



SPECIAL

ADDRESSES

Confessions of an Operations Other Than War (OOTW) Correspondent

Thomas A. Ricks, *The Wall Street Journal*

"(T)he prime confession I want to make is that the media has done a poor job of covering the OOTW operations of the last few years."

Journalist Tom Ricks covered the U.S. invasion of Grenada and the relief operations of Restore Hope in Somalia and Uphold Democracy in Haiti, and was preparing to cover Bosnia. He asserted that stability operations ("a term I hate, by the way") are a paradigm shift for the media as well as for the military. But, for a variety of reasons that Ricks explained, the media has not reacted as effectively as the military to the change in the way that it must carry out its role. Furthermore, the increased importance of the media in these operations creates some real challenges for the military.

Three challenges for the media in adapting to OOTW

1. **The media has difficulty figuring out The Story.** The Story is the theme that the editors, some times referred to as gatekeepers, expect. In Somalia at the end of 1992, The Story was feeding starving children. "Images that reinforced that belief were used, were printed. Images that contrasted...were downplayed

This is a synopsis of the luncheon speech delivered by Mr. Thomas Ricks, the Pentagon correspondent for The Wall Street Journal. He has covered U.S. military activities in Somalia, the Adriatic, Korea, and Haiti.

either by the reporter as he saw them or by the gatekeepers.” The result was that the U.S. public did not get the whole story and was surprised by the violence that came later. “In Haiti, I’m still not sure what The Story was....I suspect that The Story of Haiti is that neocolonialism is back and it works.”

2. **The media tends to cover only the initial phase of an operation other than war.** Ricks explained that this is “partly because they (reporters) don’t know how, and partly because their editors don’t know what they want. It’s partly out of boredom and partly because it can be difficult and dangerous.” Ricks observed that the ratio of media deaths to military deaths is higher in OOTW than in war. About the same number of reporters that lost their lives in all of World War II have already died in Bosnia.
3. **The military is a profession; in America, the media is not.** The military has barriers to entry and a clear system of credentials. It is also serious and systematic about after-action reports and lessons learned. Thus, it has been able to adapt to OOTW in important ways. The media, by contrast, is “very competitive, not real reflective.” An okay story today is better than a great story tomorrow. In the U.K., reporters must spend three years under union rules in a provincial town; in the U.S. “anybody in this room could become a reporter.” While Ricks found free entry and competition preferable to a more restricted environment, he saw these characteristics of the American media market as key factors in its slowness to adapt to the operations other than war environment.

Five challenges for the military in coping with the media in OOTW

1. **The media perception is a center of gravity for all parties.** The media can be either a friend or a foe to different players in the emergency. To illustrate this, Ricks contrasted two headlines. In the first, “New Bosnian Prime Minister Fighting Media War With Republic,” the media was an ally to the minister. The second—“To Russian Army, the Press Is Another Foe”—was in response to the Russian Army destroying a satellite dish used to transmit coverage of its actions. Although the U.S. Army commander in Haiti considered each day that he kept Haiti off the front pages to be a victory, spouses of the deployed troops relied on the coverage to understand what the troops were doing in Haiti.



Mr. Thomas A. Ricks

2. **The media, consciously or unconsciously, tends to inject simple American values into complex and ambiguous situations.** When, in compliance with their rules of engagement, troops stand by as a vendor is beat up on the

street in Haiti, or as a woman is raped in Somalia, it's a story that is certain to excite public opinion. This is not all bad, but "troops and commanders need to recognize it and learn to live with it," said Ricks.

3. **Because the media can cross the lines in operations other than war, the media gathers more information and disseminates it faster than the military chain of command.** Media reports quickly get back to the Pentagon and the policy-makers, "effectively getting inside the commander's decision."
4. **The media's understanding of the operation decreases with time due to frequent reporter rotations.** Often, "the people who are covering the U.S. military on the ground are going to be guys who don't know the difference between the Marines and the Army; who think that fuel tanks on Blackhawk helicopters are bombs...and who generally think that military people are stupid and inflexible. So good luck."
5. **The military must cope with the local media.** The local media can be an important political player. And the local media encompasses radios and televisions that broadcast the BBC or CNN. "People in rural Haiti know what Bob Dole said this morning about Aristide. Probably when your own soldiers don't." The military can interact effectively with the local media to create understanding and appreciation of its objectives. Ricks told the audience about a Special Forces officer in Haiti who did a call-in show at a local radio station, responding openly to local Haitians' questions. "... (H)e was kind of the uncrowned king of that valley, because he was the man who held that valley together."