Will the Army Ever Learn Good Media Relations Techniques? Walter Reed as a Case Study

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F YOU EVER wanted a near-perfect case study of how not to deal with the press, the Walter Reed Army Medical Center (WRAMC) controversy would be a great place to start. Of course, the Walter Reed episode also offers lessons in leadership and accountability. Some of those lessons manifest themselves in this article, but the focus here is on the Army's bungled interaction with the news media and on how to avoid a repeat of the nightmarish fiasco.

On Sunday, 18 February 2007, the *Washington Post Magazine*—with a circulation of just over 900,000—carried a major story by Dana Priest and Anne Hull, two of the newspaper's staff reporters. Titled "Soldiers Face Neglect, Frustration At Army's Top Medical Facility," the story ignited a firestorm in the Congress and the Defense Department. The opening paragraph of the story was an eye-catcher: "Behind the door of Army Spec. Jeremy Duncan's room, part of the wall is torn and hangs in the air, weighted down with black mold. When the wounded combat engineer stands in his shower and looks up, he can see the bathtub on the floor above though a rotted hole. The entire building, constructed between the world wars, often smells like greasy carryout. Signs of neglect are everywhere: mouse droppings, belly-up cockroaches, stained carpets, cheap mattresses." Duncan had suffered a broken back in Iraq, lost an ear there, and had been brought to Walter Reed to be treated for his injuries and to recuperate.

The *Post* story went on to describe how the two reporters had spent four months visiting WRAMC, talking with patients and their families, and seeing for themselves the conditions at what they dubbed "the Other Walter Reed." The reporters had interviewed the WRAMC commander, Army Major General George W. Weightman, and included his comments and explanations as part of the story.³

The story was a nightmare for the Army, and the *Post* reprised it the following day with a lengthy piece about the WRAMC's Mologne House and the Soldiers housed there. A facility originally designed for housing families of Walter Reed patients, Mologne House now accommodates recuperating Soldiers and their families. Although the story describes Mologne House's wingback chairs and fine chandeliers in its first paragraph, the story's emphasis was not on the physical surroundings, but on the bureaucratic intransigence convalescing Soldiers and their families encountered: "Mostly what the Soldiers do together is wait, for appointments, evaluations, signatures,

The views expressed in this article are the author's and are not necessarily those of the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, the National Defense University, or the Department of Defense.

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PHOTO: Army MSG Allan Blaydes walks down the second floor hallway of Building 18 of the Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Washington, D.C., 15 March 2007. (AP Photo, Charles Dharapak)



Building 18 of the Walter Reed Army Medical Center, which was used to house recovering wounded soldiers, Washington, D.C., 15 March 2007.

and lost paperwork to be found." The reporters quoted the wife of one Soldier as saying, "If Iraq don't kill you, Walter Reed will."

The Army's handling of this public relations disaster began before the *Post* even printed the initial story. The *Post* sent a long list of questions to the Army six days before publication of the Priest/ Hull article.⁵ According to the Army, none of these questions dealt specifically with the conditions patients experienced at Walter Reed. The questions related solely to the process and paperwork of medical disability claims and how the Army handled them. None of the questions alerted the Army to issues that would be the focus of the *Post's* story: the condition of the facility in which it housed patients. Colonel Daniel Baggio, the chief of media relations for Army public affairs at the time, noted that, "Building 18 was not even mentioned in the questions from the Post."6

The Army took advantage of its receipt of the list of questions from the *Post* to stage what the newspaper's media critic, Howard Kurtz, labeled a "preemptive news briefing." Calling in six rival news organizations, the Army offered them what it knew about the forthcoming *Post* story and the Army's response to it, asking them not to publish anything—"embargo the story" is the term used in the news business—until the early Sunday edition of the newspaper hit local grocery and convenience stores on Saturday afternoon.

The preemptive briefing succeeded in part. The Associated Press (AP) ran a story on Saturday that cited General Weightman several times. The Army

is aware, said Weightman, of complaints from some of the patients at Walter Reed. "From our internal reviews of these perceptions," he was quoted as saying, "we have been modifying our policies and procedures as necessary to address these perceptions."9 The AP story did not mention conditions in Building 18, apparently because the Army did not know that the conditions there would be part of the Post story and therefore

did not brief the other news organizations on the subject.¹⁰ The AP story did not receive much play, however, because there was not much news in it. Problems with bureaucracies, after all, are nothing new in Washington.

