



The Military-Media Relationship

An Exercise in Strategic Patience

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN the military and the media is very much akin to a marriage. The honeymoon is long since over and both of us have seen the best and worst of each other. The partners cannot divorce or even think of asking for a permanent separation. They are forever linked and stay together for the sake of the children.

There is friction in any relationship, and this includes the military-media relationship. Some friction is healthy and good, but as we know, too much of it, and the relationship tends to sour. We see this in statements such as General Robert E. Lee's in 1863:

It appears we have appointed our worst generals to command our forces, and our most gifted and brilliant to edit newspapers! In fact, I discovered by reading newspapers that these editor-geniuses plainly saw all my strategic defects from the start, yet failed to inform me until it was too late. Accordingly, I'm readily willing to yield my command to these obviously superior intellects and I'll, in turn, do my best for the cause by writing editorials—after the fact.

There have been numerous studies and articles written on the ever-evolving and changing relationship between the two. At times, they seem to be polar opposites. The Mexican-American War saw the first professional journalists sent to cover a war and military operations. Since then, journalists have covered every conflict, including the Civil War, both World Wars, Korea, Vietnam, Grenada, Panama, Desert Storm, Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom (renamed New Dawn), and operations over Libya, not to mention covering the military from the small unit to the national policy level in times of peace.

Most consumers of news, both in and out of the military, at times forget that the business of news is just that—a *business*. For example, in 2009, 104 newspapers closed for financial reasons.¹ Many were local papers, but some were major regional newspapers such as the *Rocky Mountain News*, *The Christian Science Monitor* print edition, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, and others. These were major regional and local publications that would never have been considered to be at risk before the explosion of new media

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PHOTO: GEN David Petraeus, Commander, Multi-National Forces-Iraq, is being interviewed by Terry McCarthy (then from ABC News) at Patrol Base Murry, south of Baghdad, Iraq, 11 July 2007. (photo courtesy of author)

and the proliferation of free news available via the Internet. The president and CEO of the Associated Press (AP), Tom Curley, tells us that AP had to find a new business model to survive an age of universal access to their content via the web. He implied that consumers now question why they should have subscriptions to various newspapers or other media outlets when they can get the news at no cost on the Internet.

This is a monumental problem for media organizations today. The economic issues that have recently plagued the media could explain the reasoning behind the types of coverage we see in print, broadcast, or radio. It is doubtful that anyone within the media will say that business decisions drive coverage, but the media are in the business of reporting what sells. Without viewers, listeners, or readers, they cannot sell advertising space and will go out of business.

Military versus Media Expectations

The military expects the media to be accurate and to characterize the events covered in the proper context. In turn, the military provides access and timely information. The first media organization to report on the events drives recognition and dollars. The media must recognize that the earlier information about complex and dynamic events is released, the more likely the information will have errors. The media does not make errors on purpose, but due to the dynamics of combat or a crisis, errors will occur when information is provided before all the facts are in. The military has to do the best it can, and the media must be aware that truth changes as events become clearer. To mitigate some of these issues, the military must rely on trust and relationships between its spokespersons and reporters. Reporters have to understand that the military is putting out the best information it has at that time.

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In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall. The media covered this event 24/7 for weeks. Stories on Katrina filled the available news hole. At the time, I was the director of the Combined Press Information Center (CPIC), Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I). I contacted all the news bureaus operating in Baghdad to determine what coverage coalition operations were receiving, if any. They informed me that until further notice, there would be limited U.S. news coverage from Iraq due to the hurricane. When I asked if there would be any coverage if we captured Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, I was told that would not make the news. I pushed further to find out whether we would get coverage if we captured Osama Bin Laden and Zarqawi together, in a meeting with others planning an attack. I was informed that perhaps we would get 30 seconds of news time.

The 2 May 2011 killing of Osama Bin Laden is an example of the changing face of military news. Initial reports came out hours after the operation, followed by more and often conflicting information. Multiple briefers delivered the information, using their own filters, and as the information matured, more clarity emerged that changed the original narrative.

