

Crisis, Television, and Public Pressure

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Last month, when, according to the New York Times, the Clinton Administration "started a blitz of speeches to define the guiding principles of its foreign policy," National Security Adviser Anthony Lake told an audience at Johns Hopkins, "Public pressure for our humanitarian engagement increasingly may be driven by television images, which can depend in turn on such considerations as where CNN sends its camera crews."¹

This has become the conventional wisdom. And, just because it is commonly assumed to be right, it need not be wrong.

Yet surely this proposition deserves parsing. We don't respond equally to all stimuli. There now must be enough history to help make distinctions that can assist policy makers gauge how Americans are collectively going to react to crisis images.

The classic case, often cited in communications literature, is of a report about famine in Ethiopia that aired on the NBC Nightly News,

¹Thomas L. Friedman, "U.S. Vision of Foreign Policy Reversed," New York Times, September 22, 1993.

October 23, 1984.²

There then had been famine in Ethiopia for a decade virtually without recognition by American TV. Tabulations of minutes-by-subjects on the U.S. primetime news programs show that the networks have no interest in the African continent other than in South Africa. There were no American network personnel anywhere near Ethiopia in 1984. An American freelancer had offered film on the famine to CBS, NBC, and PBS in 1983, and all had turned him down. But the BBC did a story which was seen by NBC's London bureau chief, Joseph Angotti, who urged it upon his bosses. They declined. He sent it to New York anyway, where anchorman Tom Brokaw insisted on using it.

The response was immediate. A deluge of famine stories followed as viewers pressured the Reagan Administration (then in the midst of a presidential election campaign) to respond to the crisis. U.S. government food aid increased dramatically, from \$23-million for fiscal 1984 to \$98-million, two-thirds of which was committed after the NBC broadcast. But within a year, although there was still famine in Ethiopia, TV coverage had returned to its pre-1984 level. The public had tired of the

²For an excellent account, see Christopher J. Bosso, "Setting the Agenda: Mass Media and the Discovery of Famine in Ethiopia," in Michael Margolis and Gary A. Mauser, editors, Manipulating Public Opinion (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing, 1989), pp. 153-174.

issue. And the networks, having only discovered Ethiopia through serendipity, were probably happy to drop an expensive and unattractive story. Thus ended public pressure on this U.S. policy.

Marvin Kalb, the veteran network diplomatic correspondent who is now a Harvard professor, says that the media have two criteria for covering an overseas event. One: Does it have "sizzle"? That is, does it deal with a riot, a hijacking, or some other happening that can stir emotions. Two: Are U.S. troops involved?³ Famine in Ethiopia had "one," not "two." Apparently "one" will get a story on the air, but it takes "two" to keep it there.

Let us fast forward to review important changes in the media since the Ethiopia story.

All three networks changed ownership in 1986. CBS was taken over by Lawrence Tisch of Loews. NBC became a subsidiary of General Electric. CapCities became the new owner of ABC. Significantly, I think, only CapCities was in the media business and only ABC has remained committed to seriously covering international news. (Here I make a distinction employed by The Tyndall Report, a publication that follows

³Quoted in The Media and Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War World, a report prepared by The Freedom Forum Media Studies Center at Columbia University, 1993, p. 25.

the networks: "international news" refers to coverage in which the U.S. is not involved; "foreign policy" is the category of stories that involve this country.) In the cost-cutting world of today's networks, a large corps of foreign correspondents, once the pride of CBS and NBC, has been replaced by parachute journalism. By 1992, for example, NBC was down to only nine correspondents permanently posted abroad.

Parachute journalism means that the networks pay a great deal of attention to a story for a very short period of time. On the day the Navy SEALs arrived in Mogadishu and were greeted on the beach by the American media (December 8, 1992), the three networks together devoted 45 minutes of their primetime news broadcasts to Somalia. A week later, after the anchormen had gone home, the collective news count was down to 13 minutes; 8 minutes by December 17. These parachutists are exceptional journalists. To watch a Bob Simon or an Allen Pizzey create a first day story is a beauty to behold. Generally, however, parachutists are experts at getting news, rather than on Somalia or Bosnia. Crises in places like Moscow, on the other hand, are likely to include reportage by resident correspondents who speak Russian, even though they will be muscled aside by their big feet colleagues. (Ironically, perhaps, many of the journalists who cover crises in dangerous places for newspapers, presumably those from whom we should expect more analytical reporting,

are young, inexperienced freelancers.)

