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Goodbye Vietnam Syndrome: The Embed System in Afghanistan and Iraq

We need to tell the factual story – good or bad – before others seed the media with disinformation and distortions.

Public Affairs Guidance, US Department of Defense¹

The embedded reporter system did not originate, as some commentators think, in the planning stages of the war in Iraq in 2003; it was conceived in the final stages of the Bosnian War and international efforts to broker a peace deal via the Dayton Accords of 1995. In its leading role with the United Nations Protection Force in the Balkans, the US military had clear ideas about their objectives and of how the media might help meet them. The General commanding the American sector in Bosnia, William L. Nash, had three objectives in respect to dealing with the media: to gain public support in America for the conduct of the operation; to maintain the morale of the troops; and to use the media to promote compliance with the Dayton Accords among the former warring factions (Nash, 1998, pp. 132–33). To these ends, his military planners developed a system of ‘embedded media’, purportedly a less restrictive version of the pooling system that operated in the Gulf War. Reporters (about 40 of them) would accompany troops on the ground for two weeks and get ‘a more nuanced picture of our activities by allowing them virtually free access to the soldiers and commanders.’ This of course required a revamp of the Joint Information Bureau system to ensure tighter coordination between all levels of command and avoid embarrassing and unnecessary conflicts of interest (*ibid.*, p. 132).

A significant component of the Nash approach, one not seen in the Gulf War, was the idea of allowing journalists to be present with the troops on the ground, which would demonstrate the ‘transparency of our operations and the firmness of our purpose.’ Offering the example of

Linda Patillo, of ABC News, who witnessed a confrontation between a US Army Colonel and a Bosnian Serb Commander in the Spring of 1996, Nash was delighted with the public relations derived from the story that Patillo sent back. He said that it portrayed,

...a 'real life situation' in which armed conflict could have broken out at any minute. [It] showed the preparedness of [our] forces, their resolve to do their duty, and the colonel's...professionalism and calm nature in the execution of his duty. What a great story to show the American people! (ibid, p. 133)

Nash concludes that,

it is essential that the military and the media engage *before* they need to do so. It is something that requires a break from traditional thinking and a recognition that good policy and good execution usually result in good stories...Don't sweat the spin. Work the issues wisely. (ibid, p. 135)

Nash does not explain how this new approach would fit into a system of information management – censorship and propaganda – but the potential was certainly implied and it was to be tried and tested in earnest during the US military's next major operations, in Afghanistan in 2001 but most especially in Iraq in 2003. As Pentagon public affairs official, Bryan Whitman, later admitted, much advance thought and discussion went into its implementation in the Iraq War. 'We did public affairs planning like we would do for any other form of war planning' he writes, 'We war-gamed it' (Whitman, 2004, p. 207).

AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ

What the Pentagon 'war-gamed' was a refinement of the embed system tried out in Bosnia, combined with the daily media briefings familiar during the Gulf War. In their introduction to a volume of interviews with embedded reporters in Iraq, from the US and abroad, Katovsky and Carlson (2004) argue that the system promised journalists 'the coziest lovefest with the military since World War II' (p. viii). The procedures and ground rules that governed embedded reporting in Afghanistan and

Iraq were not far removed from those that applied to the media pools in the Gulf War but the challenge they presented to independence and objectivity seemed to be much more focused and controversial. The role of media briefings, where the military offer ‘context’ and ‘background’ to ongoing operations, is also critical here because when embedded reporters shrug their shoulders and admit that, of course they only offer part of the picture of war, they seem to forget the briefings and how those operate to fill in the blanks on the propaganda canvas. In the sections that follow, therefore, I argue that the twin system of embedded reporting and media briefing used in Afghanistan and Iraq was a propaganda triumph for the US and its coalition partners and a professional humiliation for the journalists who opted into it.

