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# Bull Disclosure

Since Vietnam, The Pentagon Has Muzzled The U.S. Press During Wartime To Control Public Opinion.

**D**URING U.S. MILITARY operations in the Persian Gulf last year, yellow ribbons and American flags bedecked mailboxes, street posts, houses, office buildings and trees. On many days, stores, restaurants and parks were quiet while people stayed home to watch continuous coverage of the Gulf War on television. Laser-guided bombs unerringly hitting their targets and smart bombs diving down ventilator shafts or chimneys became popular battlefield images on prime-time television.

Meanwhile, a group of journalists, under the auspices of the Center for Public Integrity, an investigative organization in Washington, D.C., had a different view of what was happening in the Persian Gulf. Soon after the war broke out, Jacqueline Sharkey, a professor of journalism at the University of Arizona and a pre-eminent investigative reporter, began working on an in-depth study of Gulf War coverage.

Sharkey is no novice at uncovering government smoke

and mirrors. She has won several awards for her reporting on Central America, including honors from the Overseas Press Club, the Investigative Reporters and Editors and the Society of Professional Journalists. Her articles on U.S. policy in Central America provided members of a Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee insight while they investigated Col. Oliver North's involvement with the Contras. A former *Washington Post* copy editor, Sharkey was a Fulbright fellow in Colombia and earned a master's degree in the study of law from Yale Law School.

In alliance with the Center for Public Integrity, Sharkey investigated U.S. military and media relations during wartime operations. Eleven months later, Sharkey produced a startling 110,000-word report, *Under Fire: U.S. Military Restrictions on the Media from Grenada to the Persian Gulf*.

Sharkey talked about her study in a recent interview with *The Weekly*. Following are her remarks and some details from the study.

**TW:** Why have Pentagon officials restricted media coverage during recent wartime operations?

**Sharkey:** Censorship of the press during military operations in the Persian Gulf, Panama and Grenada is an outgrowth of what happened in the Vietnam War, where the media had practically free access to the battlefield. Military personnel believe negative media coverage turned the U.S. public against the war. So after Vietnam, the Pentagon began to look for a way of restricting press access to the battlefield in order to control public opinion.

During the Falkland/Malvinas Islands War with Argentina, Margaret Thatcher's government allowed only a small number of reporters to cover the operation. The media was confined on-board ship and military personnel reviewed stories and stopped or censored interviews if they didn't like the impression the reporter was trying to convey. As a result the British public overwhelmingly supported the war.

Political leaders in Washington saw how effectively the Thatcher government managed the press to gain public support and decided to use some of the same tactics in the next U.S. military operation.

That opportunity occurred in the 1983 U.S. invasion of Grenada where during the first two days of combat, the Pentagon imposed a 48-hour news blackout. The press was not allowed on the island and all information about the operation came from U.S. government sources. The video footage shown on the networks was supplied by the Pentagon: bloodless, antiseptic, casualty-free footage. And Defense Secretary Casper Weinberger along with President Reagan praised the invasion as a brilliantly executed operation.

After the war was over, however, the media discovered that the U.S. military bombed a mental hospital, mistaking it for a military facility and killing more than a dozen patients. The Pentagon had misled the press about the numbers of U.S. and Grenadian casualties. The troops were confused about who was the enemy and instead of receiving detailed military strategic maps, soldiers were given tourist maps.

Meanwhile, the American public is convinced that Grenada was a great U.S. victory. It doesn't matter if damaging information about military maneuvers comes out later because people's initial impression is the one most of them will remember.

**TW:** What happened after Grenada?

**Sharkey:** Bowing to the protests from the press following Grenada, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. John W. Vessey Jr. set up a committee, the Sidle Panel, to determine ground rules and guidelines for wartime media

coverage. Released in August of 1984, the Panel's report suggested (that) the Pentagon should establish a new relationship with the press based on mutual respect and cooperation; that ground rules and guidelines for media restrictions be based solely on considerations of operational security and troop safety; and that the Pentagon provide the press with access to military transportation and communication facilities. Because it's difficult for the media to find transportation to the battlefield in the initial stages of any military operation, the Sidle Panel also recommended establishing a small pool of reporters, the Department of Defense (DOD) national media pool, to be sent with the first wave of troops to cover the initial phases of a military operation.

