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The Media and War

The shadows of past wars, and particularly the most recent, hang over those conflicts which threaten to overtake us. Thus the shade of the First World War darkened the inter-war years, and the shadow of the Vietnam War, or the 'Vietnam syndrome', deeply influenced US' views until the Gulf War in 1990–1991. These shadows were shaped by war correspondents and ministerial speeches at the time and later by novels, memoirs and films. Much of their impact was unconscious and it interacted with other influences. We know, for example, from opinion polls that, since the Second World War, the US public have favoured the Air Force over the other services. On the other hand, the Europeans have been more sceptical and fearful of the impact of airpower on civilians. We can presume that this is because the US homeland has never been the victim of air attacks unlike every major European country, and reading or hearing reports of the blitz on London was not the same as being there. But it may also be that the US public wanted to fight wars which favour a country, like their own, with the most advanced technology.

European and American differences over airpower had a major impact on trans-Atlantic relations in the early 1990s. Even though massive US air attacks had failed to win the wars in Korea and Vietnam,¹ the Clinton administration believed that the war in Bosnia in the early 1990s could be ended by allowing the Bosnian Muslims to import arms and by bombing Bosnian Serb forces, whom they blamed for most of the killing. The administration also felt that the US people were unwilling to sacrifice their soldiers in battles on the ground. The European governments, led by Britain and France, were more doubtful about the utility of bombing the Serbs and preferred to try to abate the conflict with peacekeeping forces. The shadow of Vietnam and other guerrilla victories thus had one effect on the Americans and quite another on Europeans. In the

event, peacekeeping did not stop the killing, NATO launched air attacks and the Bosnian Serbs eventually agreed to negotiate an end to the war, though whether this was due to such attacks on their forces, or to the fact that they had all the territory they wanted and had begun to lose the ground war to the Bosnian Muslims and Croats, remains uncertain.

In 1999, buoyed by success in Bosnia, the Clinton administration persuaded NATO to undertake a sustained bombing campaign against Serbia. The aim was to compel the Serb government to end their occupation of Kosovo and accept peacekeepers in the province. Once again Milosevic, the Serb leader, capitulated but whether this was because of Russian pressure, because NATO was beginning to talk of sending ground forces into Kosovo, or simply because of bombing remains unclear. What is certain is that NATO was running out of targets in Serbia which could be struck by aircraft without killing large numbers of civilians, and that it would have had to use its ground forces if Milosevic had not given way.

War correspondents played a very important part in creating the shadows which influenced such debates, yet it is not easy for them to shape these shadows so that they reflect a conflict. Those who serve in wars, and the journalists who cover them, are usually dissatisfied with media coverage because it seems to lack the 'feel' for the experiences which they have undergone, while historians rarely make use of journalists' accounts when they come to write about past campaigns. The question is, however, not whether media coverage has been comprehensive or invariably accurate, as it can never be either, but whether its general shape has been right, whether it has given people enough information to understand what was happening when British forces intervened overseas and to decide whether the campaign's continuation was justified. There are a number of inherent difficulties; the obscurity, complexity and pace of the battlefield; the prejudices and competence of the correspondents or of the editors whom they supply with information; the threat to the correspondent's life; censorship by the armed forces and influence by the government.

Wars are generally made up both of long periods of boredom when there is little for journalists to report, and very fast moving and complex battles which are extremely taxing to describe adequately, even for those who are familiar with such events. Police forces take months or years to decide who committed a murder and accumulate sufficient evidence to convince a jury. They interrogate those who witnessed the crime and all those who have relevant information. Yet still they make mistakes and innocent people are imprisoned. A battle, where

conflicting groups try to achieve, and sometimes hide, their purposes and methods, and where noise, fear and confusion reign, is vastly more complicated than a murder. When a civil airliner or a train crashes, the subsequent enquiry takes months or years, while experts of all types give information to the investigators. On a battlefield hundreds of aircraft, tanks, trains and other equipment may be destroyed, the journalist has no time to await subsequent enquiries as to how they were destroyed. Even if he or she witnessed an event, their account might well differ substantially from the story told by another witness. They have only one advantage over subsequent and pains-taking enquirers, memory distorts and their instant reports leave no time for pride and absent-mindedness to obscure the truth.

