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On Strategy and War: Public Relations Lessons from the Gulf

By Helio Fred Garcia

Just as the Gulf war showed that the American military has learned a lot since Vietnam, it's also clear that the military's public relations operation has learned a lot about PR.

At the same time the American public is applauding the military victory in the Persian Gulf, PR professionals can learn a number of lessons from the military's handling of public relations during the war.

A number of military-analysts-turned-TV-commentators noted with approval the military's return to the principles of Carl von Clausewitz, whose *On War*[1] is the classic study of the military art. They say it's a big reason we won, and won decisively.

I've long believed that anyone who is serious about public relations as an instrument of strategy should read Clausewitz. For those who find 650 pages written in 19th Century German style a bit daunting, Col. Harry G. Summers, Jr.'s *On Strategy*[2], a 200-page Clausewitzian analysis of why we lost Vietnam, will do. (In fact, a serious student of strategy should read both.)

Once the touchstone of most Western military strategy, Clausewitz fell out of favor in the late 1950s, replaced by social scientists who brought us systems analysis, gradual escalation and attrition, body counts, and other sins of the Vietnam era.

In the Gulf war, Clausewitz emerged not only on the battlefield; he was also in the briefing room. We won not only the air war and the ground war; we won the battle for public opinion. A close reading of Clausewitz (or Summers) provides a context for understanding both the military victory in the Gulf and the PR efforts that contributed to it. Some observations:

Lesson 1. Ends and Means: Eyes on the Prize

One of Clausewitz' first principles is that war is merely the continuation of policy by other means. "The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose."[3]

The public relations corollary is simple: public relations is merely the continuation of policy by other means. It is a critical instrument of policy. But it is only a means; it is never the end in itself. Clausewitz insists that the difference between ends and means not be confused. And PR people should take note: One of the biggest complaints managers have about PR people in general is their inability to differentiate between the tactical means to a goal and the goal itself. Thus, the fixation on clippings and other operational minutiae, without reference to the goal PR is trying to accomplish. (Surely, the goal is not to get publicity?!)

Unlike Vietnam, the political goals in the Gulf war were clearly articulated: expulsion of Iraq from Kuwait, restoration of the legitimate government of Kuwait, etc. And the military plan was designed to meet those goals. (There was some question about whether there were additional goals, such as elimination of Saddam Hussein's military machine, or of Hussein himself. Whether these were goals or not, they are not inconsistent with the stated goals, and did not detract from the realization of the stated goals.)

Also unlike Vietnam, there was tactical recognition that public relations was a critical means to achieving the political goals. Once those political goals were clearly understood, the public relations goals—which

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are tactical and subordinate to the over-riding strategic goals—became clear: maintain public support for Operation Desert Storm and help keep the U.S.-led coalition intact, without tipping off the Iraqi military about sensitive matters.

Colonel Summers addresses the shift in public opinion during the Vietnam war, and puts the blame squarely on the Commander-in-Chief:

> "One of the more simplistic explanations of our failure in Vietnam is that it was all the fault of the American people—that it was caused by a collapse of national will ... The main reason it is not right to blame the American public is that President Lyndon Baines Johnson made a conscious decision not to mobilize the American people —to invoke the national will—for the Vietnam war."[4]

In the Gulf war, the military public relations apparatus worked to strengthen public opinion before military operations began, and to maintain it throughout the fighting.

The next time the CEO refuses to talk to the press on sensitive matters, note the example of Messrs. Cheney, Powell, Schwarzkopf and Kelly.

On the day of military victory in the Gulf, the PR victory was also apparent. *The Wall Street Journal* reported:

> "The Pentagon relied on news coverage, carefully constrained by military briefers, to help deceive Iraq and bolster public support for the Persian Gulf War...it's clear that the government made effective use of the news media in its campaign against Saddam Hussein."[5]

Lesson 2. Speak from the Top

Clausewitz' emphasis on the political goal driving military strategy reminds one of the old adage that war is too important to be left to the generals. The PR corollary is clear: PR is too important to be left to the communicators.

Just as in war the president sets the goal and the military establishes the operational methods of accomplishing that goal, in PR the organization's leader must set the goal and the communicators advise on the operational methods for reaching it. But that's not the leader's only involvement in PR. There are times when the most effective means of persuasion is for the policymaker to do the talking—particularly important when a controversial or complicated process needs to be explained.