**TW:** Were the recommendations of the Sidle Report upheld during the U.S. invasion of Panama?

**Sharkey:** The letter and the spirit of the Sidle Panel were both violated during the invasion of Panama in December of 1989. Defense Secretary Dick Cheney decided not to call out the DOD national media pool until it was too late for the pool to cover the initial hours of the invasion. When the DOD reporters finally arrived in Panama, no transportation was available and they spent the first morning at a U.S. military base watching CNN and listening to a lecture on the history of U.S./Panama relations.

In the ensuing days, the media had almost no access to transportation or communication facilities and were not allowed to go out on their own without a military escort. Six months after the invasion, in June of 1990, *Newsweek* uncovers information revealing that at least a dozen U.S. troops were killed by their own forces. During the first days of the fighting the media was told no U.S. troops were killed by "friendly fire." Over and over again Cheney and Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Pete Williams said in press conferences and briefings how the Stealth aircraft, used in combat for the first time in Panama, hit its targets in Williams' words, with "pin-point accuracy." Several months later a Pentagon investigation, prompted by a April 4, 1990 *New York Times* article questioning the success of the Stealth, reveals that the U.S. Air Force lied and the Stealth missed both of its targets.

**TW:** And what happened recently in the Gulf?

**Sharkey:** The restrictions initiated in the Gulf War were some of the most severe in the history of this country. Col. David Hackworth, the most highly decorated living American soldier, a veteran of Korea and Vietnam, who was covering the war for *Newsweek* said the restrictions were designed not to protect military security and troop safety but to control public

# THE Skinny

**SPACE SUIT IRONED OUT:** The Pima County Board of Supervisors has agreed to pay \$110,000 to a sheriff's office employee who claimed he was bypassed at promotion time because he believes in UFOs.

The cash settlement ended what the national magazine *UFO* has called "perhaps the first lawsuit of its kind."

About 18 months ago, sheriff's office planning and operations officer Bob Dean filed suit after the county's top cop appointed someone else to head the emergency services department. Sheriff Clarence Dupnik cited Dean's interest in unidentified flying objects as the reason the 13-year county employee wasn't offered the job although the officer had an outstanding work record.

Dean had been ranked second behind Karen Paulsen in the job competition. She turned the job down. Despite reported long-time county procedures, Dupnik bypassed the 62-year-old department veteran and tapped someone who wasn't even a candidate for the post.

Dean filed suit in Pima County Superior Court, alleging that Dupnik violated his First Amendment right to free speech and discriminated against him because of his age and gender.

"People have a right to believe in whatever they want to believe," then-Attorney General Bob Corbin told Phoenix's *New Times* writer Ward Harkavy (reprinted in "Two Men in a Little Green Suit," *Tucson Weekly*, June 19, 1991). "I have an interest in UFOs, too. I don't know whether I 'believe' in them or not. But I'm sure interested in them. It's fun. Does that make me not qualified to be attorney general?"

Paulsen also questioned Dupnik's decision, calling Dean a "highly competent professional who's deserving of the job. He's interested in UFOs; I'm interested in antiques. He pursues his interest in his own time. Why should it matter?"

Dean's astral beliefs are grounded on earth. He said that during his 27-year career in the U.S. Army, he saw classified documents and studies confirming the existence of UFOs.

"I don't run off on little tangents and talk about little green men, and I have a right to the damn job because I earned it," Dean said.

The Board of Supervisors last month voted to settle the case and pay Dean \$110,000. One local pundit told *The Skinny* that Supervisor Greg Lunn had the most colorful rationale for voting to settle the case. Lunn said the board should give Dean the money because Dean pointed out there was an alien being on the board. Nodding in the general direction of fellow Republican Supervisor Ed Moore, Lunn quipped that Dean was right about that.

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Photo by Tim Archibald

Professor Jacqueline Sharkey's research concludes that the Reagan and Bush administrations learned a lesson in media control from Margaret Thatcher.

opinion about the conflict. Hackworth said in a *Newsweek* article that he had more guns pointed at him in the Gulf as a journalist than as a soldier in Korea and Vietnam.

*TW: What tactics were used by the Pentagon to censor the press and control public opinion?*

Sharkey: As the first U.S. troops departed for Saudi Arabia on August 7, 1990 not a single journalist accompanied the forces. The DOD national media pool was left behind and other reporters were unable to obtain Saudi visas. Because the Saudi government does not have a tradition of free press, the Pentagon explained, it was difficult to deploy reporters with the first wave of troops.

