iraq 1) starts three months later with U.S. bombing of Baghdad.
- There is an important PS to this episode. Nayirah turns out to be the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to the U.S., her appearance was organized by a PR company, and no one can (later) find any validity to her story.

# A “shadow world”

- The media present a *representation* of reality.
- The map is not the territory.
- So a kind of “shadow world” emerges, hopefully paralleling reality.
- Problem: We react to this shadow world in the *very real world*.
- We go to war over images, and it’s happened time and again.
- Want to talk about the weight around a journalist’s neck?

# Success & Failure

- In foreign policy, success and failure often depend on the eye of the beholder.
- The media serve as *eyeglasses* for the public, focusing on complexities and presenting them in stark, simple terms.
- Policy makers are vexed, feel events appear out of context; they may change a lot as the stew cooks on the stove.
- But the media are looking for the “boiling bubbles.”

# Media Set the Standards

- Media have the power to set standards that policy makers must meet ... like how many war dead are *too many*?
- The public, particularly if it doubts a White House policy, may accept the media's interpretation.

# What's the press up against?

- A well-oiled spin machine in the White House.

*“He (Clinton spokesman Mike McCurry) and his colleagues were engaged in a daily struggle to control the agenda, to seize the public’s attention, however fleetingly, for Clinton’s wide-ranging initiatives. They had to manage the news, to package the presidency in a way that people would buy the product.”* – Howard Kurtz, *The Spin Machine*.

# Different agendas

- White House journalists had a different agenda. They were focused in the Clinton years, on *scandal and malfeasance*.
- They were interested in conflict, drama, and “pulling back the curtain to expose the *Wizard of Oz*.”
- It was their *job* to report what the president said, but their *mission* was to explain *why* he said it and what his sometimes-seedy purposes were.
- The White House press staff’s job was to launder the news – scrub it free of dark stains.
- And sometimes, to employ the tactic of *misdirection*.

# Dodging bullets

- *Central mystery of Clinton's second term:* How a president so aggressively probed on so many fronts could remain so popular with the American people. Bad news did not make a dent, and McCurry was a big reason for that.
- On the contrary, Clinton's performance helped create the sense that the country was doing just fine on his watch.

# The plan

- The plan: to alternately *seduce, mislead, and sometimes intimidate* the press to get them to report what McCurry wanted.
- At stake was the success of Clinton's second term.
- It worked beautifully for the White House and saved Clinton's popularity, which probably saved him from removal from office.

# Rehearse, rehearse

- White House press staff did not expose Reagan or Clinton to press without rehearsing what he would say, lest he deliver an unscripted sound bite marring the day's story line.
- The modern presidency is, above all, a *Media Presidency*.
- “There was a time when the president was graded on the traditional measures of his relations with Congress and foreign leaders ... and his ability to keep the economy moving and the nation at peace...”

# A new grading standard

- “...Now the increasingly opinionated mass media had somehow become the arbiter of political success, and the distiller of conventional wisdom.” – Howard Kurtz in *Spin Cycle*.
- It was truly “governing by sound bite.”
- McCurry and his staff needed the press to sell their message to the public, and the press needed an action-packed presidency on which to build their reputations and name recognition.”
- What results is the famous “symbiotic relationship” between the W.H. and the press.

# The press and war

- Nowhere is the media's impact more important than in its war coverage.
- That coverage begins before war is even declared.
- The government sees the media as a two-edged sword in times of war and the buildup to war.

# Blacks, whites, & grays

- As the time for war nears, the government wants things painted in black-and-white terms for the public to galvanize support.
- This is called a “two-valued orientation.”
- “You’re with us (the good guys) or you’re with them (the bad guys).”
- Problem for the government is that the media often look at the grays.

# How to frame a war?

- **Vietnam** is decisive in changing journalists' minds forever.
- A split develops in the U.S. reporters covering the war. Some favor approaching it like WWII, patriotism intact and behind the U.S. effort. Others begin questioning what the military is saying as what they see often contradicted it.
- Reporters like David Halberstam, Neil Sheehan, & Malcom Browne (then others) begin calling it as they see it, angering the military and traditional reporters who felt they should go more with the military's version of events.

# Countering the media

- By November 1967, Lyndon Johnson begins a PR campaign to persuade the press, Congress, and public that “progress” does exist in Vietnam and that the war is being “won.”
- Media aides advise LBJ to stress the theme of “light at the end of the tunnel;” don’t talk about specific battles, wins, losses, or casualties.

