

CHAPTER TWO

Manipulating Hearts and Minds

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FOR NEARLY A HALF A CENTURY American editors and government officials have lectured the world on the virtues of a free press, the desirability of the free flow of information, and the necessity to avoid governmental domination of the informational system.

How have these principles fared in the seven months beginning with the invasion of Kuwait in August 1990? There is a rich record from which to judge. Here only a tiny sample will be taken, but this demonstrates the essential practices of media performance in this period. What has been revealed? Along with providing a living laboratory for an assessment of the high-tech weapons the Pentagon has been building and stockpiling for decades, the Gulf War offered a spectacular opportunity for information and opinion management.

In retrospect and on balance, the remarkable control of American consciousness during and after the war must be regarded as a signal achievement of mind management, perhaps even more impressive than the rapid military victory.

After all, Iraq has only 18 million people. It is essentially a poor, not heavily industrialized society which was temporarily the possessor of a sizable arsenal. Its quick capitulation before overwhelming force was foretold.

But the informational assault against the American people is an altogether different affair. Here was "the information society," capable of the most dazzling capabilities for making information available instantaneously to the entire population. Did it meet the challenge? Actually, a

simple truth emerged: Dazzling information technology is no substitute for, and can obscure, elemental bread-and-butter information.

For, in fact, the United States, with its enormous media system operating with state-of-the-art technologies, has been as closed as a society could be to information, facts, and opinion which in the slightest challenged the national war policy. As one journalist put it, after the war was over and the censorship straitjacket somewhat loosened, "the real, and dangerous, point is that the Bush Administration and the military were so successful in controlling information about the war they were able to tell the public just about what they wanted the public to know. Perhaps worse, press and public, largely acquiesced in the disclosure of only selected information" (Tom Wicker, "An Unknown Casualty," *New York Times*, March 20, 1991, p. A17).

The main theater of operations for the information war was television. The print press was a secondary front and not quite as carefully guarded.

As Ronald Reagan's deputy chief of staff in charge of imagemaking, Michael Deaver, put it: "Television is where 80% of the people get their information," and what was done to control that information in the six weeks of war "couldn't [have been] better" (*New York Times*, February 15, 1991, p. A9).

What happened then to the principles of free speech and free flow of information, to say nothing of information pluralism, between January 15 and March 1, 1991, in the American media?

In short, the control process exercised through an amazing coordination of voluntaristic efforts by hundreds of media gatekeepers (editors, broadcasters, disc jockeys, sports announcers, talk-show hosts, etc.) succeeded in presenting the Gulf War, again according to Michael Deaver, as "a combination of Lawrence of Arabia and Star Wars"—i.e., heroic Western leadership of the Arab world joined with mouth-gaping demonstrations of advanced weaponry.

Accomplishing this end took painstaking effort. At home, the faces and views of only a very select group of individuals appeared on living room screens. Night after night, as well as throughout the day, nearly all commentary about the crisis and the war was restricted to military questions. Not surprisingly, every retired general found a new career as a consultant to one or another of the national networks. When civilians appeared, they were the politically certified think-tank experts or D.C. politicians with impeccable establishment credentials.

A former assistant editor of the *Washington Post* writing on Gulf War coverage for the *Columbia Journalism Review* (March-April 1991): 25-28) notes that "during the crucial first two weeks of the crisis [in August

1991] 76 percent of all references to Bush [on the networks] were favorable."

Yet even more significant in contributing to the American public's information deficit was what *was kept off television*. Far and away the most glaring informational omissions at the beginning of the crisis were the views and testimony of the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, April Glaspie.

According to an Iraqi transcript of a conversation between Glaspie and Saddam Hussein, only a few days before the invasion of Kuwait, Glaspie, in effect, said that the U.S. was indifferent to the Iraq-Kuwait dispute and considered it an intra-Arab matter.

Seven months later, this is denied by Glaspie, who claims that the transcript had been tampered with. But where were the media in that interval to explore this remarkable episode? Glaspie, in fact, was held incommunicado in Washington, under State Department order not to speak with the press.

Yet a diligent and truth-seeking press corps—which had no problems, ethical or otherwise, surrounding former Senator Gary Hart's Washington home to nail him for an interview about a weekend liaison—was suddenly impotent to find a U.S. ambassador in the nation's capital.

When Glaspie finally emerged on March 20 to tell her completely unconvincing story ("Needed the Glaspie File," *New York Times*, March 23, 1991), members of Congress treated her deferentially and asked no embarrassing questions. But Congress's abdication of responsibility for scrutinizing Bush's war policy is another story for another time.

The shocking refusal of the media to report vitally relevant domestic events and perspectives about the crisis and the war extends well beyond the Glaspie affair, important as that was. Ralph Nader noted that the January 26 peace march in Washington "was probably the biggest citizen demonstration ever . . . in winter." CBS gave it a four-second scan.