Very often journalists have had no training to help them describe or analyse military affairs and this makes them more dependent on military briefings in their efforts to understand events.² On the other hand, they will still arrive on the battlefield with preconceived political ideas which will distort their descriptions of events. Journalists notoriously escape from the results of their mistakes and misinterpretations. Readers and viewers usually forget individual errors but, while they may enjoy journalism and probably admire war correspondents for their courage, they say that they despise the 'hacks' and their employers; Rudyard Kipling's description of the influence wielded by the owner of the *Daily Express* Lord Beaverbook as 'power without responsibility; the prerogative of the harlot throughout the ages' has stuck. Eighty-six per cent of Britons in one survey in 1992 professed to lack confidence in the 'press', though they discriminate between the different sections of the media.³ In April 2003, 55 per cent said that they preferred television as a source of news on the war in Iraq to the newspapers, while only 8 per cent preferred newspapers. It was unclear whether this was because they read popular newspapers, which had less thoughtful coverage, or whether it was because they preferred to believe what they could see on the screen, even if it was carefully selected and edited.⁴

The problem of making sense of the battlefield, 'of telling the truth', has remained constant since William Howard Russell, arguably the first or one of the first war correspondents, tried to put together his own observations on the battles in the Crimean War with the fragmentary accounts he received from the officers and men involved.⁵ After the battle of Alma he commented:

How was I to describe what I had not seen? Where learn the facts for which they were waiting at home? My eyes swam as I tried to

make sense of what I had heard. I was worn out with excitement, fatigue and want of food . . . I longed to get away from it – from the exultation of others in which thought for the dead was forgotten or unexpressed. It was now that the weight of the task I had accepted fell on my soul like lead.⁶

Russell's comment encapsulated the impossibility of adequately describing in a few words anything so multifarious and chaotic. Seen this way, the traditional war correspondent had a far more difficult task than the novelist who can, like Stendhal, simply say that battle is an incomprehensible mess and describe it in terms of haphazard and often inexplicable events, irrational passions, violence and confusion.⁷ War correspondents often nowadays say that they can do no better, they look at war from the point of view of the soldier or civilian, not the general or the politician. As the television journalist Martin Bell put it, 'forget the strategic overview. All war is local. It is about the ditch in which the soldier crouches and the ground on which he fights and dies.'⁸ Yet, as some media analysts have pointed out, such assertions may discourage attempts to make sense of what is happening.⁹ Reporting or photographing a random series of incidents without any attempt to link them together or to explain them means that the primary purpose of the correspondent, giving the reader a general idea of what occurs, has been put to one side.

Before the First World War the viewpoint was very different. Many hard-bitten war correspondents were Social Darwinists who saw themselves as reporting the eternal struggle for survival and believed that peace made individuals and nations decadent, an attitude which led so many of the intellectuals to rejoice when war broke out in 1914.¹⁰ The struggle for survival seemed particularly evident by the end of the century in East Asia where China and Korea appeared to be in terminal decay and where Japan secured an overwhelming victory against the Russians in the war of 1904–1905. Thus one of the war correspondents explained Russia's defeat by suggesting that 'the improvements, or the so-called improvements, of civilisation have a disastrous effect on the physique and stamina of a nation'.¹¹ Another protested at the end of the war:

After having tasted of the horror and sublimity of war I was to return to the contemplation of . . . that sordid, eternal squabble for pence which they call peace – a squabble in which there is no Red Cross, no

quarter, no regard for sex or age, no dignity, not a single redeeming feature.¹²

He went on to write of the dead soldiers, 'better the death they died than the self-centred existence which seems the sum of our modern civilisation'.