The embed system: procedures and ground rules

Section 2 of the US Department of Defence’s Public Affairs Guidance (PAG) states that embedded media personnel ‘will live, work and travel as part of the units with which they are embedded to facilitate maximum in-depth coverage of US forces in combat and related operations’ (See Appendix 5). In a similar vein, the British Ministry of Defence Green Book states that:

The purpose of embedding correspondents with units and formation headquarters is to enable the media to gain a deeper understanding of the operation in which they are involved, particularly through access to personnel and commanders. They will be afforded all possible briefings and other facilities, including the opportunity to accompany British troops during war-fighting operations. Their individual requirements will be met wherever possible. In return, they are likely to be subject to some military orders and training, both for their own safety and that of the unit. (Paragraph 22; see Appendix 6)

These military orders, what the Pentagon’s PAG refers to as ‘ground rules’ (Section 4, paragraphs F and G) include categories of releasable and restricted information. Releasable information relates to *approximations only* of such things as unit strength and the types of ordnance at its disposal; ‘friendly casualty figures’; and participation in a given operation by allied forces. Information that is not releasable, because

it may 'jeopardize operations or endanger lives', relates to *specifics*, in other words 'specific numbers' regarding troops and units below corps level; geographical location of units; names of unit installations; future operations; and 'photography showing level of security at military installations or encampments'. Breach of the ground rules of embedded reporting could result in loss of accreditation or, to put it in the rather more ominous language of Section 4 of the PAG, 'the immediate termination of the embed and removal from the AOR [Area of Responsibility]'. It is interesting to note that the phrase used in the preceding Section 3 of the PAG ('Procedures') is 'termination of the embed opportunity'.

The PAG rules and procedures are expressed largely in functional, military jargon but the very last line in the last section of the guidelines, Section 7 dealing with 'Miscellaneous/Coordinating Instructions', hints at the hidden public relations/propaganda agenda behind the embed system: 'Use of lipstick and helmet-mounted cameras on combat sorties is approved and encouraged to the greatest extent possible' (Paragraph 7C). The impulse to have the war depicted in soft focus was not a whim of the military planners. It fitted into a broader propaganda strategy, played out on TV networks at home in the US, to 'Hollywoodize' the personal experience of the ordinary US soldier in 'war on terror' wars like Afghanistan and Iraq.²

Reporters who declined to sign up to the embed system were accredited as 'unilaterals' to use the military jargon or, as they called themselves, 'independent journalists'. Without the relative protection of a military unit, their job could be a good deal more difficult and dangerous. Some journalists and media personnel, like ITN's Terry Lloyd and his interpreter Hussein Osman, lost their lives going it alone as independent reporters; others risked arrest and loss of accreditation. Luis Castro of Radiotelevision Portuguesa and his colleagues were arrested, detained and suffered physical abuse and intimidation at the hands of an American military unit for 2 days before being released and ordered out of Iraq. 'My men are trained like dogs!' the officer commanding told Castro by way of an explanation. 'They know only to attack!'³

The embed system and objectivity

The most obvious question to ask of a system that brings the journalist into such close encounters with the military is: how can he or she be really

objective or even impartial, especially when viewing an operation from the single vantage point of a military position or, as happened, when the military unit fired on and killed unarmed civilians, or carried out abuses against civilians? Alex Thomson (2010) readily admits that embedded reporting only produces a partial picture of the wider conflict: 'Of course it is biased. And so are filming trips with the Taliban for that matter. It is the nature of the beast' (p. 21). He does, however, concede that some journalists take their 'embed opportunity' too far:

You're always embedded with people to a lesser or greater extent. The difficult thing is how far it lets your brain get embedded...and how far you become a [public relations officer] for what's going on, which is essentially a game that the Pentagon and perhaps even more so the MoD clearly want people to play and it's depressing the number of journalists who are willing to go along with that.⁴

As seen from this and the following examples, responses from journalists who reported as embeds from Afghanistan and Iraq were divided between those who protested loudly their integrity and objectivity and those who admitted openly that although they were only able to offer a partial view of the conflict it was either that or not bother reporting at all.