Nader also pointed out that "a senior member of Congress, Henry Gonzalez, the chairman of the House Banking Committee . . . put in a resolution to impeach Bush on the war; he's virtually 'hut out [of the news]" (*Columbia Journalism Review*, [March-April 1991]: 27).

Another instance, Jesse Jackson's experience with the media during the crisis, reveals the emptiness, or at least the arbitrariness, of the revered journalistic principle of newsworthiness—to say nothing of the degree of news control that was being exercised at the national level.

Jackson reported: "Since August 2nd, I have talked with Saddam Hussein for six hours, two hours on tape. Longer than any American. I met Tariq Aziz [Iraq's foreign minister] for almost ten hours. I took the first group of journalists into Kuwait, negotiated for the release of hostages.

"And when we got back, there was not one serious interview by a network. A categorical rejection. Now why is there no interest in what we saw, observed, and got on tape?" (*Columbia Journalism Review* [March-April 1991]: 28).

Jackson's legitimate question has not been answered, and it should be noted that his comment was published in a relatively insignificant periodical with a circulation of about thirty-thousand—hardly a competitor for one of the national news magazines which sell in the millions.

The total control of the news at the war front at least was more straightforward. The Pentagon decided what would be reported, and that was that.

A lawsuit was filed by the Center for Constitutional Rights against the Department of Defense, and Richard Cheney, Colin Powell, and George Bush in particular, on behalf of several small nonestablishment media (*Nation*, *In These Times*, *Guardian*, *Harper's*, *Progressive*, *Mother Jones*, *L.A. Weekly*, *Village Voice*, *Texas Observer*, and *Pacifica Radio News*).

In contrast, the networks and national papers' editors and publishers hardly protested their exclusion from independent reporting of the war. The war was over before the lawsuit against the government could be acted upon.

While the bombings and the ground war were under way, television screens for hours on end carried little but Pentagon briefings: Pentagon-released footage and reporters' censored stories, most of which came from the armed forces information sources to begin with.

One reporter, *Newsweek's* correspondent in the Gulf and a decorated war veteran, complained, "I had more guns pointed at me by Americans or Saudis who were into controlling the press than in all my years of actual combat." And another reportorial comment added, "Desert Storm was really two wars: The Allies against the Iraqis and the military against the press." (Both quotes are from Bob Sipschen, "The Media Rewrite, Review the Gulf War," *Los Angeles Times*, March 7, 1991, p. E2.)

Some could say that the rigid military control of the American media was hardly necessary. With few exceptions, the media did their own self-censorship and did it thoroughly.

This was most observable in the foreign opinion coverage—what there was of it. The foreign voices that supplemented the American generals and think-tank experts were no less carefully selected. John Major, the British prime minister, was the preferred spokesperson on almost all developments that seemed to call for an overseas commentary. Occasionally, François Mitterrand or a supportive German leader was summoned to reassure the American public that the war was truly an international effort.

On a few occasions, the Jordanians and King Hussein, in particular, got some attention. Their opinions were used to demonstrate, beyond doubt, that the Palestinians, who comprise half of the king's subjects, were supporters of the demonized Saddam Hussein. According to this guilt-by-association imagery, the Jordanians deserved the same treatment being meted out to the Iraqis. At the very least, the footage of the king and his constituents served as a further reinforcement for the remarkably unquestioning and sympathetic coverage bestowed on Israel.

Yet the full extent of the cocoon drawn around the American mind can only begin to be appreciated by *what was excluded*, day after day, about international sentiment on the buildup, the bombing, and the ground war in the Gulf. To document this requires a comprehensive review of press and broadcast coverage of scores of countries—clearly a task beyond the reach of a single article. But not beyond the facilities and capabilities of billion dollar media organizations, but markedly beyond their willingness to provide such coverage. All that can be attempted here are a couple of the most egregious omissions that had been widely publicized might have facilitated a modest amount of public awareness of what kind of an enterprise was unfolding—at least in the minds of a significant number of others.

For example, a paid advertisement in the *New York Times*, on March 18, 1991, weeks after the war's end, by a private group of Japanese citizens made an impassioned statement against the use of military force in international disputes. From the advertisement, it can be learned what one would never have known from earlier media coverage—that the war has been widely opposed in Japan. "When the Japanese Government tried to send our already unconstitutional Self-Defense Forces to the Gulf," the ad stated, public opposition was massive. "Rallies, meetings, and demonstrations were held all over the country." No recognition of this can be found in the American media. Nor can it be said that these manifestations occurred *only* in an unimportant, Third-World country.

Spain was another center of massive popular opposition to its government's contribution, modest as it was, to the coalition fighting in the Gulf. There also, huge rallies and governmental resignations might have been expected to receive some American media attention. They didn't.