During Operation Desert Storm, the most important press briefings were conducted not by the PR head but by the leadership of the military: Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, Joint Chiefs Chairman Colin Powell, and the commander of coalition forces in the Gulf, General H. Norman Schwarzkopf. Even the daily briefings, in the Pentagon and in Saudi Arabia, were conducted by generals involved in running the war. (The day-to-day Pentagon briefer was Lieut. General Thomas Kelly, a three-star general, who was director of operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff.)

Lesson to PR people: The next time the CEO refuses to talk to the press on sensitive matters ("That's what I pay you for..."), note the example of Messrs. Cheney, Powell, Schwarzkopf, and Kelly. There are times, especially the high-stakes times, when only the boss will do.

Lesson 3: Take the offensive: control communications

The daily press briefings were consistent with another of Clausewitz' principles, the "offensive." Colonel Summers quotes U.S. Army Field Manual 100-1 to summarize this principle:

> "**Offensive**. *Seize, retain, and exploit the initiative.* While the principle of the objective requires that all efforts be directed toward a clearly defined 'common goal,' the principle of offensive suggests that offensive action, or maintenance of the initiative, is the most effective and decisive way to pursue and attain the 'common goal'... While it may sometimes be necessary to adopt a defensive posture, this should be only a temporary condition until the necessary means are available to resume offensive operations. An offensive spirit must be inherent in the conduct of all defensive operations—it must be an *active* defense, not a *passive* one."[6]

The PR corollary is clear, and is fundamental to all public relations: Know what you want to say; say it well; say it again (and again...); then say goodbye. This approach allows you to control the communications agenda—and therefore the information reaching your target audience. The most common failings in PR revolve around knowing what an organization's message is—what to say—and taking the initiative to find or create opportunities to state the message. Using Clausewitz, the first part is easy: the goal drives the message. But then it's necessary to take the initiative, or the message won't get through. Merely waiting to be asked a question is not sufficient. And refusal to communicate can be fatal.

As straightforward as this principle may sound, it is often forgotten by PR people or over-ruled by nervous clients, employers, or lawyers who insist on either silence or subterfuge. These can be especially damaging in sensitive situations, where rumors or other third party reports can seriously undermine an organization's effectiveness. The best way to preempt rumors, speculation, and third party posturing is to put out a

steady flow of relevant, verifiable information.

The last part of the PR corollary ("say goodbye") means that the organization should not be drawn into matters beyond its own agenda. During Operation Desert Storm, this took many forms, including restricting access of reporters to the front lines except in pools, pre-publication clearance of news reports from the war zone, and well-prepared briefers who refused to address questions beyond their agenda.

Throughout the war, the military controlled the flow of information. It stated very clearly what it would not discuss, and required all accredited press to conform to stringent groundrules. In these circumstances, it would have been easy to become complacent, to close down communications, to keep senior people behind the scenes rather than facing the press, and to release only minimal information. But that would have been a *passive* defense. The principle of the offensive requires an *active* defense: the control of information should lead to ongoing disclosure. By providing a large volume of information from highly credible sources, the military prevented the press from finding alternative—and often counterproductive—sources.

There are a number of other examples of the principle of the offensive—initiative—at work in the war. One is the use of schematic charts. Many times, pictures told a much greater story than mere words, confirming another fundamental PR principle: don't assert, demonstrate. The giant oil slick caused by Iraqi pumping of crude oil into the Gulf is one such case. But release of reconnaissance photographs—which would certainly demonstrate the enormity of the disaster—could have provided too much information to the Iraqis on coalition intelligence methods and capabilities. The easy way out would have been to ignore the pictures. But the solution was also simple: The briefers displayed schematic drawings of the areas in question, which told the story without giving away the store.

Corporate PR people who are plagued by lawyers who refuse to let you talk, take note: between self-destructive blabbing and self-defeating silence there's lots of room to maneuver.

Lesson 4. Press Coverage is A Means, Not an End

During the U.S. invasion of Grenada, the military shut out the press. Many reforms were instituted following Grenada, including the pool system used during the Gulf war.

But besides the technical details of press access to the front and other restrictions, the most significant change in the military's attitude toward the press between Grenada and the Gulf is the recognition that press coverage is an instrument of policy. Rather than keep the press away, as in Grenada, or give the press unrestricted access to the war, as in Vietnam, the military devoted significant resources to the active management of press relations. *The Wall Street Journal* reported:

> "'Some people say the media is the enemy,' says one senior Army officer familiar with the war plan, 'but in fact the media is really a battlefield, and you have to win on it.'"[7]

And win they did.