There is no doubt that the intimacy and immediacy of the system blinded many journalists to its vices. Jim Axelrod, of CBS Evening News, confessed that covering the Iraq War as an embedded reporter was 'the great, pure, authentic experience of my career. I suspect it may be the purest thing I'll ever do. I was in the enchanted forest' (Katovsky and Carlson, p. 23). Stuart Ramsey, who reported from Afghanistan as an embed for Sky News, thinks that 'you can embed but you must remain honest and impartial. To do that, you must draw on your knowledge and deal with the rules of the embed' (2010, p. 30). However, John Burns of the *New York Times* draws a distinction between neutrality and fairness when reporting as an embed:

In this profession, we are not paid to be neutral. We are paid to be fair, and they are completely different things. [...] Yes, we should be absolutely ruthless as to fact. We should not approach a story with some sort of ideological template that we impose on it. We should let the facts lead us to conclusions, but if the conclusions seem clear then

we should not avoid those on the basis of an idea we are supposed to be neutral. Because if that were the case, they might as well hire a stenographer, and a stenographer would be a lot cheaper than I am. (Katovksy and Carlson, p. 161)

One of the least discussed issues in this debate is the potential for the embedded journalist to participate in military operations. 'I was a non-combatant', said Chantal Escoto, 'military reporter' for the *Leaf Chronicle* in the US, 'but I told [the troops] I'd be ready to pick up a gun if I had to' (Katovksy and Carlson, 2004, p. 131). That would be in breach of the Geneva Conventions and although Section 4, Paragraph C of the Pentagon's ground rules prohibits reporters from carrying firearms of their own, there were incidents in Iraq when journalists found themselves aiding troops in combat situations. The BBC's Clive Myrie, attached to a British Army unit in Iraq, told a BBC documentary how he found himself passing flares from soldier to soldier during a firefight with Iraqi troops before stopping to think about what he was doing.⁵

The military briefings

As in the Gulf War, daily military briefings were a defining feature of media coverage of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq – and just as controversial. These were designed by military planners to provide context for embedded reporting on the ground or, to put it in more critical terms, to shape the daily news agenda, restrict information and release disinformation in the interests of propaganda or Psyops, psychological operations (see, for example, Miller, 2004b; Paterson 2014).

Conducted from a purpose-built media centre in Doha, Qatar, the so-called 'Freedom Briefings' offered the 700 journalists what the military described as 'information' but what a BBC documentary, 'War Spin', called 'maximum imagery, minimum insight'.⁶ The official spokesmen, General Vincent Brooks for the US military and Group Captain Al Lockwood for the British Army, were the front men charged with providing the information and controlling the questions at the briefings as well as granting interviews. It was very clear from the start of the war that regardless of the coalition, the media briefings were being run by the American military for consumption on the major US TV networks such as CNN and NBC. Journalists with these networks were given the front

row seats and first call on asking questions. The media of the coalition partners, including Britain, were second and so on down the hierarchy to media organisations from non-aligned and neutral countries. Journalists with Middle East outlets such as Al Jazeera and Abu Dhabi TV, were given short shrift by Brooks and other briefing officers whenever they asked awkward and difficult questions, which was most of the time. However, there were ground rules that applied to all the journalists who attended the briefings: questions were rationed out, follow-ups were discouraged and the briefers rarely provided full answers to questions.⁷ Journalist and media critic, Michael Wolff, interrupted a briefing by Brooks to express the disquiet felt by many of the 700 journalists there about the amount and quality of information. 'My final question after which I was not allowed to ask anymore questions,' he told the BBC, 'was the question every reporter was asking, not just every day but literally every minute, which was why should we stay? What's the value to us for what we learn at this million-dollar press centre?' Brooks replied that it was Wolff's choice whether he wanted to be there or not. For the military's part, 'We want to provide information that's truthful from the operational headquarters that is running this war.' Wolff was then barred from asking any further questions and, in a heated confrontation afterwards with Pentagon advisor, Jim Wilkinson, he was advised to 'fuck off and go home.'⁸ Thinking back on his experience of the briefings, Wolff thought that,

The profoundly interesting thing about Doha is that nothing happened [and that] even when you're not getting information from the guy who has the information to give, you're still getting information by the very fact that he's not giving it to you. (Katovksy and Carlson, 2004, pp. 41–42)

On the British side, Al Lockwood and his colleagues worked off a list of daily official lines that usually accentuated the positive or worked to disarm difficult questions. They even posted in their office a list of topics to be avoided or handled with extreme care, what they termed 'poo traps'; these included the use of depleted uranium, bombing accuracy and civilian casualties. When difficult incidents could not be avoided, such as the Coalition bombing of a civilian area in Baghdad on 28 March 2003, that killed 36 innocent people, the strategy was to

first deny responsibility and then deflect the blame onto the enemy. In this instance, Brooks told reporters that it may have been a faulty Iraqi air defence missile or it could have been a deliberate act by the Iraqis to undermine public support for the Coalition internationally.⁹ Both possibilities were thought by experts to be highly unlikely but they were effective as spin to manage the controversy until the story slipped down the news agenda.