Of the six news organizations the Army alerted, only the Los Angeles Times was problematic. On the positive side, the Times quoted Weightman acknowledging many of the problems at Walter Reed and noted that he was increasing the number of personnel assigned to care for wounded veterans, a detail the AP story omitted. From the Army's perspective, this was a good revelation. It demonstrated the first rule in dealing with a negative story: admit when you have made a mistake and tell the world what you are doing to correct it.

On the other hand, the *Times* quoted extensively from the *Post* story, giving the *Post*'s effort a presence on the West Coast that might not otherwise have been there. The *Times* also advanced the *Post*'s account by reporting Paul Reickhoff, the head of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, as saying that he had a "friend who had suffered 'catastrophic injuries' in Iraq and was forced to

...the first rule in dealing with a negative story: admit when you have made a mistake and tell the world what you are doing to correct it. 'carry his paperwork through the snow' when he became an outpatient." Reickhoff's comments did not appear in the *Post* story, so this new detail added to the Army's public relations problems, rather than reducing them.

To make matters worse, the Army's preemptive briefing spurred the publication of yet more investigative reporting on Walter Reed. One of the newspapers invited to the briefing was the *Army Times*, which declined to attend. Instead, the *Army Times* decided to release its own story on Walter Reed, which it had been working on for several months. According to the *Columbia Journalism Review Daily, Army Times* had intended to publish its story several weeks later, but the timing of the Army's briefing caused this Gannett-owned weekly to post its story online immediately, with the print version coming out on Monday, 19 February, doubling the Army's media troubles. 12

The Army's attempt at media manipulation through the "preemptive news briefing" thus assumed a problematic life of its own. Colonel Baggio insisted, however, that the Army had done nothing wrong in calling in the outside reporters. "I wish I had invited in more of them," he related when asked about the matter. 13 His take on the episode was that the briefing allowed the Army to get its message out simultaneously with publication of the *Post* story, rather than waiting for the next news cycle. That view is one way of looking at the situation, but sharing the *Post* story with rival news organizations, even with the embargo provision, caused distress in press circles that led to unpleasant ramifications.

Peter Spiegel, who wrote the *Los Angeles Times* story, told Kurtz, author of the *Columbia* story cited above, "It made us feel very uncomfortable that we were being set up to be the Army's public affairs arm." ¹⁴ The briefing also drew a negative reaction from the lead reporter on the *Post* story. "How do you think this is going to affect our relationship"? Priest asked an Army public affairs officer. "Do you think I'm going to be willing to give you that much time to respond, if you're going to turn around and tell my competitors?" ¹⁵ One can also assume that various editors at the *Post* will now be wary about dealing with Army public affairs officers in the future, as will other journalists. They will think to themselves, "If the Army did this to as powerful a newspaper as

the *Post*, what will they do with me and my story? Maybe I shouldn't give them a preview of it." This, of course, is pure speculation, but it is realistic to assume a normal person would react that way.

So, what should the Army have done when it received at least a partial heads-up from the newspaper, conditions in Building 18 not included? When given such a preview, most organizations would use the time to alert higher-ups as to what was coming, prepare counter-points to the story, and prepare to point out any factual mistakes. Waiting until the publication of the story before calling in other news organizations is not only the right thing to do, but also the pragmatically prudent thing to do. Not engaging in manipulative, preemptive briefings might mean never having to address a story at all. At the very least such forbearance avoids the potential for unintentionally spawning tangent stories that can compound the difficulties.

Three days after the *Post*'s initial story, the news got worse for the Army. On Wednesday, 21 February, the *Post* ran an editorial addressing problems at Walter Reed. Titled "Rotten Homecoming," the editorial skewered the Army for the "bureaucratic contempt and physical squalor that too often await badly injured outpatient Soldiers" at Walter Reed. It also cited Weightman's pledge that "conditions on the post will improve rapidly," calling the Walter Reed commander's response "commendable." 16

I should interject here that, of all the high-level Army officials involved in this story, only Weightman seems to have understood how to deal with the press on a series of negative stories like these. Unfortunately, he became the first designated fall guy for the problems at Walter Reed—even though he had apparently begun to clean up the mess he found when he took over the command in August 2006.¹⁷

The same two reporters who wrote the initial story and its Monday follow-up (Priest and Hull) had another piece in the newspaper that same day. "Top Army officials yesterday visited Building 18...," the reporters wrote. "Army Secretary Francis Harvey and Vice Chief of Staff Richard Cody toured the building and spoke to Soldiers as workers in protective masks stripped mold from the walls and tore up soiled carpets." Weightman was quoted as saying that "all of the staff increases he had requested would be met." Army Secretary Harvey was also quoted on the causes of the problems at Walter Reed: "It's

a failure...in the garrison leadership...that should have never happened, and we are quickly going to rectify that situation." It was clear that the search for a scapegoat had begun, but at least people at high levels in the Army were beginning to acknowledge that there were problems at WRAMC.