The media must bear that in mind and update stories to correct errors when they occur. In fact, the media do correct errors, but not automatically. Sometimes it is a lengthy process to get corrections made after mistakes come to their attention, and most of the time, the public never sees the correction. Depending on the story, readers barely notice corrections on page two in the bottom corner of a one-inch by one-inch box. For a story with a greater impact, the media may issue a larger correction more easily seen and heard. This is a nuanced understanding the media may have, but one the public may not share.

The hardest part for the military is understanding what the news is and that what we say will not always resonate and break through all the other news of the day. According to “The State of the News Media 2011” by the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, the number-one story of the past year was the weakened state of the U.S. economy. It accounted for up to 17 percent of the overall coverage for each quarter of 2010. This does not take into account spiking or breaking news

events such as the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico or election coverage. The coverage of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars accounted for only four percent of all news studied in 2010, actually down from five percent in 2009. This does not indicate that the military story is not important, but that news concerning the military must compete with all other types of news events.²

Time and expectation management are important. To change the public's perceptions or expectations takes time. There is no rule of thumb on how long it will take, only that it will take time. There is no silver bullet to make it happen as fast as the commanders or other senior leaders would prefer.

Having been deployed as a public affairs officer as the director of the CPIC, MNF-I for 18 months beginning in the summer of 2004, I witnessed firsthand the issues of perceptions and expectations from the media and indirectly the public. During those months, the mainstream media turned a blind eye to MNF-I news releases.

The challenge was how to get media outlets to open emails and read them. How many times will they read about an Iraqi water treatment plant opening or schools being built? Not many. To overcome this challenge, we developed new and innovative subject lines to gain the interest of the media. For example, when a new water treatment plant began operation where there had been no fresh water before, we exchanged the standard subject line. We changed it to "Got Water?" This was an attempt to get the media to open the emails and gain interest. It worked on a limited scale. We were attempting to change media expectations and perceptions about the importance of information we provided.

My next deployment to Iraq was as the public affairs officer to General David Petraeus, the new commander of MNF-I, on 10 February 2007. On the flight from Fort Leavenworth to Baghdad, we had time to think and reflect on the past and current state of military-media relationships, specifically in Iraq, and how to conduct our media relations and operations.

I provided several overarching recommendations to Petraeus. First, we needed to reestablish our credibility with the Baghdad-based media. Second, access was going to be critical—we needed to give the media access to commanders. Third, we needed to facilitate the stories the media wanted as well as

those we desired. This last point became known as Battlefield Circulation (BFC). During BFC, the media would accompany Petraeus during the day with an opportunity to interview him at the end of the day.

Based on my observations and discussions with many members of the media, I sensed that they did not take what MNF-I was saying at face value or as credible. This was a major concern. If the command was not considered a credible source, getting the information to the public would be doomed to failure before it had a chance to succeed.

Perception and Expectation Management

Correcting this perception would take time. The media would not change their perspectives or expectations overnight. The approach to change was simple: provide timely and accurate information, provide access to the command at all levels, provide new guidance from the MNF-I commanding general to all multi-national division commanders, and hold the media accountable for their articles.

We knew that to change the media's expectations we would have to change our approach. This is where the BFC approach proved valuable. The reporters would have direct access to Petraeus and hear, see, taste, and smell the same things he and the staff were seeing at the same time. There would be nobody standing behind the curtain, no rosy adjectives describing what was happening. Reporters would have access to those who were briefing Petraeus and his staff and be able to ask questions of the units on the ground as well as Iraqis that were nearby.

Battlefield circulations allowed the media to draw their own conclusions, to see that we were telling them the facts as we knew them at the time. Circulations provided access so journalists could report on events, and more importantly, they changed the expectations and perceptions of the command.