The DOD pool followed U.S. troops to Saudi Arabia on August 12. A couple of weeks later, as hundreds of American and foreign journalists arrived to cover the military presence in the Gulf they were not allowed to go anywhere or interview troops without a military escort. The Pentagon's Joint Information Bureau (JIB), set up in the Dhahran International Hotel to organize press pools and aid journalists covering military maneuvers, was overwhelmed with thousands of story requests. The JIB was unable to accommodate a fraction of the media.

Repeated petitions by Navy Capt. Mike Sherman, head of the JIB in Dhahran, for more vehicles and equipment provoked little response from Central Command. Sherman borrowed two computers from hotel employees and obtained a fax machine from a military unit. Fax machines and phone lines would have enabled reporters to transmit their stories from the field.

Instead, print material was sent through a series of couriers dubbed the

"Pony Express." Requests for couriers to use air transportation were denied.

Many reporters complained of further restrictions. Military escorts told soldiers and officers not to answer certain questions and stopped television interviews, "because they did not like what was being portrayed," says James LeMoynes, a *New York Times* correspondent. The military personnel assigned to press pools often acted as censors. Escorts listened to interviews conducted by reporters and reviewed their articles, often deleting words or passages that might have embarrassed the military.

Phil Davison of the British paper *Independent on Sunday* said he was almost ejected from a pool by an officer who didn't like a story Davison had written. Judd Rose, an ABC correspondent, said reporters in his pool wanted to visit a unit where a Patriot missile was launched the previous night against an Iraqi Scud. The pool instead was sent to a facility where military equipment was being repaired. Reporters, frustrated with the delays, who tried to work independently outside the assigned media pools were ordered off bases, detained, sent back to Dhahran and told that their access to future interviews would be suspended.

When Col. Hackworth realized that reaching the troops through military resources was a farce, he managed to obtain a uniform, military credentials and painted his jeep to look like an Army vehicle. He found soldiers and officers in the field eager to tell their stories. "They were very angry about the freedom of the press because many of them thought that's what they were fighting for—freedom."

*TW: In your report you point out many instances in which the Pentagon misled the press regarding successes in the battlefield.*

Sharkey: During the first week of the Gulf War, the Pentagon told the press that U.S. bombing raids had a success rate of 80 percent. Later it was revealed that a bombing operation is considered a success if a plane takes off, locates its target, drops its bombs and returns. Success of a mission has nothing to do with whether the bombs actually hit their targets.

Among other discretions regarding offensive military successes, the Pentagon officials boasted that the Tomahawk missile, used for the first time in combat, had a greater than 98 percent launch success rate. In an April 1991 article published in the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* by Eric H. Arnett, a physicist who is an expert on cruise missiles, Arnett points out that "launch success rate" is unrelated to the Tomahawk's ability to hit its targets. It means nothing more than the Tomahawk managed to get out of its launcher without getting stuck. Even today, however, people think the Tomahawk missile was phenomenally successful because of its praise in the early days of the war.

*TW: What success did the Pentagon ultimately achieve by restricting the press?*

Sharkey: The Pentagon won the support of the American public by creating the impression that the war in the Gulf was bloodless. In the words of Gen. Fred Weyand, the last U.S. commander in Vietnam, "...there is no such thing as a 'splendid little war.' There is no such thing as a war fought on the cheap. War is death and destruction. The American way of war is particularly violent, deadly and dreadful..."

When reporters asked the Pentagon about the number of Iraqi casualties, officials said these numbers were irrelevant. Instead, the military would provide weapons counts. In one instance, Gen. Powell talked about the "body count" of aircraft.

When the Gulf War was over, the National Resources Defense Council, a public interest group, filed a Freedom of Information Act request with the Pentagon concerning the Iraqi body count. The Defense Intelligence Agency reported in a letter that approximately 100,000 Iraqis had been killed and 300,000 wounded. This letter also stated that these figures had an "error factor of 50 percent or higher."

Several publishers are interested in reprinting Sharkey's book, and the Center has received inquiries from university political science, history and journalism programs interested in using it in classes. Copies of *Under Fire: U.S. Military Restrictions on the Media from Grenada to the Persian Gulf* are available from the Center for Public Integrity, 1910 K St. NW, Suite 802, Washington D.C. 20006 or call (202) 223-0299.

—BY CATHY SPENCER

Tucson-based freelance writer Cathy Spencer has written and edited for *Omni* and has contributed articles to *Newsweek International*.