By Thursday, Army Surgeon General Kevin Kiley felt that the situation at Walter Reed was under control. In what was clearly the beginning of his problems in dealing

with the public relations disaster, Kiley offered his thoughts at a news conference on the grounds of the medical facility. Referring to the building the *Post* had identified as filled with "mouse droppings, belly-up cockroaches, and stained carpets," he told assembled reporters, "I do not consider Building 18 to be substandard." Minimizing the conditions at Walter Reed and ignoring the systemic problems identified in the *Post's* stories and addressed by his subordinate, Weightman, Kiley reported, "We frankly fixed all of those problems."19 In making such statements, Kiley violated another of the key rules in addressing a public relations disaster: don't try to deny the obvious. If high-ranking officials did not see mouse droppings and mold-encrusted walls as a problem at a medical facility, then, the Army is in worse shape than anyone thought.

Kiley then offered a theme of detachment that proved all too revealing and eventually led to his downfall. In doing so, he provided another example of how not to address real problems. Referring to the *Post*'s stories as "one-sided representation,"

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Army Surgeon General Kevin Kiley speaks to the press during a news conference at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center complex in Washington, D.C., 22 February 2007.

he defended the conditions in Building 18, saying, "This is not a horrific, catastrophic failure at Walter Reed." The "one-sided representation" comment is what stands out. One wonders what he thought the other side of the story was. Was he thinking it would excuse the situation if some rooms in the building did not have mold, or rodents, or dead cockroaches? This theme would surface again.

The Walter Reed episode clearly damaged the Army's credibility. The best approach would have been for Army leaders to understand and accept the reality that WRAMC had issues with its physical plant, with the conditions in which some recuperating Soldiers and Marines were living, and with DOD bureaucratic procedures for designating levels of disability. The *Post*'s accounts never made clear, however, that the Army's medical department was not responsible for these bureaucratic inconveniences. Had the principals involved responded more deliberately, addressing such inaccuracies would have ameliorated the cumulative impact. Instead, their defiance born of dismissive arrogance prevented constructive engagement of the problems themselves. Kiley evinced an attitude that the story was the problem, not the conditions at WRAMC.

On 1 March, the *Post* reported that the Army had "relieved of duty several low-ranking Soldiers who managed outpatients"—presumably shortly after the initial story had come out. But there was no leadership *mea culpa* from the Army's medical

department.²¹ That same day, the higher-level scape-goating began. Weightman was removed as WRAMC commander. However, his firing again compounded the Army's problems because his replacement, Kiley, had been in charge at Walter Reed before becoming Surgeon General in 2004.²²

The *Post*'s story pointed out that Weightman had only been in command at Walter Reed since August 2006 and had attempted to correct some of the deficiencies he found there. The *Post* noted that Kiley's appointment "surprised some Defense Department officials because Soldiers, their families, and veterans' advocates have complained that he had long been aware of problems at Walter Reed and did nothing to improve its outpatient care." In an ominous portent, the *Post* report also observed that Defense Secretary Robert Gates "was not involved in the appointment of Kiley."²³

By the next day, Army Secretary Harvey was also gone, presumably because of his role in naming Kiley as interim commander at Walter Reed. Secretary Gates was quoted as saying, "The problems at Walter Reed appear to be problems of leadership." Gates seems to have understood intuitively that heaping all of the blame on Weightman, while placing Kiley back in charge of Walter Reed, was simply not going to wash.

Kiley, meanwhile, continued to dig in with greater defiance. "I want to defend myself," he said. "It was… yellow journalism at its worst…"²⁴ Almost immediately, Kiley was replaced at Walter Reed by Major General Eric B. Schoomaker, younger brother of the Army's Chief of Staff.²⁵ However, the damage had been done. The Army had already lost a major general and a service secretary, plus various lower-ranking Soldiers, and the bleeding still had not been stopped.

Secretary Harvey violated a key principle of leadership: *find out who is actually responsible before you start firing people*. Taking action for its own sake is rarely appropriate, although it seems common enough in Washington. As Secretary of the Army, Harvey should have been more deliberate, realizing that the problems at WRAMC had to have developed over a period of years. Kiley had recently served an entire tour of stewardship, and there had not been enough time since then for those conditions to fester out of nothing.