The first indication that the new approach was working came from Terry McCarthy, then of ABC News in Baghdad. In April 2007, during the buildup of forces for the "surge," McCarthy took his own television crew out in the streets of Baghdad where previously there had been huge clashes between coalition forces and insurgents. He was able to go out on his own without support from coalition forces



(photo courtesy of author)

GEN David Petraeus, Commander, Multi-National Forces-Iraq, greets Terry McCarthy, then from ABC News, Forward Operating Base Kalsu, 11 July 2007.

and report what he was seeing. McCarthy went out on a limb and was the first reporter to announce that the surge was indeed working.³

Over time, the BFCs proved their value in improving overall news report accuracy. Context and characterization of reporting coming from Iraq changed from that of skeptical, cynical, opinion-based reporting to that of more factual and nuanced understanding. The intended results were to have an informed public that could make informed decisions. Some may infer that it was “influence operations,” and to some degree, it was. However, our media strategy was not nefarious and underhanded, but above board using candid, factual information. Easily understood facts and figures allowed the media to see for themselves the ground truth, and they were influenced to better report what was occurring in Iraq.

Not an Issue of Control

Many within the military, from privates to senior leaders, desire to control the media. This desire encourages a strained relationship between the media and the military. We know from history that the relationship has always been rocky and has

nothing to do with control, or as the media may call it, censorship:

The basic explanation is that the natures and goals of the two institutions are fundamentally in tension. For its part, the military, like most bureaucracies, prefers to do its business behind closed doors—all the more so because the nature of its business is so often shocking to the sensitivities of the public, on whose support it must rely. Therefore, the military inherently sees the media as a subversive, rather than a positive, element. The press, however, responds to the requirement of democracy to expose the actions of the government—including, especially, the military—to public scrutiny.⁴

Given this premise, the military must understand the media and not attempt to control it. Should control be attempted, the outrage from the media declaring censorship will overshadow events and call into question the motives of such an attempt. The news then changes from your intended message to that of control and censorship.

Each entity has a specific job and goal in mind, and often the two are at odds. However, as we know, both parties must understand the relationship and find ways to work with each other. The media is part of the landscape in which we operate, and soldiers have to learn to deal with it and all of its unique characteristics.

Embedded Media Works

In the past 10 years, perhaps the most effective program to foster the military-media relationship has been the embedded media program. This single program has afforded the opportunity for the military to learn about the media and for the media to learn about and report on the military. The type of reporting that has come out of this program is reminiscent of that by Joe Galloway during Vietnam in his coverage with UPI.

Debates concerning the usefulness of this program continue both in and out of the media. Over the years, many have claimed that reporters lose balance and objectivity by being too close to the military that they are covering. Having run the embed program for MNF-I for 18 months and having seen it work again for 20 months in Iraq, I have no doubts about the media's collective ability to be objective and to report on the mistakes, missteps, and tragic events taking place in and around deployed forces.

To be fair, the embed program is not perfect. It will not always meet the needs of the media or the military. At times, the media will be frustrated with logistical issues, namely the lack of transportation in and around the area of operations. In Iraq, one way around this was to increase their priority of airlift. This was justified due to the importance MNF-I placed on the media getting information to the public.

Not all commands will have the flexibility to establish priorities for media support. This lack of resources will require patience by both the military and the media. In the end, reporters who have taken advantage of the embed program will have had an opportunity that few get to bring to their readers, viewers, and listeners. The military also has enjoyed

coverage that would not have been possible without the embed program. Embedded reporters have revealed all that is courageous about the military as well as some failings. In the end, we should count this as a win for both the military and the media and a bigger win for the public, who now have an inside view of an institution that so few understand.

Recent Viewpoints

In June 2009, *Rolling Stone* magazine published "The Runaway General," an article profiling General Stanley McChrystal, commander of the International Security Force Assistance Command (ISAF) in Afghanistan. Some say the article led to the removal of McChrystal from command. Many blame Michael Hastings, the reporter embedded with McChrystal and his staff while in Paris, for having violated established ground rules specifying that many of the comments made were off-the-record, meaning the statements could not be used. An inspector general report from the Department of Defense found no evidence of any wrongdoing on the part of McChrystal or his staff in the execution of that interview. In an interview with CNN, Hastings said, "It was all very clear it was on the record. I had a tape recorder and a notepad in my hand most of the time."⁵

To date there has not been any evidence made public on what was actually said or what rules were established. Hastings is releasing a book, which might shed additional light on the subject. Somewhere in the middle, the truth should be found.