The early war correspondents lavished praise on the officers' bravery in the face of danger, partly to encourage others to behave in the same way and partly because warfare had been described in these terms since the time of Homer. Casualties amongst civilians living in battle zones were not the centre of their attention nor the core of their reports because their readers expected them to concentrate on the fighting itself and the wars were often far away. In contrast, by the end of the 20th century the focus and the language had changed; correspondents did not normally use adjectives to allude to the bravery of the combatants, but to dilate on the sufferings of the civilians and of the military casualties. Paintings by war artists of the heroic battles waged by individuals were replaced by photographs either of tanks, ships and aircraft or of civilian casualties. The soldiers faded into the background. The explicit purpose remained the same, informing the public about the course of the war, but the journalists were looking at different aspects of war and interpreting events in different ways.

Histories of the media's coverage of military intervention suggest this change of perspective occurred during the Vietnam War. This was the first war to be observed so intensively by television, it was also the first prolonged, modern war in which many of the Western correspondents came to doubt both the desirability of Western intervention and the competence of a 'Command... that rode us into attrition traps on the back of fictional kill ratios, and an Administration that believed the Command, a cross-fertilisation of ignorance'.¹³ But the coverage of warfare has been constantly altering; even at the beginning of the 20th century correspondents were beginning to pay more attention to the impact of war on civilians and, as pointed out in Chapter 3, the Red Cross was now an accepted feature of European battlefields.¹⁴

Thus, one of the correspondents covering the Russo-Japanese War in 1904–1905 recalled the Japanese bombardment of the Manchurian city of Liaoyang, when 'cries of pain and of mourning were heard in innumerable Chinese homes, mothers lamenting their shrapnel mangled babies, infants trying in vain to feed off breasts that would never suckle again'.¹⁵ As war has succeeded war, correspondents tried ever

harder to put such civilians into the picture. During the Second World War, the Australian journalist and historian Alan Moorehead typified the trend. Sent to cover the allied invasion of North Africa, he described the changes in Thibar, a tiny Tunisian village just over the border from Algeria. He recalled the confused rumours that swept the valley when the allied landing began and the overwhelming fear amongst the people that the fighting would spread to their village. Then the British troops came and German aircraft began to strafe the area so that moving vehicles were unsafe in the daytime. Thibar was, nevertheless, relatively lucky, Moorehead referred to the 'battered township' of El Aroussa, the 'depressing shambles' of Medjez-el-Bab and the 'blasted town of Sousse' where the Arab section had been badly hit by allied bombing.¹⁶ During the final allied breakthrough to Tunis, Moorehead described how the beautiful Medjerda valley 'turned from green to dirty yellows and greys; the fields of wild flowers had withered entirely; the ripening wheat was flattened; the dust was appalling'. Tunis itself had escaped the worst damage except round the docks and the port of La Goulette where the wharves were badly cratered.¹⁷

Moorehead took an overtly pro-allied view but he was much more sparing in his use of adjectives than the 19th-century war correspondents. He described meeting one soldier John Anderson shortly after the action for which he had been awarded the VC, but his account of Anderson's own behaviour is nonchalant. Moorehead's assessment of the soldiers' attitudes is very different from his 19th-century predecessors:

They have no high notions of glory. A great number of people at home who refer emotionally to 'Our Boys' would be shocked and horrified if they knew just how the boys were thinking and behaving. They would regard them as young hooligans. And this is because the real degrading nature of war is not understood by the public at home.¹⁸

All this has to be compared with the language Russell and others used to describe events in the Crimea and afterwards. Russell began his report on the battle of Balaklava, 'if the exhibition of the most brilliant valour, of the excess of courage, and of a daring which would have reflected luster on the best days of chivalry can afford full consolation for the disaster of today, we can have no reason to regret the melancholy loss which we have suffered in a contest with a savage and barbarian enemy'.¹⁹ Russell's report is replete with adjectives and harks back to heroic ages; the

flowery language, the historic references and the denigration of the Russians would be equally unacceptable today.

