

# Media admit failure in covering gulf war

"What worried us was that the press was very easy to co-opt."

by Ira Nayman

Consider two scenarios.

**SCENARIO ONE:** an emerging democracy is invaded by its neighbor, causing its rightful rulers to flee. The invading army is massive and well-equipped. Reports from the country indicate widespread human rights abuses. The United States fights a clean war, aided by accurate technology, finally liberating its ally.

**SCENARIO TWO:** a tyrannical monarchy is invaded by its quasi-religious neighbour; the rulers of the country flee with over \$100 billion, sitting out the rest of the war in Western casinos.

The invading army's strength is deliberately overestimated, its technology primitive. Reports of human rights abuses are exaggerated, sometimes fabricated, by the Pentagon. The United States, with an overwhelming technological superiority, presides over a slaughter in order to protect its oil interests.

If you believe the first scenario, you will likely support a war to liberate an embattled nation. If you accept the second scenario, you might be more inclined to question such a war.

The difference between the public believing one scenario or the other is largely controlled by the media.

So, how did the press serve the public during the Persian Gulf war?

"We [the media] failed," says Terry Milewski, Washington correspondent for CBC's *The National*. Milewski and nine other CBC reporters appeared at Convocation Hall for a forum conducted by Peter Mansbridge, host of *The National*.

"In this war, we were totally taken to the cleaners," said *Toronto Star* foreign affairs columnist Richard Gwyn. He and a half dozen other *Star* reporters appeared at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education



were only two lines of barbed wire, a couple of mine fields and a trench that I jumped across . . . There was nothing there."

"We were, of course, lied to during this war by the military and by the politicians in power," Gwyn said. "The handling of the war by the military was so superb that you never saw any blood."

But none of the panelists suggested that this excuses the way the press

cluded "there was a very accepting attitude . . . on the part of the American media."

Terry Milewski said the North American media showed a "profound ignorance" during a "press release war." But he added that, given the restrictions under which the press operated, he didn't see "what else we could have done."

The main limitation was the military's organization of reporters into

Donovan went to the front despite not being part of a pool. Of the 1,000 reporters covering the war, he estimated that he was one of only 30 to 50 to do so. The Americans and Saudis were telling reporters they could not go to the front, but, when Donovan tried, "I was stopped several times . . . but I was never turned back." In fact, the Americans had no legal authority in Saudi Arabia, so they could not deport any independent reporters.

"The press restrictions . . . were only there in a lot of reporters' minds," Donovan concluded. At the CBC forum, some speakers questioned whether it was possible to cover the world in a single news broadcast, or even a series of broadcasts. "There's only so much we can say" in a single broadcast, Peter Mansbridge admitted.

Joe Schlesinger, the CBC's senior foreign correspondent stationed in Berlin, said the network had too few reporters and too little money to cover every story with sufficient depth.

Many people worried that individual news stories left out too much of the context of what was being covered. "I want to see history being made," Schlesinger said, admitting that it can't be done in a two minute news report. The reporter has to "try not to violate history," he explained.

The CBC was also criticized for not covering the anti-war movement enough. According to one panelist, anti-war protests in Africa and the Middle East attracted 100 million people.

Mansbridge argued that the network covered the movement poorly because they didn't have enough reporters to do the job.

Canada had specific problems in the Gulf because of its unusually low supply of reporters. Of 126 correspondents in Syria, Canada had one while Monte Carlo had four, *Journal* documentary correspondent Brian Stewart pointed out, despite the fact that Canada had the fourth largest force in the Gulf.

Schlesinger complained that this leaves gaping holes in Canada's media coverage, since "there are large areas of the world we can't cover."

Thanks to Bruce Cattle of CIUT for assistance.

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for another forum, moderated by *Star* editor John Honderich.

Reporters discussed the U.S. government's attempt to promote its anti-Iraq agenda. "There was a terrific lot of disinformation at work," said *Star* war correspondent Kevin Donovan.

"I had never seen the CNN coverage, but I know now from being back that you were seeing pictures of hardened bunkers and tremendous defences and long oil trenches . . . [but] I remember the Captain saying that there were no defences—there

covered the war. "[Military censorship] didn't worry us at all," Gwyn said. "What worried us was that the press was very easy to co-opt."

*Star* Washington bureau chief Linda Deibel expanded on this point: "It was very surprising to me—the questions that weren't asked, and how easy it was for the Pentagon and for the State Department and for the White House to get their points across."

Claiming that questions asked by reporters at briefings were "uncritical" and "very friendly," Deibel con-

'pools.' While most reporters were restricted to their hotels, those who were allowed to go to the front were escorted by soldiers and could only engage in carefully controlled interviews.

Donovan said reporters were forced to sign restrictive contracts with the military.

"To get press credentials to cover the war in Saudi Arabia, you had to sign a document in Riyadh saying you would not go to the front and you would not ever talk to an American soldier without having a Public Affairs officer present."

"We were forced to work largely from hotels," Claude Adams, *The National's* London correspondent admitted. He said reporters suspected the pool reports didn't tell the whole story, but they had to accept the reports because they were "all we had."

Information coming from the Pentagon's daily briefings was particularly suspect, but reporters had no evidence to refute its claims, Adams said.

Donovan had a different view of the briefings, one of the few sources of information in Riyadh. "It was like covering an institutional event in downtown Toronto," he said. "It was a very nice hotel and reporters were sitting in a very nice room. Coffee was served. It didn't strike me as the sort of thing I expected in a war."

