

# Persian Gulf War: Desert Snow Job or accurate portrayal by military?

## Snow Job

By Greg LeRoy

The Persian Gulf War is over now, so it almost seems pointless to ask whether it was a just or necessary conflict. What is still worth examining, however, is how the Bush Administration, the Pentagon, U.S. intelligence agencies and even agencies financed by foreign governments were able to manipulate and control public access to information during this time.

And the mass media, rather than bringing the truth to light, often uncritically parroted the official line.

The Bush Administration began the misinformation campaign by saying that we were going to war to "defend democracy" (in a feudal dictatorship); to reestablish the "legitimate government of Kuwait" (that had never been elected); to protect our oil interests (while, statistically, Kuwait had provided less than one percent per annum of U.S. oil imports).

### Media was Lax

The mainstream media went out of their way not to challenge the Bush Administration, or buried the truth deep in the inside pages. And the press was just as lax in critical judgment during the saturation bombing campaigns of Desert Storm.

Was it reasonable or humane, for example, to target power plants, oil refineries, roads, sanitation plants, water treatment facilities and government buildings deep inside Iraq?

And didn't bombing Iraq back to the Stone Age violate the United Nations mandate to liberate Kuwait?

Hardly anyone in the mainstream media raised these issues. Rather, TV, newspapers and magazines all showed Pentagon-supplied shots of "smart weapons" zeroing in on precise targets--although only seven percent of the 85,000 tons of bombs dropped were "precision-guided munitions."

The bulk of the bombs used were of the free-falling gravity type, less discriminating in their destruction. When confirmed reports of civilian casualties could no longer be ignored, the reporters who dared to publicize these facts (such as CNN's Peter Arnett) were

*Continued on next page*

## Accurate Portrayal

By James W. Hart Jr.

Greg LeRoy, declaring that the press did not fight hard enough against alleged U.S. Government censorship in the Gulf War, has administered a brutal public beating to the media as well as the Government. Being a U.S. Air Force Reserve public affairs officer, I have become accustomed to explaining our military's communications efforts during the Persian Gulf War. Now, I find myself in the unusual position of speaking up in the media's defense as well.

LeRoy struck out blindly at journalists, our brave fighting men and women and the entire U.S. Government, demonstrating that he is either oblivious to the facts or possibly chooses to ignore reality in an attempt to stir up public ire.

The first fallacy is the claim of manipulation and control of public access to information regarding the conflict. This embodies three giant myths:

- 1) That the press didn't do a good job covering Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm.
- 2) That the military restricted reporters' ability to do their jobs.
- 3) That the military manipulated the press to manage the image of the war.

### Public Rated Coverage High

The facts debunk these myths and the American public recognizes this.

In a Jan. 27, 1991, *Times Mirror* poll of war coverage, almost 80 percent of Americans rated news coverage of the war as excellent or good.

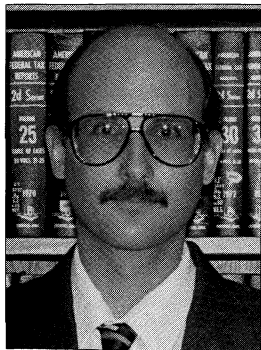
In addition, more than 60 percent thought the reports were accurate, which is a higher rating than the public's view of normal daily media reports.

That leads to discussion of the second myth, that the military censored media reports, delayed the release of information or restricted reporters' access to the field and troops.

Again, the facts simply don't support this claim.

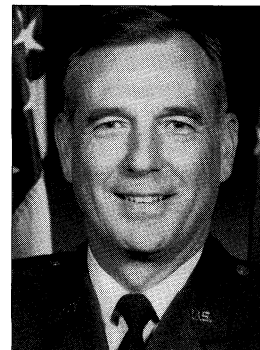
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### About the authors:



Greg LeRoy, left, is Director of Public Search, a non-profit public interest group that does research and analysis on military, foreign policy and nuclear issues. He has published two books and his articles have appeared in newspapers and magazines including *The Guardian* ("Independent Radical Weekly"), for which he is Houston correspondent. He studied philosophy and physics at Lafayette College and Rice University with a year of research in philosophy at Oxford. His article on the press and Iraq first appeared in the *Houston Post* Aug. 4, 1991.