Of course, the bland language used by Moorehead and others could fail adequately to reflect what was happening quite as much as the focus on the courage of the troops in the 19th century. The effects even of nuclear weapons were, for example, hidden at the time behind the flat terminology used. *The Times'* headline on 8 August 1945 was simply 'Tokyo report on vast damage by new bomb', *The Daily Telegraph* headlined the story, 'Allies invent atomic bomb: first dropped on Japan'. *The Times'* report said that Japanese broadcasts indicated that 'enormous' damage had been done to Hiroshima and that they denounced the US attack as 'sufficient to brand the enemy for ages to come as the destroyer of mankind and as public enemy No. 1 of social justice'.²⁰ Unscathed by war themselves, the American people had to use considerable imagination to appreciate the effect of bombing on Hamburg and Dresden, Hiroshima and Nagasaki from the short reports published in the press.

Nevertheless, governments are aware of the potential impact of media reports on their own people and on foreigners. The balance of power between governments and media is unstable, and tension between them is both inevitable and, to some extent, desirable. The media are inundated with information by governments and the danger is that they will either accept it uncritically or slant their reports by selecting items which fit their preconceptions.²¹ They are also subject to pressure from the armed forces and from governments to avoid certain issues altogether, not just because they believe coverage would threaten national security, but because it would inconvenience the government. On the other hand, ministers and serving officers know how much power journalists can wield. In wartime, as Russell showed in the Crimea, they can make or break reputations, and they can influence the attitude of the public to the campaign as a whole.

In the winter of 1854 Russell had to decide how much to report on the British army's lack of preparations for the freezing conditions in the Crimea and the effect which this had on their combat readiness. If he did not report, he would be conniving in the logistical failures and hiding the truth, if he reported fully then the Russians would realise that the British army had virtually no powers of resistance. In the end he decided to give at least some idea of the army's sufferings. The effect was a government crisis, a flood of donations for the troops and belated attempts to make good the deficiencies. In other words, Russell changed the perception of the war in London and the policy towards it. He cared about the outcome and behaved as much like a diplomat as a journalist; he

could not be 'just' an objective reporter of events. The tension between reporting the truth and interfering in the progress of the war, between observing and acting is inescapable. In Bosnia during the early 1990s many journalists became so convinced of the case against the Serbs that they ceased to behave as objective reporters. The television presenter and writer Nick Gowing called this conscious abdication of any attempt at impartiality, the 'cancer' of modern journalism.²² The journalists' campaign did not immediately push governments into action but it has left a lasting mark on the way that war has been viewed.

Lloyd George, the British prime minister, argued during and after the First World War that the media were unable to describe what the war was like because of the censorship his government imposed. He told the editor of *The Manchester Guardian*, C. P. Scott, 'if people really knew, the war would be stopped tomorrow. But of course they don't know and can't know. The correspondents don't write and the censorship would not pass the truth.'²³ This is patronising nonsense; people did have a general idea of the bloodshed and suffering involved. H. G. Wells' novel, *Mr Britling Sees it Through*, published in 1916, described the trenches, the barbed wire, the artillery fire, the mud and the casualties lying in no-man's land between the lines.²⁴ Despite the censorship, he could describe what the battlefield looked like from the press reports and personal accounts provided by friends. Similarly, a civilian diarist noted in January 1917:

The mud at the front is unbelievable and men are sinking in it. Eugene Crombie has written a description of it to his mother.... Eugene says that... there is the horrid sensation of treading on something soft and yielding which you know to be a corpse or part of one buried in the slush. Still, he adds, even this is nothing to seeing corpses half-gnawed by rats.²⁵