In the end, the article itself should not be blamed for the removal of McChrystal, nor should the reporter. If we take what Hastings wrote at face value and consider the lack of statements from anyone clearly refuting the article, then the article stands as written. Interestingly, many in the media came out against the article claiming it would negatively affect military-media relations for "beat" reporters. How they get information from the military, especially the senior leaders, was in jeopardy, so these claims said.

During an interview on the *Hugh Hewitt Radio Program*, John Burns of the *New York Times* made

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several remarks relating to the military-media relationship. He remarked, “I think it’s very unfortunate that it has impacted, and will impact so adversely, on what had been pretty good military/media relations.” Burns went on to say:

My unease, if I can be completely frank about this, is that from my experience of traveling and talking to generals—McChrystal, Petraeus and many, many others over the past few years—the old on-the-record/off-the-record standard doesn’t really meet the case, which is to say that by the very nature of the time you spend with the generals, the same could be said to be true of the time that a reporter spends with anybody in the public eye. There are moments which just don’t fit that formula. There are long, informal periods traveling on helicopters over hostile territory with the generals chatting over their headset, bunking down for the night side-by-side on a piece of rough-hewn concrete. You build up a kind of trust.⁶

Burns continued with comments on trust and responsibility:

It’s not explicit; it’s just there. My feeling is that it’s the responsibility of the reporter to judge in those circumstances what is fairly reportable, and what is not, and to go beyond that, what it is necessary to report. I think that much of what we learned about General McChrystal, in what was really a very powerful *Rolling Stone* article, and the general feeling of unease and disrespect towards the administration in Washington, could have been done without directly quoting things that were said, and I would guess, in a very ambiguous kind of circumstance, mostly by the general’s aides, which they could not have, I think, reasonably expected to end up being quoted as saying.⁷

Burns explains the debate on what is on- and off-the-record, in terms of the interests of what the public has a right to know, occurs in his own publication between the editors and the reporters. They debate what is off-the-record, what should be



(photo courtesy of author)

GEN David Petraeus talks with local Sheiks from Taji and the surrounding areas. Accompanying GEN Petraeus is Lara Logan (CBS News), Taji, Iraq, 12 March 2008.

used when agreements are made, and when agreements can be violated. Such debates go directly to understanding the issues of attribution; what is on-the-record, off-the-record, and the background of the situation (e.g., not for attribution).

In April 2011, Peter Slavin of the *Washington Post*, who is on sabbatical to Northwestern University, asked me to speak to his class of approximately 20 journalism students. During the course of the three-hour seminar, the discussion of these same issues arose. There were many in class that felt that if the statements in the *Rolling Stone* article were fact, it was okay to violate the off-the-record agreements in the public interest. The difficult part of this is who determines what is in the public's interest? Is it the reporter? Is it the editor? Is it a conversation between the reporter, editor, and the original source? The risk is, if this agreement is violated, what are the second-and-third-order effects?

Should that trust be violated, it would be expected that individuals will not speak with the reporter and perhaps the publication in the future. Depending on the outcomes, they may take that attitude to the extreme of not engaging with any media. Trust between a military member and a reporter is hard to earn and easily lost when the damage can ruin careers. The far-reaching impacts are such that they undermine the legitimacy of the media and foster distrust between the military and the media, as they are already wary of each other.