James W. Hart Jr., who rebutted LeRoy's article in the Aug. 11 *Post*, is VP of Public Affairs of Panhandle Eastern Corp. and its subsidiaries and is Brigadier General in the U.S. Air Force Reserve. He serves as mobilization assistant to the director of PA, Secretary of the Air Force. Hart was named the Outstanding Texas PR Practitioner in 1991 by the Texas PR Assn. Before joining Panhandle Eastern in 1988, he was senior VP and general manager, Denver office of Hill and Knowlton. He was employed by Gulf Oil Corp. for 10 years to 1985.



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## Snow job

*Continued from page 24*

called traitors and propagandists.

Or the blame was thrown back on Iraq's shoulders. "We must point out again and again," NBC's Tom Brokaw explained on NBC News, "that it was Saddam Hussein who put these innocents in harm's way." Just what, one might ask Brokaw, were Iraqi "innocents" supposed to do if not stay in their homes or civilian air-raid shelters?

## U.S. Used Horrific Weapons

Instead of a questioning press, we were drowned in a flood of articles and commentary on the threat--which, by the way, never materialized--of Iraq's "immense" chemical stockpiles.

When, on the other hand, American forces began to use white phosphorus-filled howitzer shells, napalm, improved and horrifying fragmentation shrapnel and fuel warheads that equal the explosive power of nuclear weapons, the U.S. media suddenly became mute.

Even during the final hours of the war, the home front was denied access to what was happening. On the road from Kuwait to Basra, U.S. pilots talked about a "turkey shoot." It took a British newspaper, *The Independent*, to provide accurate coverage. Tens of thousands of retreating Iraqi soldiers had been slaughtered during a single 48-hour period.

It "was sickening," the report said, "to watch a routed army being shot in the back."

While this endless loop of noninformation and misinformation

circulated in every major newspaper, national magazine and radio news program during the Gulf War, major network TV news--where the majority of Americans received their information--was even more biased.

## Peace Side Under-Represented

A survey of ABC, CBS and NBC nightly news conducted by Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, a national media watch group, found that during the Gulf War "of 878 on-air sources, only one was a representative of a national peace organization." President Bush, of course, in March had said that there wasn't "any anti-war movement out there. A couple of voices, but you can't hear them." This was far from the truth.

Some of the largest demonstrations since Vietnam had been mounted in a half-dozen cities across America, involving hundreds of thousands of people.

They were denied media coverage, however, in favor of dismissive features on the "lunatic fringe" of the peace movement, or by fluff articles on how U.S. G.I.s couldn't engage in their traditional pastimes in Saudi Arabia--like drinking and womanizing.

"From the commitment of troops on August 8 until January 3 there was 2,855 minutes of (network TV) news on the Gulf crisis," says the FAIR report, "but only 29 minutes that dealt with grass-roots dissent, even though half the country opposed going to war."

Not all the blame, however, lies with the press. The Pentagon, having learned lessons from Vietnam, kept a tight-fisted control over all information, and confined journalists to "press pools" that had been previously field-tested in Grenada and Panama.

When the press eschewed the pool concept, as in Grenada, where journalists chartered a fishing boat to take them to the island, the U.S. Navy threatened to blow them out of the water if they didn't

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## Snow job

Continued from page 25

turn back. Four reporters who managed to land on Grenada independently were evacuated by U.S. troops and effectively held incommunicado for several days.

This time journalists in Saudi Arabia who went out on their own, such as the New York Times' Chris Hedges, found themselves "detained" by U.S. military police. And a French TV crew was forced at gunpoint by U.S. troops to give up film of Marines wounded at Khafji. "We had to decide," says Hedges, "whether to risk expulsion or abide by the rules."

## Wartime Brings Propaganda

Government manipulation of news during a time of war has a long history in America, dating back to 1917 when Woodrow Wilson formed a Committee on Public Information, headed by George Creel, which was supposed to create and disseminate propaganda, even going so far as to "prove" that American pacifist organizations such as the Quakers were being funded by Germany.

World War II saw the formation of the Office of Strategic Services, which later became the Central Intelligence Agency. The impact of these secret agencies used as propaganda tools during a time of declared national emergency cannot be overlooked.

Almost 20 years ago a Senate Select Committee on Intelligence chaired by Frank Church found evidence of more than 200 wire services, newspapers, magazines and book publishing companies that were owned outright by the CIA. An expose by the New York Times in 1977 uncovered another 50 media outlets run by the agency.