However, the big stick of media control and manipulation in this operation was wielded behind the scenes by the 'special advisers', not least Jim Wilkinson for the US government and Home Office civil servant, Simon Wren, for 10 Downing Street. For most of the war, they worked well together to coordinate the official line from day to day, providing consistent background or off-the-record information. However, in the early stages the British were critical of how the American military was dealing with the non-American media and with their manipulation of stories such as the rescue of American soldier, Jessica Lynch, into something akin to a Hollywood action movie courtesy of Pentagon-supplied footage. According to the BBC, Simon Wren went so far as to pen a confidential memo to Tony Blair, expressing his misgivings about the situation and the need to put it right.¹⁰ These tensions aside, the 'good cop/bad cop' approach to the briefings worked effectively to co-opt the media in the wider propaganda war, whether the media liked to admit it or not.

The wider propaganda war

If the first casualty of war is truth, then the second is understanding. Oliver Boyd-Barrett (2004) goes beyond ground-level debates about the embed system to look at its long-term effect – a story of war that is almost exclusively that of the victors:

Western reporting of the wars in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) were stories told by Western correspondents reporting from Western positions speaking to (mainly approved) Western political and military sources, mainly about Western military personnel, strategies, successes and, less often, failures, and backed with comments from (often vetted) Western military 'experts'. (pp. 29–30)

The irony is that in their anxiety to filter out ‘unreliable’ or ‘unverifiable’ information from outside the system, journalists from the western, corporate media seemed blissfully unaware of their ‘dependence on government or military sources of their own side for...*safe* information, disinformation or lies’ (ibid, p. 32; emphasis in the original). For Vaughan Smith, this has far reaching consequences beyond professional and academic debates about ethics. ‘News management or spin,’ he writes, ‘creates cumulative damage to us all by undermining our trust in the institutions that engage in it and subverting the quality of our conduct more widely in society. We are paying for these wars with more than blood and treasure’ (2010, p. 47).

Debates about the pros and cons of embedded reporting, therefore, should not hide the essential point of the system in the first place: the military’s need to control the media and co-opt them into the propaganda campaign driving the war effort in Afghanistan or Iraq. Only a few journalists seemed to be aware of this or at least admit it publicly. Jeremy Bowen, for example, writes that the ‘best way to get ahead in the media battle is to control access to the war [...] Winning the information war is no longer incidental; it is a top military priority’ (2006, pp. 111–12); while Oliver Burkeman describes the embed system as ‘an astounding PR success for the Pentagon’ (Allen and Zelizer, 2004, p. 6).

Some of the academic literature also considers the implications of embedded reporting in the wider framework of military information management and propaganda (see, for example, Boyd-Barrett, 2004; Keeble, 2004; Miller 2004a & 2004b; Paterson, 2014; Tumber and Palmer, 2004); and even the dark arts of psychological operations (Miller 2004b and Paterson, 2014). For example, Chris Paterson reveals that during the 1990s, CNN and National Public Radio (NPR) in the US offered internships to PsyOps officers, who used them not merely to observe and get to know the media better as a public relations exercise ahead of a future conflict, but to learn how to disrupt news flows to strategic advantage; a determinedly more subversive objective (2014, pp. 36–37).

Once again, the system of control, censorship and propaganda that produced such a stunning success for the military in Iraq marked yet another milestone in the evolutionary road from the days of the Vietnam Syndrome and open hostility to the presence of the media in the war zone. To put this in some perspective, the chapter concludes with a look at NATO’s media operation during the Kosovo crisis in 1999, when the

mechanisms of control and spin went wrong in the first phase of the campaign because of institutional and political division.