Some within the media do not agree with how Hastings wrote the article, how he came by the information, or with the decision to print what amounts to personal opinions. Lara Logan, CBS News chief foreign correspondent, while appearing on *Reliable Sources*, a CNN program, cast doubt on Hastings's claim that his interviews with McChrystal and his staff were all on-the-record. When asked if she would have published the same comments about President Obama and Vice President Biden as Hastings had, Logan said, "It really depends on the circumstances."⁸ According to Logan, what she found damaging to the military-media relationship was Hastings' description of his own style, pretending to build an illusion of trust. Logan said, "That is exactly the kind of damaging type of attitude that makes it difficult for reporters who are genuine about what they do."⁹

In a different interview on CNN, Hastings said that beat reporters like Logan, specifically assigned to cover the military, do not publish negative pieces about their subjects in order to assure continued access. Logan refuted that statement saying:

I think that's insulting and arrogant, myself. I really do, because there are very good beat reporters who have been covering these wars for years, year after year. Michael Hastings appeared in Baghdad fairly late on the scene, and he was there for a significant period of time. He has his credentials, but he's not the only one. There are a lot of very good reporters out there. And to be fair to the military, if they believe that a piece is balanced, they will let you back.¹⁰

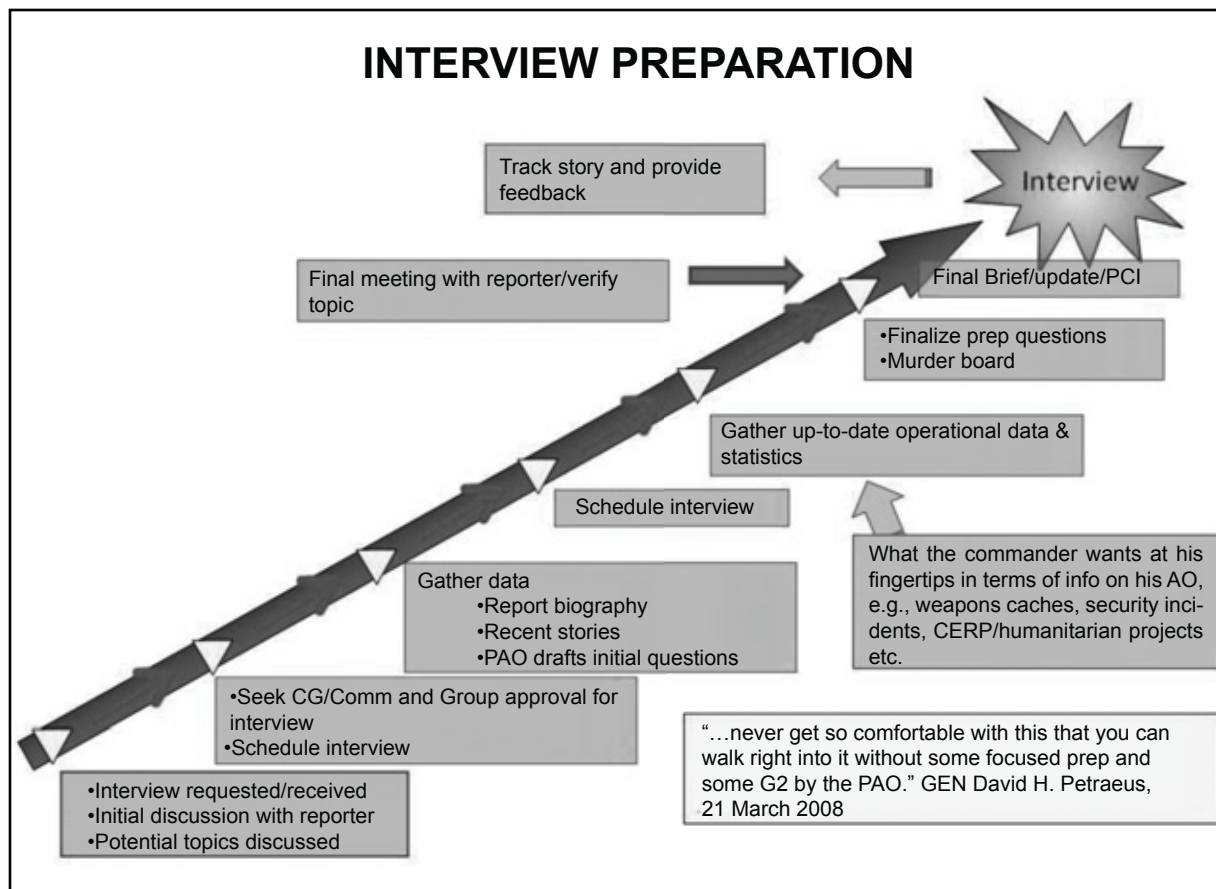
In a statement issued by McChrystal, the former IASF commander said:

It was a mistake reflecting poor judgment and should never have happened. Throughout my career, I have lived by the principles of personal honor and professional integrity. What is reflected in this article falls far short of that standard. I have enormous respect and admiration for President Obama and his national security team, and for the civilian leaders and troops fighting this war, and I remain committed to ensuring its successful outcome.¹¹

In an article in the April 2008 issue of *Esquire*, "The Man Between War and Peace," Thomas Barnett reported conversations that were on-the-record between him and Admiral Fox Fallon, then-Commander, U.S. Central Command. This article had the same impact as the *Rolling Stone* article. The statements pitted Fallon against President Bush.¹²

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates reluctantly accepted Fallon's resignation in which the admiral cited "the current embarrassing situation of public perception of differences between my views and administration policy and the distraction this causes from the mission."¹³

The *Esquire* article, and other press reports, suggested there were differences between administration policy at the time and Fallon's reported thoughts on policy toward Iran. Based on discussions with individuals, it was clear that the public affairs officer was kept out of the discussions and



was unable to advise his commander on the use of ground rules that contributed to the statements appearing in the article.

However, not all profile articles are detrimental to a senior leader’s career if conducted properly. Two examples come from *Esquire* and *Vanity Fair* magazines. The first is “The Monks of War,” from *Esquire*, a profile of then-Lieutenant Generals James Mattis and David Petraeus and General William Wallace. The profile, also by Barnett, shows that with proper preparation and understanding of the ground rules, potentially critical mistakes can be avoided.¹⁴

The same holds true of the *Vanity Fair* profile on Petraeus, “The Professor of War,” in May 2009. Senior leaders who have a clear understanding of the ground rules, topics the reporter wishes to engage, and what the second-and third-order of effects of personal opinions and offhand comments can make, continue to have successful relationships with the media and can greatly enhance their ability to inform the public at large.¹⁵

Preparing for a Media Engagement

General Petraeus gave some sage advice to his subordinates during his battle update analysis on 21 March 2008:

Just a reminder to all those who are out there doing these [interviews]. Do a very quick “murder board” to get your head into the game before you do this, with a PAO who has pulled the latest news clips right off the wire, has kept up with what that particular journalist’s particular bent is, and all the rest of that. I think on the occasions I felt like I really had my game all together and blew off a murder board, that was exactly when it turned out that I didn’t have my game together, and I didn’t have my head in it and fumbled around. So you never get so comfortable with this stuff that you can walk right into it without some focused prep and again, some G2 by the PAO.¹⁶

How to Move Forward

What we must guard against is an emotional reaction to articles or events precipitated by media reports. When we have that “knee-jerk” reaction and shun the media, not allowing them access and refusing their requests for information, all we do is limit our abilities to succeed in mission accomplishment.

We should not interpret recent events as chilling to the relationships we currently share and will share in the future with the media. Leaders at all levels have an obligation to tell the public what is happening with their sons, daughters, husbands, and wives. We should not use articles like the Hastings piece to make the argument that the media cannot be trusted. Nor should it be an excuse for avoiding needed engagements.

Those who will use the *Rolling Stone* article to avoid doing interviews are doing a disservice to the military and the public. Without the willingness to engage the media, the stories and events concerning soldiers and units will not get to the public. If that occurs, the Army will fail in its mission and its obligation to have an informed public. Others understand what we have to do and will use such occurrences to help make themselves better prepared to work with the media. Those two groups already have their minds made up. The group I am most concerned with is the group on the fence. These individuals can fall to either side and can either proactively engage with the media or withdraw. Our responsibility as leaders, mentors, educators, and professionals is to ensure that they land on the side of the fence that helps them understand the issues. Officers and other Army

leaders need to learn how to engage with the media properly and with minimal risk and to ensure they set themselves up for success. Only then will we as an institution truly get beyond the perception that the media is out to get the military.