Just as ominously, the Bush Administration allowed a PR firm financed by the Kuwaiti government unprecedented access to Congress, the White House, media outlets and even the U.N.

The PR firm, among Washington's pre-eminent, is called Hill and Knowlton. According to *Jack O'Dwyer's Newsletter*, which covers the PR industry, H&K was awarded one of the largest contracts ever filed.

It was financed by a nebulous Kuwaiti group called Citizens For a Free Kuwait. The Washington Post estimated that the contract amounted to more than \$11 million by the end of last January.

The Kuwaiti-funded group met with Congress, media figures and board directors. And on Nov. 27, 1990, just two days before the U.N. Security Council was due to vote on whether to respond with force if Iraqi troops weren't pulled out of Kuwait, Citizens For a Free Kuwait provided a gripping slide show to the U.N. of alleged killings and tortures committed by Iraq in occupied Kuwait.

## VNRs Shipped to Media

H&K also produced hundreds of video clips that were shipped out free to most media outlets.

Writes Arthur E. Rowse in *The Progressive*: "One video, based

on a film of destruction in Kuwait, (reached) 61.4 million viewers. Another on human rights violations in occupied Kuwait reached 35.3 million. Viewers had no way to tell that the source was a PR firm."

Many stories reported in the mainstream press of alleged Iraqi atrocities were actually fabrications. For example, virtually all of the U.S. media ran front-page headlines with a report of Iraqi soldiers taking 300 premature babies from their incubators and leaving them to die. The problem was, the story turned out to be completely fictitious. The origin of this and numerous other specious reports remains unclear.

What is clear is that the press was, as Rep. Pat Schroeder (D-Colo.) commented, "kept in the dark, like mushrooms" virtually all of the time and took willingly any information from only one side of the issue--ours.

## Conglomerates Control News

Corporate assimilation and monopolization of the media played a part in all of this. Approximately 75 percent of American dailies are part of large chains that control 80 percent total of all daily newspapers. Gannett alone controls over 125 newspapers, 8 TV stations and 20 radio stations. Only a handful of these largest news chains control more than half of all newspaper publishing in the United States.

The chair of Capital Cities/ABC-TV, for example, sits on the board of Texaco. And CBS's board includes directors from Honeywell and the Rand Corp. (both of which are major military contractors).

NBC is owned by General Electric, the same GE that had aircraft engines in more than 20 different types of combat aircraft serving in the Gulf. A major investor in NBC, according to a book entitled *OPEC's Investment and the International Finance System*, is the government of Kuwait.

Clearly, this was not "the best war coverage I've ever seen," as Pentagon spokesman Pete Williams put it. Coverage was slanted to the interests of oil conglomerates, military contractors, and the government of

Kuwait--which effectively stymied public information and debate regarding the most pressing national issue of the time.

About a half a century ago, a prominent military official explained it in these terms.

"Voice or no voice, the people can be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in every country."

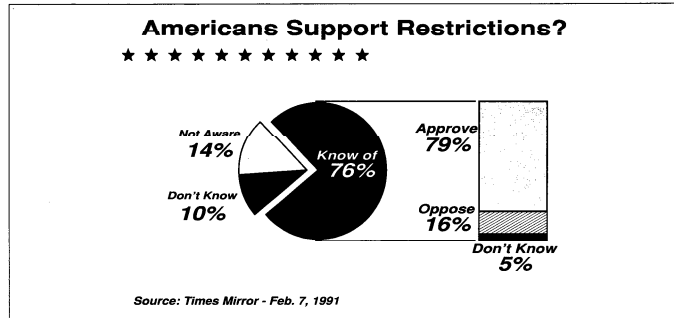
The author was Hermann Goering, one of Hitler's right-hand men. For it was on this principle that the Nazi Party established and maintained power. The lesson to be learned is that you can't use fascist means in a democracy or you put in jeopardy the essence of democracy.