At this point in the story, two things stand out clearly: Secretary of Defense Gates "got it"; he understood the problems, and much of the Army's leadership did not. For example, the same day that he fired Harvey, Gates was quoted as saying, "I am disappointed that some in the Army have not adequately appreciated the seriousness of the situation pertaining to outpatient care at Walter Reed. Some have shown too much defensiveness and have not shown enough focus on digging into and addressing the problems."²⁶

Long before matters had reached this point, however, President Bush's office weighed in. He was "deeply concerned," said Press Secretary Tony Snow. Members of Congress also expressed concern. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi asked the Armed Services Committee to investigate the matter and several presidential contenders decried conditions at the facility.²⁷ But some folks in the Army—or recently part of the Army—still didn't seem to understand.

As if he were not listening and had not heard the statements of concern from the country's political leaders, former Secretary Harvey—perhaps understandably, given his fate—continued to place the blame on the news media, and not on those running Walter Reed or on himself for his poor choice of Weightman's successor. The *Post*'s stories lacked balance, said Harvey. He then mirrored Kiley's fateful and incomprehensible detachment by asking, "Where's the other side of the story?"²⁸

At a hearing before a congressional committee, Kiley issued a convoluted admission of responsibility of sorts: "I'm trying not to say that I'm not accountable," said the Surgeon General. Then a reporter asked him how he could have failed to know about problems that existed directly across the street from his quarters. In one of those four-second sound bites that so often become the emblematic video clips that make the evening news, Kiley's ironic detachment sealed his fate. "I don't do barracks inspections at Walter Reed," said the general.²⁹ While there might

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Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates and Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Edmund Giambastiani tour Walter Reed Army Medical Center, 23 February 2007. The two leaders held a press conference following their meeting with some wounded troops being treated at the center.

have been some hope for Kiley's survival before that moment, those eight words—featured with his photo on the front page of the next day's *Post*—signaled his demise. He uttered the words on Monday, 5 March 2007, and handicappers were betting that he would not last a week. They were right. On Monday, 13 March, Kiley announced he was retiring, having submitted his request to do so to acting Army Secretary Pete Geren the previous day.³⁰

According to the *Post*, Geren, a former Democratic Congressman from Texas, "had sought Kiley's removal in recent days."³¹ Major General Gale S. Pollock, Kiley's deputy, was quickly named interim Surgeon General. Unfortunately, she, too, immediately had her problems with the press.³²

At no time over the several weeks that this debacle took place did anyone representing the Army ever point out a factual error in the reporting. There were accusations of exaggeration, but never any concrete examples demonstrating that any reporter had written anything misleading or inaccurate—for instance, the fact that the byzantine

bureaucracy has nothing to do with Army medicine. The profound inference that emerges from this and other aspects of the debacle is that the Army must be doing a terrible job of preparing its general officers to work with the press.

The "press-as-enemy" syndrome, so common during and after Vietnam, is still alive and well among general officers in today's Army. This is true despite the fact that not one of them served while the Vietnam War was going on.³³ This inherited fear of the press betrays an untoward fear of transparency. One wonders if it stems from a corrosive lack of confidence in the rightness of one's aims and the

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strength of one's abilities. It certainly reveals a skewed attitude toward public service. Following are some lessons Army leadership can take away from this fiasco.

- When confronted with allegations of malfeasance, misconduct, or just plain negligence, admit them if they are true. How many times in your Army career have you responded to a personal failure by offering a lame explanation or excuse to a superior? Not many, I'd bet. I realize it's a bit simplistic, but a more sophisticated version of the old, "Yes, sir," "No, sir," and "No excuse, sir" should still be the basis of your answers. Offer the mitigating circumstances if there are any, but then explain what you are doing to correct the problem. In this case, there really was no excuse for mouse droppings and dead cockroaches in rooms where our wounded were recuperating.
- Do not blame the messenger. Claiming "yellow journalism" or lamenting that the press never writes about the good will never suffice. There have been plenty of stories, for example, about how good the care is at Walter Reed, and Bethesda, and the Brooke Army Medical Center (San Antonio) burn facility. 34 It is the job of the fourth estate to report on the foibles and the follies of government officials.
- Realize that reporters are human, too. If you double-deal them, they will resent it and you. Trying to scoop them by alerting their rivals ahead of publication is not acceptable.³⁵ The karmic blowback from such tricks can be bracing. These reporters will not be apt to forget or forgive, and the next time you go to them with a request, they are probably going to respond immoderately and question your lineage.
- It really doesn't matter if you don't like the press. The Constitution you swore to defend protects them; they are going to do their jobs; and your career—as some of our Army officials have learned to their dismay—may depend upon how you interact with them. You don't have to like them, but you need to learn to work with them in a reasonable, civilized fashion.
- Cultivate the reporters who cover your area of responsibility. If they know you personally, they are much less likely to write something without getting a full and fair understanding. Such familiarity could well persuade them that there is no story.
- Remember that in most situations you only need to survive one day's news cycle. Unless your