BOMBING SERBIA, 1999¹¹

The military intervention in the Kosovo conflict of 1999, when Serbia was seen to be carrying out a policy of ethnic cleansing as a means of denying Kosovan independence, was largely led by NATO from its headquarters in Brussels. In the early stages of the operation, involving air strikes against the Serbian military and political infrastructure, NATO planes committed up to thirteen so-called 'blunders'. These were accidental bombings of civilians, including a Serbian passenger train on 12 April and a convoy of Albanian refugees heading out of Kosovo to Albania two days later on 14 April. NATO's unconvincing presentation of these incidents, particularly the bombing of the refugee convoy, opened up an information vacuum and offered spaces in prime time television news where, away from the briefing rooms, journalists could ask awkward questions about what they were being told.

Much of the uncertainty in the immediate wake of the bombing lay in the fact that NATO in Brussels was taking its cue from the Pentagon in Washington, where NATO Commander Wesley Clarke briefed aggressively against the Serbs only to retract it when some facts began to emerge. The organisation took another five days to finally present a definitive account of the circumstances surrounding the convoy attack and during that time, and quite independently of the Brussels media pool, news presenters and correspondents assessed the contradictory evidence with the sort of scepticism and open-mindedness seriously lacking during the Gulf War in 1991 and in Operation Desert Fox, the bombing of Iraq in 1998. 'The question remains', said a Channel Four News reporter, 'what were NATO planes doing in the area and why did they decide to attack these convoys, which included tractors and cars?' (14 April 1999). Later that evening, BBC *Newsnight's* probe opened with this cautionary gambit: 'You won't find any starker examples of Dr Johnson's adage that *truth is the first casualty of war* than today's deaths in Kosovo' (emphasis added). Correspondent, James Robbins, considered NATO's case but cautioned that '*NATO has missed military targets and hit civilians before* and tonight in Brussels the Alliance spokesman, Jamie Shea, was *much more guarded in his response*' (emphasis added).

The next day, 15 April, NATO admitted that in fact there had been two vehicle convoys hit in different locations in the Djakovice area and that one of those, a refugee convoy may have been hit by NATO planes. The NATO line was that if this was the case it was regrettable but that the bomb was dropped 'in good faith'. The ironic *Guardian* headline the next morning quoted the military briefer: 'When the pilot attacked, they were military vehicles. If they turned out to be tractors, that is a different issue' (16 April 1999). However, the trickle of information and lack of hard evidence only served to sow more confusion among the news media about what exactly happened and what NATO was doing. As BBC news anchor, Anna Ford, remarked: 'There's still a lot of information that doesn't add up here. It sounds rather fishy!' According to her correspondent in Serbia the blunder and its fall out constituted 'a serious blow to NATO. Its credibility and its effectiveness are being questioned' (18.00, 15 April 1999). Channel Four News reported that 'NATO is on the back foot tonight' and that 'NATO's line has changed repeatedly'. While 'the Serbs have allowed foreign cameras rare access to otherwise dark corners of Kosovo...NATO has so far chosen not to show military video of exactly what happened during its attack' (15 April 1999). So, why the absence of video evidence? That would surely vindicate NATO's claims that the Serbs bombed the convoys among other civilian targets in the area and that NATO planes only targeted and hit military vehicles and positions? In an interview on Channel Four News, James Foley, spokesman for the US State Department, accused the western media of not demanding access from the Serbs to Kosovo and the 'horrific images of the poor victims'. The news anchor Jon Snow responded: 'Well you see the thing which is perplexing us is that *the western alliance is not giving western media access to images either*' in spite of its much vaunted and sophisticated aerial surveillance technologies (15 April 1999; emphasis added).

Midway through the operation, in May, the Spanish newspaper, *El Mundo*, published what was purported to be an internal NATO report lamenting the poor state of NATO battle readiness when it came to launching its media and public relations campaign (Goff, 2000, p. 18). Shea claimed that the document was 'not without value' but nonetheless denied it was official or that its unauthorised release had anything to do with him or anyone in his office. He did however concede that there were problems. He explained, for example, that just as the operation got underway he had to send half his staff to Washington for NATO's 50th

anniversary summit and so was 'really flying by the seat of my pants for the first four or six weeks'. The lesson, he said, was 'that we have to have a big [media] organisation, even if we don't need it, from day one. It's better to have it and not need it than not have it and be found wanting'.¹² NATO's press relations budget for the Serbia/Kosovo operation was between 50 and 60 million Belgian francs, at the very most about GB£882,252. Shea revealed that rather than bidding for a supplementary public relations budget he 'raided the existing budget.' Most of the money went towards equipping a centre adequate to the needs of the international media presence in Brussels for the duration of the air campaign. This was what he had been 'begging for years for [and] which had suddenly become instantaneously and miraculously available during the air operation. So necessity was the mother of procurement if not invention.'¹³