Initially, there was mild protest among most mainstream press about the pool system, lack of access, and pre-publication censorship. But these were mostly *pro forma* complaints. The only serious challenge was a law suit filed by Pulitzer Prize winner Sydney Schanberg and several small publications. But by and large, the press lived with the restrictions.

This is particularly telling, since groundrules are usually subject to negotiation. Here the rules (with some later, minor changes) were presented on a take-it-or-leave-it basis, and most reporters—and their news organizations—simply accepted them. *Newsweek*'s media critic later concluded:

> "In the blame game, the real culprits are the news executives who agreed to the silly rules long before the war. If they had threatened not to participate, the restrictions might well have been loosened. At bottom, the military needs TV to build and sustain support for the war even more than TV needs the military to build ratings."[8]

But the media acquiesced. Unlike Grenada, there would be coverage of the Gulf war, even with restrictive rules. After all, the war was the biggest story of the day, and no one wanted to be left out. There were even accounts of accredited pool reporters berating others who were trying to get around the restrictions. Some reporters did bypass the pools, but usually suffered for their trouble. CBS News reporter Bob Simon and his crew went to the front unescorted, and were taken prisoner by the Iraqi Army. But by and large, despite weak protests (and stronger editorial cartoons and columns from folks outside the war zone), the media accepted the restrictions.

As the war ended, more reporters expressed more anger. But at that point the battle for public opinion had been won. According to *Newsweek*:

> "With much the same skill that they displayed in establishing air superiority over the battlefield, [the military] established a different sort of supremacy over the media."[9]

To a certain degree, the press will be unhappy whenever there's any attempt to control access or the flow of information, and there is certainly unhappiness in the press ranks now. PR people need to remember that the PR goal is not to keep the press happy, but to keep information flowing through it to the public. PR, after all, is a means, not an end. And in the case of the Gulf war, the goal of mobilizing public opinion was

not hampered by the media's displeasure. Quite the contrary. *The Washington Post* reported:

> "The Persian Gulf press briefings are making reporters look like fools, nit-pickers, and egomaniacs.... They ask the same questions over and over. In their frustration, they ask questions that no one could answer; that anyone could answer; that no one should answer if they could answer. They complain about getting no answers. They complain about the answers they get. They are angry that the military won't let them go anywhere.... They don't seem to understand that the war is real.... They don't seem to understand the military either. Meanwhile, the military seems to have their number, perfectly. Media and military cultures are clashing, and the media are getting hurt. It's a silly spectacle. It's so silly that 80 percent of Americans approve of all the military restrictions on the reporting of the war, and 60 percent think there should be more."[10]

Public approval took some curious forms. Two weeks after the ground war ended, the daily Pentagon briefer, Lieut. General Thomas Kelly, who was about to retire, made an appearance on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*[11]. That by itself is unusual. More surprising, he was greeted by a very long, very warm ovation. Carson later played a segment from Kelly's final briefing, where Kelly playfully chided the press. This, too, got an enthusiastic audience response. On the next evening's program, when Carson simply mentioned the General, he got more applause.[12]

And General Schwarzkopf's press briefing declaring victory has been issued as a home video.

Future Lessons: How Will it Play?

Obviously, not everything the military did was successful. Censorship was often arbitrary or inconsistent; the pools excluded many important media outlets; in the fog of war detailed information was released that later proved to be mistaken. But these are quibbles. The big picture shows that both the military and PR operations worked.

And there are many people—myself included—who originally opposed military action in the Gulf and who are glad it's over, glad we won, and surprised at how well it went.

Looking to the future, though, it will be interesting to see whether there will be a general deterioration in relations between the military and the press, as was predicted in *The Wall Street Journal*. The same *Journal* article declaring PR victory said,

> "The Pentagon is winning a big battlefield victory in the war with Iraq. But when it's over, military leaders may face a new credibility gap with the media."[13]

We'll see. The bigger—and more interesting—question is whether this PR success is good or bad public policy. This question is being raised now as part of a larger debate on the appropriateness of press restrictions in general.

That's a debate I, for one, welcome. So should all PR people. Reporters have a right to cover a story to the best of their ability. And if they object to specific groundrules, they are free to 1) challenge them and negotiate better ones (not seriously done in the Gulf war); 2) not rely on government briefings (done rarely, if at all); or 3) get the story independently (tried by a small number of reporters, with limited success).

But the First Amendment works both ways: it protects not only the press, but the right of individuals and organizations, including the military, to tell their story as forcefully and effectively as possible. That means using PR people—professional advocates of points of view—to advise on how to do it effectively. The press may not like it. But they may have to live with it. □

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