The other major media development since Ethiopia is the rise of CNN, founded in 1979, but first truly capturing world attention with its Gulf War coverage in 1991. Yet on non-crisis days, CNN has only modest audiences at home. Nearly 40 percent of American households are not wired for cable and while 30-million people in the U.S. watch the evening news on the three broadcast networks, less than a million see CNN's prime evening program. "Public pressure," I suspect, is still most likely to come through the networks. CNN's principle importance in this regard may be otherwise: As a 24-hour news service, it is the channel of choice in newsrooms, government agencies, and places where news junkies congregate. Indeed, Presidents too watch TV. Marlin Fitzwater once told me that President Bush made decisions in three important international situations based on what he saw on television. (Mr. Fitzwater presumably will tell us all about it in his memoirs.)

When the TV anchormen left Mogadishu last December, the networks lost interest in that story. The parachutists soon abandoned Somalia for Sarajevo. Bob Simon and Allen Pizzey couldn't be in two places at the same time. Only ABC had had a permanent correspondent (Tony Birtley) in Bosnia during 1992. By the time the spotlight returned to Somalia last month with the killing or capture of American soldiers,

there were no longer American journalists in residence. The assignment had become unreasonably dangerous. CNN, for instance, had withdrawn Americans after five Somali drivers and bodyguards in clearly marked CNN cars had been gunned down. But the TV people stayed in Bosnia, also one of the most dangerous postings in history. A visiting ABC producer had been killed there and the network's resident correspondent was wounded.

That Bosnia and Somalia have appeared to be on a teeter-totter as a news story--when one was up, the other was down--relates directly to Kalb's Law No. 2: The cameras follow the troops, or at least they go where they expect the troops to be. The additional TV coverage from ex-Yugoslavia by the winter of '93 was a direct outgrowth of the expectation that the new President, Bill Clinton, was gearing up to involve the U.S. military in the Balkans. The networks were now paying serious attention: Whereas their total Bosnian coverage for the month of April 1992 was 14 minutes, by February 1993 it had risen to 95.⁴

The potential "public pressure" that could have resulted from this new media attention--but did not--is an important part of any analysis of Anthony Lake's proposition about TV images.

⁴All network figures come from The Tyndall Report, ADT Research, 135 Rivington Street, New York, New York 10002.

Somalia in 1992 was a searing story of hunger and suffering. Bosnia in 1993 is also about hunger and suffering, and "ethnic cleansing," genocidal impulses, and immense inhumanities. Peter Jennings on visiting a hospice in the warzone: "There is simply no way even to stay alive in the cold," reported ABC's anchor. "No one comes even to remove the bodies. That is just the way it is. They are freezing to death in Sarajevo." Moreover, as many point out, this is happening in Europe and is being beamed back to a nation of majority European ancestry. Still, the majority of Americans refuse to be "public pressure." Nor had the U.S. earlier become involved in Somalia because of television-induced pressure (although some have made that claim). We were there because George Bush, for various reasons--humanitarian, psychological, geopolitical, willed us to be there.

What, then, might we conclude from these cases of crisis, television, and public pressure?

TV is a reactive medium. It is not in the policy-initiating business, even though it may sometimes appear otherwise to government officials. Finding crisis in Ethiopia was accidental, and, in fact, the networks were relieved when they had an excuse to go elsewhere. Overseas camera crews rarely are allowed to go looking for crisis. It's too expensive. Other than the episodic "sizzle" stories, they tend to follow

the flag (Somalia) or into areas of probable involvement (Bosnia).

What this means is that a President has great leeway in the policy-formulating period, despite TV's capacity to generate public pressure. This wide margin for maneuver roughly extends to the point where American lives are in danger. After that, the TV pictures kick in, and a President's options shrink rapidly.