There was suspicion in some quarters that the NATO press office in Brussels laboured too much under the weight of media expectation in the 24-hour news cycle, a danger long recognised in other official quarters and by many journalists. As far back as 1996, William Perry, then US Secretary of Defense, spoke in the abstract about the pressure for the instant response to media queries:

The pressure...is to say something... . If you simply say, 'I don't know what the facts are. We're going to have to take a couple of days to find out,' that's not very satisfying. Therefore the continual pressure is, 'Well, what do you think it is, what do you believe has happened? If that's happened what do you think you ought to do?' You can resist those but you resist them with great difficulty. (1996, p. 125)

And looking back at the Kosovo conflict, Channel Four News correspondent, Alex Thomson, referred to 'a kind of culture of information intimidation' whereby NATO was 'caught up in this desperate need to furnish this media beast with information at top speed'. He suggested that, 'They don't have to give daily briefings if they don't want to – give a weekly briefing! I mean they make the rules!'¹⁴ Jake Lynch of Sky News was aware of 'a lot of acrimony behind the scenes [due to] the fact that Jamie Shea was not given the information' about the exact circumstances of the convoy bombing. Yet even at that, and this is from a purely NATO perspective, Shea 'inadvertently gave us more information than he should have done'.¹⁵ Shea saw it differently. Far from being denied

information by the Pentagon at such a crucial juncture, he was the one who held it up in the first instance because he thought it inadequate and in the long run detrimental to NATO credibility:

Either we put all the facts on the table and say everything we know and answer all the questions and tell the journalists that we have come clean or we don't say anything. But I didn't want this [situation] of giving one explanation on Day One and giving an alternative explanation on Day Two and looking silly. Partial explanations are often worse than nothing.¹⁶

He also revealed that Pentagon spokesman, Ken Bacon, stepped in behind him and added some punch to his position:

I'm very grateful to Ken who said, 'Look, we've made this commitment to journalists to own up even if it is going to be embarrassing to us and we can't renege on that'. He used a phrase, which I've used often myself: 'If we are not honest in admitting our failures, they won't believe us when we claim successes.'¹⁷

The military, said Shea, were concerned with getting on with the campaign, not expending time and resources to an investigation for the media:

But eventually...I think we got the message through that this was so important in terms of NATO's public image and credibility, it was as important explaining this as getting on with fighting the conflict itself. And towards the end that was understood. The trouble is that in any organisation you often need a failure to turn a situation around...And it woke people up to the reality of conflict...that this was a real conflict with real consequences and that therefore we had to adjust.¹⁸

The adjustment came during the PR crisis over the refugee convoy bombing. Alistair Campbell, press secretary to Prime Minister Blair, stepped in to urge a revamp of NATO's PR operation, an intervention Shea thought was decisive. 'There was a blockage there', he admitted, 'and sometimes in organisations you need people with clout to overcome those blockages. When prime ministers thump the tub they get things done

much faster than when Jamie P. Shea, the NATO spokesman, thumps the tub.¹⁹ Any intervention by Campbell into controversial issues or events was bound to become a story in itself in the British media. Indeed, Jake Lynch noted that Campbell's influence extended much further and deeper than simply supporting Shea's efforts with human and material resources. It shaped the whole presentation of information and material, which was to 'sort of ration out small nuggets of information and wrap around that as much material as you can in order to project the kind of story you want to project'. In other words, 'It had been very effectively "New Labourised" in that they thought stories. They decided from day one to try and control the agenda and did a reasonable job of it.'²⁰