Passing references were made to the closing of Egyptian schools and universities to prevent student demonstrations against governmental policy, but these were scarcely sufficient to counterbalance the footage of President Mubarak endorsing U.S. actions. Similarly, five-second flashes of huge rallies held in North African cities against the war were completely inadequate in providing a sense of the massive opposition in that part of the world to American policy.

What was rejected endless for domestic consumption was that the United States was engaged in an allied effort, supported by the United Nations, that also embraced the sentiments of a good part of the world.

Unreported also were the views of Latin Americans, Asians, and Africans. The admirers, or at least supporters, of the American intervention and war were the leaders of the usual handful of European and English-speaking industrially developed economies and a clutch of other states who were paid or coerced into joining the coalition.

Most telling of all about the role of the American media has been its utter unconcern with the number of Iraqi casualties suffered from the incessant bombing and, in the waning hours of the war, from the strafing and decimation of thousands of retreating soldiers. Here again, the Pentagon point of view was callous but straightforward. General Colin Powell stated flatly, about the number of Iraqi dead from the air and ground operations, "It's really not a number I'm terribly interested in" (*New York Times*, March 23, 1991, p. A4).

But American journalism might have been expected to hold to another standard, especially since massive killing is a news story. Yet it never came out that way. In the one instance when it could not be overlooked because it had been reported live—the bombing of the Baghdad shelter—the networks gave special unlimited opportunities to the Pentagon and other "construction experts" to explain that the shelter was actually a communication center or that Saddam Hussein had deliberately arranged the horror to stage a propaganda coup. But for the most part, references to Iraqi casualties were notable for their absence. There were a few honorable exceptions; one in particular was the *New Yorker* magazine (March 25, 1991). It observed in the midst of the media-promoted victory euphoria that "celebrations that fail to acknowledge the catastrophe those [U.S.] troops are leaving behind are more than unseemly. They trivialize a human tragedy of almost inconceivable proportions" (p. 26).

Yet all this passed practically unremarked in TV accounts throughout the weeks, which announced almost jubilantly the "record" number of daily bombing missions—"sorties" was the preferred word—flown by American pilots.

It must be repeated that the coverage of the crisis and the war by the print press, woefully inadequate as it generally was, cannot be equated with the deplorable reporting by the TV networks and CNN. The national audience which received its understanding of what was happening in the Gulf from television was locked tightly into the government's version of events.

CNN, Cable News Network, deserves a few words of its own. Given near-total acclamation for its round-the-clock, on-site reporting, to a

global audience, CNN was made into a distant legend. Is it deserving of this esteem?

Though a relatively large number of international locales and speakers were presented, CNN, with the limited exception of its one correspondent in Baghdad, differed very slightly from the routines and patterns that dominated the three national networks. Exclusion of dissident voices and general omission of material critical to the war policy were not as blatant. The extent and varied scenery of CNN programming gave an impression of comprehensiveness. It was largely an impression.

However, CNN's emergence, overnight as it were, as the international source of news was a striking phenomenon. The fact that a single, U.S.-owned TV channel had become the reference point for global information was no trivial development. Earlier global concern about the domination of a few Western news agencies—AP, UPI, Reuters, Agence France Presse—had been contributory to the demand for a new international information order. Yet here was an altogether new dimension of informational monopoly. After the initial euphoria over CNN's admittedly impressive technical achievements, some reflection has occurred in the international community over such excessive dependency on a single source of information. *Business Week* (March 18, 1991, p. 48) reported that the head of Japan's major network "is increasingly concerned about America's domination of global TV news. . . . He joins a growing list of international broadcasters who are attacking the Atlanta-based TV network's virtual monopoly on 24-hour international news coverage."

European public broadcasters, in fact, are organizing a "Euronews" program to relieve their "concern . . . that CNN plays too strong a role in shaping public opinion."

This amounts to a (belated) recognition of the near-total control exercised by the United States over information about the Gulf events. The "solution" being considered by the Japanese and the Europeans will not bring Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans any closer to information pluralism. The new world order in information seems not very different from what the old one was like.

What television, under the watchful direction of the White House, the Pentagon, and its own managers have produced, in the words of the *New Yorker* magazine (March 25, 1991, p. 26) is "a nation . . . suffering an extended scotomic episode," an occlusion of the visual field. "It hardly occurs to us to try to imagine what they [the Iraqis] have been living through, or will have to live through in the coming months."

The president of the United States has a different view. Praising U.S. press coverage of the Gulf events, "George Bush said that the press kept its eyes and ears open during the war" (*Los Angeles Times*, March 25, 1991, p. E1). Apparently, the American people agree. In a recently

released poll, a *Los Angeles Times*-sponsored survey "discovered that two institutions enjoyed significant boosts from the war—the military and the television news organizations. Seventy-three percent of Americans felt that television reporters dug harder into the war than their print competitors" (*Los Angeles Times*, March 25, 1991, p. A9).

Such is the triumph of information and image management!

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