# The plan

- Overall plan: recapture TV, flood it with LBJ's voices, use the media to defeat the media.
- But will a good PR campaign succeed if the audience just doesn't buy the message?

# Cracks surface

- Johnson himself, however, wavers between defending his Vietnam policy and being uncertain about it.
- *“In contrast to John F. Kennedy during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, or to Franklin D. Roosevelt after Pearl Harbor, (Johnson) started by setting a hesitant tone – which did not go unnoticed in the media.”* – Peter Baestrup.

# LBJ sends for the big gun

- Johnson brings Gen. William Westmoreland to Washington, D.C. to address a large gathering of journalists.
- He says America is winning the war and that the end is in sight. This speech is highly publicized, and it seems for awhile as if much of America is buying the general's idea until ...

# The TET offensive

- ... January 1968 when the North Vietnamese regular army and the Viet Cong launch an all-out offensive (called the “TET” or New Year offensive) against 100 cities in South Vietnam, including Saigon itself.
- The fury and magnitude of this attack convince much of America that the war is not being won after all.

# A historic TV report

- That opinion is shared publicly by the best-known and most trusted TV journalist in America: CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite.
- Returning from Vietnam, Cronkite steps out of his normal objective role to tell the nation on Feb. 27 that, "...the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate" and that the war is "unwinnable."

# Crossing the line



# In his words

- Cronkite concludes:
  - *“To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic, yet unsatisfactory conclusion ... it is increasingly clear to this reporter that the only rational way out will be to negotiate, not as victors but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy, and did the best they could.”*

# The effect on the nation

- Before Feb. 27: “Hawks” numbered 61%, and “doves” were at 35%.
- By mid-March: “Doves” outnumber “Hawks” for the first time since the Vietnam War began.
- News coverage plays a role in this shift by clarifying what American military policy is and what it is not.
- “Progress,” despite the White House rhetoric, is accurately portrayed by the media as slow and uneven.

# The effect on LBJ

- After Cronkite's broadcast, White House reports have Johnson reacting, "That's it. If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost middle America."
- LBJ decides not to seek re-election as president.

# Power of images

- The press coverage itself becomes more graphic and, once again, the **power of visual images** shock the nation as we watch a young Vietnamese girl screeching and running naked down a dusty road, trying to avoid a napalm attack, and the photo of a Viet cong terrorist captured by a South Vietnamese who put a gun to the man's head and fired on camera.

# Fleeing napalm attack



# The execution



Compare with *this* photo



Or this one ...



# Still, 7 more years

- The Nixon administration continues to press the war for seven more years in search of an undefined “**peace with honor.**”
- A gradual troop reduction occurs during Nixon’s years, ending with negotiations by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Result: a total U.S. pull-out in 1975.
- Soon, South Vietnam falls to the Communists.

# The media effect

- To this date historians still debate whether the American pull-out came because of the intense press coverage of the war, and most believe it did.
- The press is a huge determinant of U.S. public opinion, and this was certainly the case with the Vietnam War.
- Still, this was a ten-year war for America.

# Sound familiar?

- Now all this is happening again, only the war is in Iraq and not Vietnam.
- Media voices are impatient again and are focusing on the dead, the dread and the defeats.
- The reason this nationwide protest is softer than Vietnam: No military draft exists (yet).

# Precursor: Iraq 1

- Iraq invades Kuwait Aug. 2, 1990
- Kuwait seeks the help of the U.S.
- Bush Sr. tells Saddam to move out, but Saddam stays put
- The U.S. leads a bombing raid on Baghdad on Jan. 17, 1991.

# CNN grows up

- CNN made its name in covering this war.
- A crew headed by producer Robert Weiner anchors the coverage from Ground Zero in the Al Rashid Hotel on Jan. 17, 1991, as the bombs are falling.
- They had the only live, outside communication system to America.
- They owned the coverage that night.

# Quick and Decisive

- The first phase of the war is an air war of 1,000 “sorties” and using “smart bombs” and long-range cruise missiles.
- Iraq’s Air Force and anti-aircraft batteries are destroyed, along with its telecommunications system.
- In February, the ground campaign occurs Four days later, it’s all over.