It is true that a good majority of British and American journalists accepted the fundamental rationale for bombing Serbia and Kosovo in spite of the rather dubious legal grounds on which the bombing campaign was carried out. There was a liberal, humanitarian consensus abroad that squeezed out radical dissent (Chandler, 2000; Chomsky, 1999). It was also the case that most journalists at the briefings were too willing to be fed information and digest it as transparent accounts of events on the ground rather than as selective and self-serving presentations of those events. Mark Laity, however, who left his job with the BBC after the Kosovo conflict to work as a media adviser at NATO, took a clear and unapologetic stance on the dependence of journalists on military sources, the briefings and the information they released. 'If you don't trust the military,' he said, 'and they're the ones dropping the bombs, who are you going to trust? Who are you going to talk to? What you want to do is you want to talk to the operators, the players, the doers, that's NATO. You don't go and speak to a bloody academic do you?' He rejected the criticisms of his performance during the briefings and on air, pointing out that he was one of the few journalists who badgered the briefers about the circumstances of the convoy incident – about whether there was not one but actually two separate attacks on two separate convoys. 'So in a sense it was me who tied them up into knots,' he argued, 'not the hostile journalists who were committed. It was the uncommitted journalists who tied them up into knots by asking them knowledgeable questions and in fact it was the ones who actually knew what they were talking about that tied them up into knots, not the ones who were making tendentious political points'. He insisted that:

The challenge for journalists is not to get all worked up because somebody has spun you; the challenge is to spot the spin and take it out. And given the choice between no information which is to a degree what we were getting earlier on and spun information what we were getting later, give me spun information every time [...] I've got the facts and in there there's layers and layers of priorities and prejudices and I've got to take them apart and say that's the key fact. And if I don't spot it then more fool me and good luck to them. It's a game. So spun information: they spun a lot but to my way of thinking they did not lie in between. They got things wrong but they were not deliberately lying. Sure, individuals might have but corporately I do not believe NATO were.²¹

One of the 'committed' journalists Laity had in mind here was Robert Fisk whose dismissal of Laity and most of his colleagues at the NATO briefings was withering: 'Most of [them] were sheep. Baaaa Baaaa! That's all it was.'²² Jamie Shea was, perhaps not surprisingly, complimentary of the journalists in the NATO media pool whom he described as his 'customers' and defended them against critics such as Fisk:

[He] accuses the press at NATO of slavishly following the Shea line whereas in reverse the charge I would put to him is that in order to distance himself from that he's totally dismissive of everything we did. It's an opposite form of extremism. I've got more time for a lot of [journalists] who were basically in the middle, that listened to us but came to their own balanced, professional judgement on things. But Fisk seems to have an excess of moral perfectionism.²³

This was an extraordinary slight on a journalist of such experience and knowledge but typical of the attacks made against him when he showed up on one occasion at the briefings to ask questions about the real extent of 'ethnic cleansing' in Kosovo; and, more specifically, the relationship between NATO bombing and the exodus of Kosovar-Albanians across the border into Albania. His attack on the majority of journalists present that day no doubt fed their resentment and ill-feeling but the crux for him was his integrity as a journalist and he would not see his reporting of Kosovo as 'extremist' or as a crusade for 'moral perfectionism'. He

suggested, instead, that insults and intimidation from 'the bad guys' is the price the good journalist has to pay for telling the truth:

[If] you cannot write with passion, if you cannot say, 'This was a civilian target, NATO said it was military, it is not, it is a hospital, I've been there, I've seen it', etcetera. If you can't do that, you go home. There's no point in being there. And if the price of that is to be abused by NATO or whatever then that's the price you have to pay. Then... you have to take on the bad guys, I'm afraid. You have to do it! If these people are going to intimidate you into writing like Reuters, which is their intention, then you must leave your job! You're finished!²⁴

And while 'uncommitted' and 'knowledgeable' journalists such as Mark Laity asked questions when NATO was on the back foot about the detail and circumstances of the refugee convoy incident, they were content to sit back and graze after the organisation got its act together and, as Jake Lynch puts it, got 'New Labourised'. Jamie Shea takes this as a compliment to the way in which NATO recovered the public relations initiative in its presentation of the bombing of Serbia:

I'll never forget one of my final briefings...at the end of May when we had another one of these incidents, number 13, when Nato struck a block of flats in a little town on the Montenegrin border. [...] I didn't wait for journalists to ask me for the information, I came straight out with it because I had all the information without having to wait for five days and no journalists asked me a question, not one! Whereas a couple of months earlier Djakovice had become the single dominant issue. It was almost by that time treated as what the French call a *fait divers*, a passing little story of no great significance. We made more of it than the press did at the end. It was almost a reversal of roles.²⁵