fiasco is truly monumental—and WRAMC was in that category, as few others are—you will be bumped from the front page by someone else's. Walter Reed was eventually bounced from the front pages by stories about Attorney General Alberto Gonzalez and the fired federal prosecutors, but its aftermath remains highly visible. Of course, you can, if you wish, keep the coverage going by attacking or trying to manipulate the press.

In the final analysis, if senior leaders can see what went wrong in the Army's handling of this abysmal series of revelations, and then draw the right conclusions, perhaps some good will have come out of this episode, painful as it was. For example, will Army officers continue to whine about press coverage, or will we realize that the press is always going to be there, doing a necessary job for a free republic? It has a right to be there, and the sooner we embrace it, the better off we will be. We have to accept that having the press watching what we do and reporting on it will make us more accountable to our citizens and to Soldiers under our stewardship. Failing to accept that fact is the zenith of hypocrisy.

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The upshot of this entire mess is that it was, indeed, a mess, and the Army is now doing what it should have done years ago: cleaning up. Would the Army have done so without the press revelations? Would commanders support the Army Wounded Warrior program with garrison budgets the way they do now had the WRAMC situation not surfaced? One would hope so, but the *Post*'s stories certainly accelerated the process. Former DOD Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs Torie Clarke wrote a book on this subject titled *Lipstick on a Pig.*³⁶ If what you have is swinishly dirty, as Clarke says, putting a shine on it will not fool anyone in an open society. Even states without a free press don't always get away with that. *MR*

NOTES

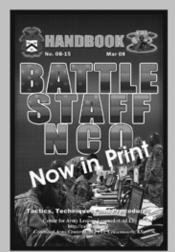
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- 4. Anne Hull and Dana Priest, "The Hotel Aftermath," *The Washington Post*, 19 February 2007, A01.
 - 5. Telephonic interview, James T. Currie with Howard Kurtz, 29 March 2007.
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- 7. Howard Kurtz, "The Army's Preemptive News Briefing, *The Washington Post*, 24 February 2007, C1.
- 8. Telephonic interview, James T. Currie with COL Daniel Baggio, Chief of Media Relations, Army Public Affairs Office, 28 March 2007.
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- 17. The senior chaplain at Walter Reed, John R. Kallerson, sent out a broadcast e-mail on 11 March in which he stated that immediately after assuming command MG Weightman had requested funds for repairs at Walter Reed and that it had taken the Army four months to come through with such, which was not very long before the stories broke in the press.
- 18. Dana Priest and Anne Hull, "Swift Action Promised at Walter Reed," *The Washington Post*, 21 February 2007, A08.
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 - 28. Ibid.
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 - 31. Ibid.
 - 32. Ibid
- 33. Said General William Tecumseh Sherman: "I regard all these newspaper harpies as spies and think they could be punished as such." James M. Perry, A Bohemian Brigade: The Civil War Correspondents, Mostly Rough, Sometimes Ready (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2000), 176.
- 34. I found the following stories, for example, with just a few minutes of effort with Google and a troll through *The Washington Post* archives: "A Resource Too Valuable to Close, *The Washington Post* Editorial, 14 June 2005, A20; Aci Connolly, "U.S. Combat Fatality Rate Lowest Ever," *The Washington Post*, 9 December 2004, A24; "Taking Care of Our Own" *The Washington Post* Editorial, 13 October 2004, A20; Steve Vogel, "Wastime's Lifesaving Technological Advances Given Their Due," *The Washington Post*, 20 November 2003, T05; Stephen Barr, "On Memorial Day, a 12-Hour Shift and an Extra Dose of Respect," *The Washington Post*, 26 May 2003, B02; Clarence Williams and Martin Weil, "Wounded Servicemen at Area Hospitals," *The Washington Post*, 30 January 2007, A09; National Public Radio, 15 March 2007, "Army Burn Center Sees Some of the Worst War Wounds", Associated Press, 9 March 2007, "Brooke Army Medical Center Addresses Soldier Care."
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 - 36. Torie Clark, Lipstick on a Pig (New York: Free Press, 2006).

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