Using ill-informed sources and misinformation is far more dangerous for the military-media relationship than is clear, accurate, in-context, and properly characterized reporting. However, this is where the media can help themselves. The media are fragmented, competitive, frequently ignorant of the military, and they constantly vacillate between the demands of the market and those of journalistic ethics. Military perceptions will always favor more and better coverage, even knowing it is an uphill battle.

We have seen the media landscape change in today's market. Unprepared reporters tend to move from crisis to crisis, unaware of the issues. They do not know how the military functions and how it attempts to frame complex events in simplified ways. They often gravitate toward sensational journalism (focusing on errors, misstatements, and spectacular events).

Nevertheless, ultimately, the military owes access to the public; it owes timely and accurate information. The audience includes military members themselves, their families, taxpayers, and Congress. The military needs to get its story out, knowing that it will be competing with other groups, events, and its enemies who are eager to give their take on events. To succeed, the military and the media need each other, no matter how good or strained the relationship. **MR**

NOTES

1. Business Insider, “The Death of the American Newspaper,” <www.businessinsider.com/the-death-of-the-american-newspaper-2009-7#>, 4 July 2009.

2. Mark Jurkowitz, Tom Rosenstiel, and Amy Mitchel, “A Year in the News 2010,” <stateofthemediamedia.org/2011/mobile-survey/a-year-in-the-news-narrative>, Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, 21 March 2011.

3. ABC News, <abcnews.go.com/Video/playerIndex?id=3001578>, 2 April 2007.

4. David Porch, “No Bad Stories,” *Naval War College Review*, Winter 2002, vol. LV, no. 1.

5. See http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-20008492-503544.html, 22 June 2010.

6. *Hugh Hewitt Radio Program*, 6 July 2010, transcript, <www.hughhewitt.com/transcripts.aspx?id=9a1c8a02-6193-4a47-9513-02d499f79cad>.

7. *Ibid.*

8. See <huffingtonpost.com/2010/06/28/lara-logan-slams-michael_n_627601.html>, 28 June 2010.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. Gordon Lubold and Carol E. Lee, “Obama: Gen. showed ‘poor judgment,’” *Politico*, 22 June 2010.

12. Thomas P.M. Barnett, *Esquire*, “The Man Between War and Peace,” April 2008.

13. See <www.af.mil/news/story.asp?id=123089794>, 11 March 2008.

14. Thomas P.M. Barnett, “The Monks of War,” *Esquire*, March 2006.

15. Mark Bowden, “The Professor of War,” *Vanity Fair*, May 2010.

16. GEN David Petraeus, 21 March 2008 Battle Update Assessment in Iraq.

Preparing for a Media Engagement

Commanders and staff find checklists useful as quick reference tools. The difficult part of working with the media and the art of interviews is simply that—it is an art. It does not lend itself to checklist type of planning. However, some simple tasks and things to consider are common to most media engagements. Here are several to think about:

Questions for you (the leader):

- What is your intent for the information line of operation or effort?
- How will you condition your team, get feedback, provide feedback, and gauge levels of effort?
- How personally involved will you be?
- How will you create a climate where speed of action is the focus?

Communication and why it works:

- Commander-centric.
- Personally and continuously involved (not micromanagement).
- Willingness to accept risk (not everyone will get it right all the time).
- Skills in public affairs, information operations, political-military, civil-military.

What matters to the military:

- Accuracy.
- Context.
- Characterization.
- Speed.

What to consider:

- Adversary's use of information.
- Speed of information.
- Media expectations.
- Certainty, risk, opportunity.
- Public affairs officer.

Strategic communication: Orchestration of our actions, words and images— What Enables Strategic Communication

- Expert knowledge.
- Unity of effort—strategic context understood by all.
- Different approaches to risk acceptance—delegation of authority.
- Comfort and confidence at high speed.

How to prepare for an interview:

- Write it down.
- Rehearse it.
- Time it.
- Have an open and frank after action review.
- Redo until comfortable.
- Build a rapport/relationship with the reporter.
- Be truthful!