The censorship prevented people knowing the details of battles but they knew what they cost because of the deaths of their relatives and their neighbours' children and the army's apparently insatiable demand for more recruits, leading for the first time to the introduction of conscription. Asquith's daughter wrote to one of her friends in October 1915, 'our poor generation – how its blossom has fallen – Rupert [Brooke] to me the greatest sorrow of the war – and one of the greatest of my life... The living and the dead are curiously mixed in one's mind. Hell and heaven seem not much further than Gallipoli.'²⁶ All that was published after the war, all the criticisms and debates simply fleshed out the

details. The conflict was much closer to home than the French Wars had been, the numbers serving in the armed forces were greater, the way in which industries had to convert from producing civilian goods to making munitions was unprecedented, the encouragement of women to serve in medical and paramilitary organisations was equally novel, the general interference with peacetime life was more extensive than it had been at least since the Civil War in the 17th century. Ordinary people may not have known how to put the conflict into historical perspective but they had an idea of the events unfolding across the Channel.

Today, with the ever-growing importance of the worldwide media and the ubiquity of the tiny camera, censorship of the details of a battle is increasingly difficult even for a dictatorship and counter-productive because of the importance of winning the journalists' sympathies. In March 2003 the Anglo-American forces tried to create a moral bond between the forces and the media by incorporating journalists in military units. This was by no means as unusual as it was presented at the time, war correspondents have been 'embedded' since Russell's period. It was no panacea, since the armed forces still depended upon the trustworthiness of the journalists and the journalists might become or seem to become the propagandists for the armed forces. The mistake the coalition made from its own point of view was that it failed to involve Arab reporters, and it was the sympathies of the Arabs and the wider Moslem world that it needed.²⁷

War is so complex, dynamic and extraordinary that the principal group of people who try to describe it will inevitably be controversial to the governments involved, the armed forces and the public at large. Journalists see themselves, not without reason, as the Fourth Estate, a vital part of the governmental system. A clear distinction has to be made, however, between the various professions within that estate. Commentators and editors often urge governments to intervene in foreign countries and to go to war, but in the days or weeks before it breaks out war correspondents may have only a limited opportunity to voice their opinions. In the 19th century their Social Darwinist views would have led them to take a hawkish stance yet the general tone of their reports today is to encourage the public to want to avoid war if at all possible.

People are much better informed now about warfare than their ancestors were and, according to their political predispositions, they and the newspapers they read balance the military dangers of an impending conflict against the potential gains. Before the fighting began in and around the Falkland Islands in 1982 it was the liberal media which stressed the

military dangers because they saw the looming conflict as irrational and imperialistic; as *The Guardian's* editorial phrased it:

We would not have sent the Fleet The separate logic of momentum and military action undermines peace at every step That is the curse of war, the irrationality that seems childish when we preach to the Turks and Greeks, the Pakistanis and Indians. Now we the British struggle with the same curse.²⁸

The paper rightly emphasised the risks involved to the Fleet and gave space to writers who complained about the immorality, irrationality and ignorance of the campaign's supporters. According to the economic historian, Eric Hobsbawm, 'almost every single political correspondent in the country, and that goes from the Tory ones right down to the Left, thought the whole thing was loony The war demonstrated the strength and the political potential of patriotism in this case in its jingo form.'²⁹

Before the campaign against Iraq began in 1991 there was proportionately less discussion of the rights and wrongs of the conflict, because the allied cause was generally taken as given, but very much greater emphasis was placed by all the media on the military dangers involved, although these were far less serious than they had been in the South Atlantic a decade before. Over Bosnia in the early 1990s there was extensive media pressure to follow US wishes and to bomb the Serbs to compel them to stop the massacres of the Muslims. *The Times'* and *The Guardian's* leading articles took this view and *The Independent* devoted its front page on two occasions to the signatures of those critical of government's policy for being insufficiently aggressive.³⁰ The dangers of becoming embroiled in a guerrilla war, which was stressed by government spokesmen, tended to be minimised by the commentators.

