

## BOOK REVIEWS

Taylor, Philip M. *War and the Media: Propaganda and Persuasion in the Gulf War*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1992.

This is a brilliant and important book, both in itself and in its implications for the future study of conflict within the international system. Readers of the footnotes – at least, of most academic studies of crises and wars published within a few years of the event – will know the very heavy dependence of their authors on contemporary newspapers and ‘viewspapers’ as primary sources, however unsatisfactory these may be. This book by Dr. Taylor, the Deputy Director of the Institute of Communications Studies at Leeds University, represents a major advance in academic technique on this traditional form. It is a detailed study of the role of the media in the Gulf War emphasizing television as the dominant medium rather than newspapers, and seeking, as the author says, “to adapt the practices of diplomatic history to contemporary media sources.” The opportunity for this study arose through a fine piece of academic serendipity. In late 1990 Taylor’s Institute had just completed the installation of a new satellite system, enabling its researchers to make a comprehensive record of all four British television channels, the major news channels of Germany, France, Italy and the Soviet Union, and the two major international satellite channels CNN and BSkyB (which took CBS and NBC material) as they covered the Gulf War. These recordings together with newspapers and other more conventional sources provided a database which, for the first time, allowed a “television war” to be examined minute by minute. The possibility of scholars being able to repeat this experiment with future crises, perhaps on a slightly smaller scale, represents an immensely significant breakthrough in the study of conflict.

Inevitably Taylor’s work appears somewhat slanted toward British sources in what was essentially an American war. However, the very close relationship both between the American and British governments during the war, and between the American and British media as part of the global media system (something which at times rivals the global state system in complexity) means that many of the author’s insights relating to Washington, Riyadh or Tel Aviv rather than London remain valid. Taylor understands both the institutional and technical processes of the media and of power diplomacy and war, and through a knowledge of their historical context he is able to link the two together. As the (then) Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, quoted in *War and the Media*, observed during the Gulf War the media’s coverage acted as “the Heisenberg physics of politics – if you observe a phenomenon with television, instantly you modify it somewhat.” Taylor shows in considerable detail how this was done, concluding that “modern technology, both military and communications, [has] changed the face of warfare,” and that the two are now inextricably intertwined.

The Leeds tapes will apparently continue to be evaluated for some years to come, and *War and the Media* presents only the first findings. Inevitably, in a book written so quickly after the event there are a few minor errors, and judgments which now appear questionable. But what is most impressive about this book is the detail and accuracy of its scholarship, and the way in which later revelations have confirmed many of its judgments. Although the author opens with a long and effective discussion of the media build-up to the war, including the remarkable failure of Iraqi propaganda policy, the core of the book is formed by case studies of three major events. The first, the inelegantly if accurately named study of the “Cock-up at Khafji,” shows how a military defeat for the Iraqis nevertheless scored a small but valuable political victory by briefly discrediting the existing coalition propaganda line (like most scholars in the field, Taylor uses the term “propaganda” in a morally neutral and non-pejorative sense); and in particular how the American attempt to present the Iraqi defeat as an entirely Arab achievement was undermined by the Western media’s speedy focus on the US Marines. Modern society is so “media porous” that in a ground war such simple manipulation is almost bound to fail. This is not necessarily true, however, of an air war. The second case study, of the Amiriya bombing episode, is particularly valuable in showing just exactly how the story broke both in Baghdad and at the Riyadh press centre, and its impact in Washington. The final study, “Apocalypse Where?” provides detailed insights into the media coverage of the “highway to hell” and the Mutla Gap. Further evidence which has emerged since *War and the Media* was written has tended to confirm Taylor’s position that President Bush called a cease-fire before any reporting of the Mutla Gap had yet appeared, but because he was convinced that the first pictures would cause a massive American public reaction against the war.

This remarkable over-sensitivity to the media on the part of the American government in particular is correctly attributed by Taylor to the “Vietnam Syndrome,” the belief that the media, the inflicting of casualties (on either side) and home support for a war, are fundamentally linked by a simple causal mechanism. As *War and the Media* demonstrates, the Gulf War showed this to be completely untrue, at least in a war as well media-managed as this one. The parading of captured coalition aircrew on television by the Iraqis caused no drop in support for the war – quite the reverse – and as Taylor concludes, “all those pre-war American anxieties about body bags, a hostile media and a poor American military performance had proved unwarranted.” Although neither one book nor one successful war necessarily make a pattern, it is unfortunate that scholars working in more traditional areas of international crisis management, who presently lament the instability brought by a “new media age,” have not paid closer attention to these findings, and persist in treating the media as some kind of terrible mystery. *War and the Media* will go a long way to helping such people change their minds. It is a book that anyone working in the field of conflict studies will ignore only at their own peril.

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