# 2 kinds of coverage

- In both Iraq 1 and Iraq 2, initial coverage of the war evidence a kind of “gung-ho,” somewhat patriotic spirit as U.S. troops go to battle.
- But that spirit changes dramatically in Iraq 2 after Baghdad is conquered and Iraq 2b starts to bog down.

# Rules for media

- Dominated by a pool system.
- Reporters are credentialed by the Pentagon and accompany certain military units, always with public affairs officers (PAOs) present at interviews with troops.
- Much of the battlefield is off-limits to the press.

# First real-time war

- Live coverage dominates from the battlefield and, along with it, challenges for security issues.
- The fog of war reported live by journalists trying to make sense of the fog surrounding them.
- Rumors as truth; what do we know for sure?
- “Gas-mask journalism”

# Dangerous tactics

- Some journalists break ranks and went on their own to hot spots.
- One is CBS' Bob Simon and his three-member crew who were captured for 40 days.

# The case of Peter Arnett

- He stays in Baghdad after all other western reporters were ordered out by Iraqis.
- Was he detained or arrested?  
Open question. In any event, his reporting is done under the eyes of Iraqi military.
- CNN notes that on all his reports. a

# Against the grain

- Bush hopes the rhetoric of “smart bombs” and “surgical precision” will show Americans this is a low-threat war to Iraqi civilians.
- Arnett’s reports instead shows widespread casualties among Iraq’s civilian population.
- Bush insists Arnett is being used as a propaganda tool by Iraqi Army. Some 34 congressmen call him unpatriotic.

# Iraq 1 ends

Iraq is forced to exit Kuwait; U.S. and coalition troops neutralize Iraqi resistance in battle; U.N. sets up monitoring procedure for WMDs; U.S. troops go home.

Saddam is left in power.

# Iraq 2

- Saddam refuses to comply with orders from WMD monitoring officials from the United Nations.
- There are rumors he is developing WMDs.
- 9/11 occurs in America.
- U.S. sends troops to Afghanistan, but then sees Iraq as fostering terrorism and sets sights on it under “Dubya.”

# Iraq 2a and 2b

- Starts on March 20, 2003 with another bombing raid on Baghdad.
- This time, fewer countries help the U.S. as Bush Jr. says U.S. will find and destroy the WMDs.
- The air and ground wars are quick and decisive.
- The “war” is over in about a month.
- No WMDs found.
- Then the real war begins.

# Covering the war

- This time, the Pentagon allows reporters closer to the action.
- “Embeds” travel with the front-line troops into battle.
- Controversy over that in the ranks of journalists.
- Embeds find freedom to report the war as it happens, up close. However, ties bind them to their units.
- A win-win strategy for press and military?

# The embeds

- A BBC-sponsored study found:
  - Reporters embedded with military units were generally able to preserve their objectivity, but the practice raised serious causes for concern.
  - Embeds make efforts to protect their objectivity and usually are able to do it.
  - Embedded reports often more reliable than official military briefings.
  - Many embeds avoided images they felt would be too graphic.

# One reporter's view

- “The advantage is that you get to see what’s going on at a very localized level. So when we talk about pockets of resistance, viewers can see exactly what we mean.” – Adrian Van Klaveren, BBC.

# A dangerous job

- Several American and British reporters and photojournalists are killed in covering the war and the current fighting.
- ITN's Terry Lloyd was killed pursuing a story on his own, outside the embed system.
- ABC's Bob Woodruff is nearly killed while on a routine patrol with a combat unit in 2006.

# A work in progress

- On May 1, 2003, Bush declares victory over Iraq in the war.
- No WMDs are found.
- Debate over how intelligence was framed to start the war.
- New Administration reason for going to war emerges: Get rid of Saddam and make the Middle East safer for democracy.
- Saddam is captured and tried, but fighting goes on to this day.

# The toll so far

- More than 3,000 U.S. casualties, most coming after the “war” ended.
- Few Americans see an exit plan.
- War drags past 4th anniversary, media pressure increases, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld is forced to resign.
- Most Americans want out of Iraq.
- Bush approval rating is at a historic low for modern presidents.

# The media effect

- Despite Bush's best efforts to put a positive spin on the war effort, daily media reports play up the deaths and seeming futility.
- The backdrop of Iraqi coverage today is a steady drumbeat of daily casualties.
- Major stories focus on the violence that claims military and civilian lives.
- Bush has lost the media war.