The majority of journalists present at the briefings may have cringed to hear Shea say that and he very definitely got the measure of them in the latter stages of the media operation. And despite the initial tensions between the Pentagon and NATO, the late Richard Holbrooke, driver of the Dayton Accords in the Balkans, described American media coverage of Kosovo as 'extraordinary and exemplary' (*Palm Beach Post*, 9 May 1999).²⁶

Richard Keeble (1999) and Philip Hammond (1999, 2000) were very critical of British media reporting of NATO's operation in Serbia and Kosovo. Hammond argued that the coverage was 'highly conformist' (1999, p. 63); and that 'one casualty of the Kosovo war was British journalism, although some sources maintain it was already long dead. In its place we have propaganda' (ibid, p. 67). Edward Herman and David Petersen (2000) have cast a similar, critical eye on the role of the US media, particularly CNN, in actively selling the conflict to the American public. In the first edition of this book and elsewhere I argued that in the case of the British news media at any rate, there was real media counterweight to NATO spin; not from the media pool in Brussels but from some of the journalists on the ground in Kosovo and more especially in the news rooms back in London. Indeed, I took issue with Keeble and Hammond's withering assessment and argued that while TV journalism in Britain might have been ailing, it certainly was not dead (McLaughlin, 2002a, pp. 121–22; see also McLaughlin 2002b). However, I would revise my argument here and suggest that the skeptical reporting in evidence during the Kosovo crisis was more a result of a poorly planned, *ad hoc* approach to media management on NATO's part. When considered in the context of the history of the relationship between the war correspondent and the military, from Crimea to Iraq, resistance to spin control during the crisis was at the very most anomalous rather than indicative of a new, critical disposition among the mainstream media.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

What the historical review in this section of the book tells us is how military thinking about the management and control of the media at wartime has evolved since the Crimean war. From an instinct to simply censor journalists and deny them access to the warzone, western militaries have learned over a century and a half of conflict that incorporating reporters into the war effort, relying on their professionalism and patriotism, and giving them the right information and the right pictures (on military terms of course) is a much more effective form of control than an attitude of outright hostility. And it is effective precisely because of the media's readiness in every instance to conform, to accept the restrictions and only ask questions, if at all, when it is too late. The system of embedded reporting and tightly controlled briefings used in the Iraq

War of 2003 marked a high point for the military and a low point for the war correspondent. Only the military appear to be learning lessons of the last conflict with their approach to media management constantly re-evaluated and revised. Britain's Ministry of Defence happily admits that its Green Book (2013) 'is the result of continuing dialogue between the MoD and media organisations and representatives and takes account of past and present operations.' Those organisations and representatives include the BBC, ITN, SKY News, the Press Association, the Newspaper Society and the National Union of Journalists. Yet after every major war since Crimea, journalists have spent considerable column inches and air time agonising over the way in which they were cowed and controlled by the military and the implications of this for freedom of the press and democracy: too late then of course to put things right and take a principled stand. Some observers may suggest that the reluctance to challenge the system is simply a matter of pragmatism on the part of the media, a conscious deal with the devil in order to get the story and the pictures of war as fast and as efficiently as possible. But for others it is nothing less than co-option into the propaganda war and it works because it is ideologically inscribed into the professional assumptions of the majority of embedded war reporters. To borrow from Slavoj Žižek (2012), their loud protests that they report objectively, independently and freely masks the very absence of freedom in the system.

This brings us to the next part of this book and another important factor that we need to assess when considering the role of the war correspondent today: the ideological frameworks that they use to explain international conflict. Chapter 8 looks at the Cold War framework that had its origins not in the post-Second World War era as dominant histories suggest but in the Russian revolution of 1917 and persisted as a dominant interpretation up until 1991, with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Chapter 9 goes on to propose that the reporting of 9/11 and America's declared 'war on terror', as well as, most recently, the increasingly hostile reporting of Vladimir Putin's Russia, represents not so much a paradigm shift as a paradigm repair. It is back to the Cold War, the most successful system of thought control and political repression in the name of freedom since the hegemony of the Roman Empire.