In a democracy we need the truth. We need all sides of an issue in order to reach an informed opinion and to participate in the democratic process. We need a free and unfettered press and material, no matter what the occasion, that is not "cleared by military censors." #

## Accurate portrayal

Continued from page 24

News reports were subjected to a security review, which applied just to those reports coming in from combat pools with military units out on the front line. The review process restricted only the release of information dealing with units' locations, plans, daily operations, weapons being used and tactics employed--critical in-



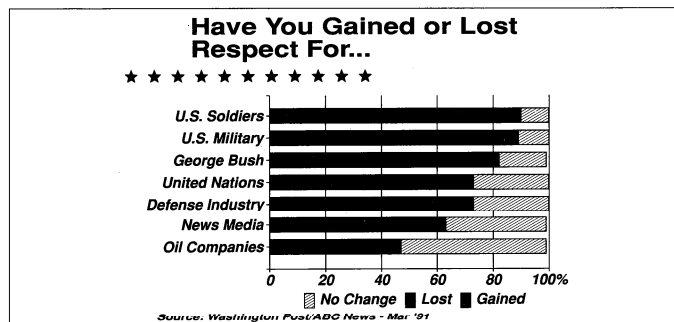
formation that the enemy could use against our forces.

Yet, with all these factors, the security review did not censor the media. More than 1,300 reports were released by the combat pools subject to security review. Of those, the military objected to five, which were sent to the Pentagon for review. Four of these were quickly approved for release because the information could have been found out through other sources.

## One Report Killed

Only one report was killed during the entire war and it was, in fact, killed by the reporter's own bureau chief, not by the Pentagon, because the article detailed sensitive intelligence sources.

This review policy was clearly supported by a majority of



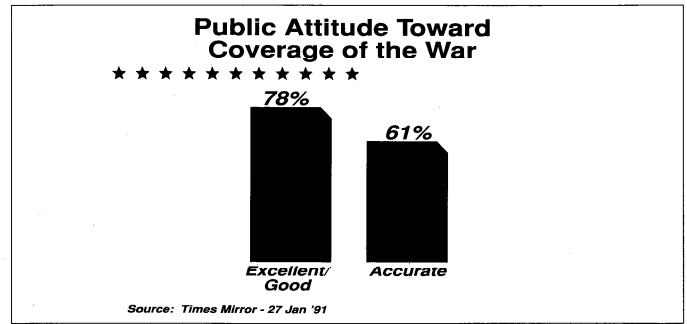
Americans.

A Times Mirror poll taken during the heat of the battle in February found that almost 80 percent of the public believed the military was revealing as much information as it could about the war. Furthermore, of the 76 percent who knew about the military's restrictions on the release of sensitive information, eight out of 10 approved of the practice.

A related complaint made in LeRoy's article was that, in the combat zones, reporters were pooled rather than being permitted to move around at will with the troops.

The logistics of Operation Desert Storm, combined with the huge numbers of reporters who swarmed into the area, made pooling an absolute necessity.

Letting reporters roam freely with advancing ground troops was not practical because of their sheer numbers.



By the time Desert Storm started, there were more than 1,600 news representatives in Saudi Arabia, with another 3,000 to 4,000 awaiting visas to enter the country. And their protection, as much as they tried to avoid it, was critical.

## Media Not Manipulated

The third myth, that the military somehow manipulated the press into reporting a favorable image of the war, is perhaps most absurd of all.

LeRoy must have a very low opinion of the media if he feels 1,600 reporters could possibly have been manipulated.

Thanks to excellent media coverage, in fact, the public got a clear picture of the war's progress.

A March 1991 Washington Post/ABC News Poll found that almost 90 percent of the public gained respect of U.S. soldiers and the U.S. military in general as a result of Operation Desert Storm. The nation's military success spoke for itself; there was no need and no desire to manipulate the press into portraying a more favorable image.

Operation Desert Storm was the most thoroughly covered, well-documented war this country has fought. It was no coincidence. The Pentagon and military public affairs professionals made an early commitment to full coverage of Desert Storm, represented by Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney's formal policy, which says: "It is the policy of the Department of Defense to make available timely and accurate information so that the public, Congress and members representing the press, radio and TV may assess and understand the facts about national security and defense strategy."

Having already accused the media of being government pawns, the article's last, and possibly the most insidious accusation, was that some form of "corporate assimilation and monopolization of the media" led to "slanted" news coverage. LeRoy denigrates the entire institution of journalism and insults the dedicated individuals who strive to report world events as accurately and objectively as possible.

The fact that *The Houston Post* would run such an attack on its own profession proves that the "free and unfettered press" LeRoy pines for exists and is healthy today. #