The weight given to the military dangers in these campaigns has, thus, depended on political viewpoints as well as military briefings. The riskiest conventional military operation was the Falklands War, although it was the liberal press, which was hostile to the campaign's objectives, which put most stress on these. British power depended upon the two aircraft carriers accompanying the fleet to the South Atlantic. If these had been sunk, and if the Harrier aircraft they carried had been unable to defeat the Argentine Skyhawks, then the war would have been lost. Britain might also have been defeated if one of the major troops carriers, such as the liner *Queen Elizabeth*, had been sunk on the way to the islands, because the public might have turned against the war. In any

case, the task force commander, Admiral Woodward, pointed out afterwards that he lost nearly half the frigates and destroyers with which he started and that the casualty rate was ten times higher than anything the British had suffered in a similar period since the Second World War.³¹

The 1991 Gulf campaign against Iraq was very much less risky because Britain acted as part of a coalition, led by the United States, yet there were exaggerated warnings that the war might continue for years. In part these fears seem to have been spread by US military briefings, reflecting their determination not to be accused of minimising the risks as they had been during the Vietnam War. Some academic and political commentators also suggested that advanced Western equipment would not work, that the Iraqis were highly disciplined, battle-hardened veterans and that they would use chemical weapons effectively.³² None of this proved accurate, US cruise missiles astonished the world by their accuracy, the Iraqis, however experienced, were quickly shattered by allied air strikes and tank columns, they were deterred from using their chemical weapons and sued for peace before inflicting casualties on the allies.³³ Fortunately, the tens of thousands of hospital beds set aside proved unnecessary.

The issue over former Yugoslavia was not the reliability of Western equipment but the concern in the British army that the campaign might become bogged down in guerrilla warfare. The army had been fighting against the IRA in Northern Ireland since the 1960s, the Yugoslav Partisans had fought courageously against the Germans during the Second World War and Tito was supposed to have prepared them for a similar struggle had the Soviets invaded during the Cold War.³⁴ But these misgivings were overlaid by media pressure from *The Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Independent* to intervene decisively. Of course, there were dissenting voices, including columnists such as Simon Jenkins in *The Times* and Edward Pierce in *The Guardian*, but they were a minority and the papers' editorial line was strongly interventionist.³⁵ In the event, military misgivings proved unfounded, neither in Bosnia nor later in Kosovo were the armed forces embroiled in guerrilla warfare, that was to wait for the 21st-century wars against Iraq and Afghanistan.

Over Afghanistan in 2001 the more radical journalists reverted to the critical tone which *The Guardian* and *New Statesman* had adopted during the Falklands War; one argued that 'the worst thing about Mr Blair's missions-pretty-impossible is that they have become coated with a patina of national pride. They seek to blend past glories with present imperatives.'³⁶ British commentators tended to exaggerate the initial military difficulties, as they had done over Iraq in 1991, not least because

British columns had been defeated in Afghanistan in the 19th century. They tended to forget that the British armies had quickly avenged these defeats and occupied Kabul, and the efficacy of US airpower against conventional armies. Jonathan Steele in *The Guardian* predicted that images of civilian dead would destroy support for the air campaign.³⁷ In the event, within a matter of weeks the anti-Taleban tribes allied in the Northern Alliance, together with US airpower, had driven the Taleban from most of Afghanistan. In the long run, however, journalistic caution was more than justified by the insurgency which gradually developed against Western forces. The Taleban came back from Pakistan, where they had taken sanctuary, and allied air attacks alienated many Afghan people and even evoked protests from the pro-Western government in Kabul.³⁸

Plainly the participants in such pre-war debates were deeply influenced by the shadows of past wars, some long-gone and some more recent. They were touched by liberal hatred of nationalism and imperialism, by memories of Vietnam and of British defeats at Afghan hands in the 19th century, by experience of weapons which did not work, by the general tone of British culture and by their own political persuasions. Their responsibilities can hardly be exaggerated. They deeply influenced the public debates amongst the elite and sometimes governments themselves. If they encouraged conflict in an unwise campaign or if they opposed the use of force when it could have been constructive, they were indirectly responsible for the suffering and deaths involved. They have indeed dangerous power without responsibility and, generally, without the threat of being called to account.