

## REVIEW ESSAY

### Reporting Conflict

Hooper, Alan, *The Military and the Media*. Aldershot: Gower Publishing, 1982.

Ever since news reporters started to accompany armies into the field in the early 1800s, a love-hate relationship has developed between the profession of arms and the profession of journalism. Newsmen are loved when they observe discretion, particularly over information of possible use to the other side, when they praise the fighting qualities of the soliders, sailors and airmen and the wisdom of their leaders, and when they paint an heroic but not too disturbingly realistic picture of life in the combat zone. The media are hated if members publish or broadcast accurate information that may cost the lives of servicemen whose plans are thus compromised, or if they are brutally frank about poor combat performance or shoddy administration, or if one reporter makes so brave as to criticize the direction of the war, or if a TV crew records sights and sounds so unnerving that domestic viewers may withdraw their support from the national endeavour. Worst of all, journalists are loathed if they seem to sit on the fence in some conflict situation where their fellow nationals are being killed, withholding moral support and muttering about "balance."

In his book, *The Military and the Media*, Alan Hooper has tried to reinforce the love and diminish the hate in this ancient relationship. His is not another harangue of the media or blast at the services. It is a sincere and at least partly successful attempt to explain the often conflicting imperatives that drive the armed forces on the one hand and the gentlemen of the press on the other, and to find ways of reducing friction. His approach is original. After an historical introduction he devotes five chapters to explaining how the news media operates, then two to the portrayal of the military on television. Next come case studies on Vietnam, Northern Ireland, the Iranian Embassy siege in London and the Falklands war, and conclusions from these experiences. Finally there are chapters about the media's knowledge of the military and vice versa, and how both might be improved, and *recommendations on headquarters philosophy and organization for handling public relations in future conflicts*. Although the book is focused on the British armed forces and media, it provides much valuable material for the military and police forces of any liberal democracy.

The author is impressed with the professional skills of the media world and gives detailed accounts of how news is gathered, edited and promulgated. This provides a strong background to the case studies, when we see some of the gloss rub off the professionalism

under the unaccustomed stress of battle. The media, like most organizations, is only as strong as the weakest links in its chain, and all too often in war these weak spots are the inexperience and ignorance—in military terms—of the reporter on the ground. For there is nothing in the newsman's training that alerts him to the possible catastrophic consequences of doing his own job well—that is, reporting facts quickly and accurately. But it was just such professionalism which caused the Duke of Wellington to complain that his dispositions in the Peninsular War were being compromised to the enemy. In literally dozens of terrorist incidents in the past ten years police and military have had their plans exposed by similar professionalism. Those who saw the TV film *The Canadian Caper* will remember the amazement on the face of the young reporter as he was told how unfortunate it might be for those concerned if he went ahead and published his exclusive story of American diplomats sheltering in the Canadian Embassy in Tehran. Within the media's professional ethic, there is a strong reluctance to accept the fact that newsmen often become more than mere observers upon the world's stage, to acknowledge that by the content and tone of their reporting, they become actors. Yet this avoidance of responsibility co-exists promiscuously with another media ethic, one that promotes editors and journalists to guardianship over our moral and social condition.

This latter trend is the aspect of the journalist profession that probably worries the military most, yet it is one which receives least attention in Hooper's book. Alun Chalfont has condemned "a tendency to search for some kind of bogus intellectual objectivity and to regard the terrorist on the one hand and the policeman or soldier on the other as two sides of a morally symmetrical confrontation."<sup>1</sup> George Will suggests: "It may be that one reason terrorists can so effectively use the media is the systematic, almost philosophic, proud and even militant irresponsibility of the media. Does not the journalism profession now pride itself on refusing to calculate the social consequences of what it prints or broadcasts?"<sup>2</sup>

These are severe appraisals, and they point to the central contradiction in the media's own view of its role—a desire to be exonerated of any responsibility, and yet to wield limitless power over public perceptions, and thus over events. This contradiction was faced squarely by Robert Elegant when he wrote: "As long as the 'Viet Nam Syndrome' afflicts the media, it seems to me that it will be virtually impossible for the West to conduct an effective foreign policy."<sup>3</sup> Elegant went on to demand that he and other journalists who covered that war should assume a share of responsibility for the horrific outcome for the Vietnamese people of the American failure of will. In short, Elegant proposed that journalistic power should be matched by journalistic accountability. It was not a popular notion in the profession: the schizophrenia endures.

But at least the Falklands war has demonstrated that the Viet Nam Syndrome can sometimes be overcome. The British military did

not handle the public relations aspects at all well, and bickering continues. But the journalists who accompanied the troops could not live together in luxury hotels, as they did in Saigon, and therefore the incestuous life style with its self-congratulatory anti-establishment ethos could not develop. By good fortune too, many of the small band of journalists involved in the Falklands were top quality. Hooper is very good on this point, comparing the ease with which a journalist in Vietnam could be helicoptered into a combat zone, expose a few feet of film, and be returned to safety, with the long close association between journalist and military unit as the Royal Navy task force sailed into the South Atlantic. The media has come to expect unlimited assistance from armies in the field, and demands absolute freedom of action. There is no reason why military establishments should grant unreasonable requests. Better, perhaps, to welcome the newsmen on the condition that they share the risks and living conditions of the men they are writing about or filming, and remain with them for an agreed period.

We have only to glance at Argentina, or Guatemala, or communist Vietnam to remind ourselves that a controlled or intimidated press remains silent while the police and military destroy the principles they are supposed to be upholding, becoming terrorists in state uniform. Two of the merits of Hooper's book are its consistent support of liberal democratic principles and his advocacy of military cooperation with the news media, who are seen as a bulwark of liberty. We cannot argue with either. *The Military and the Media* is an excellent source of fact, discussion and thoughtful analysis and should be read by armed forces, police and media alike. Yet for this reviewer a nagging question remains: however much the military improve their public relations act, will the media behave any more responsibly in reporting conflict in future than they have in the past?

Maurice Tugwell  
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#### Footnotes

1. Lord Chalfont, "The Climate of Opinion," Benjamin Netanyahu (ed.), *Terrorism and the Media*, (Jerusalem: Jonathan Institute, 1979), p. 10.
2. George Will, "The Journalist's Role," in Netanyahu, op. cit., p. 35.
3. Robert Elegant, "How to Lose a War: Reflections of a Foreign Correspondent," *Encounter* (August 1981), p. 89.