

PERSIAN GULF WAR, THE MOVIE¹

By George Gerbner

When Mao Zedong was asked what he thought was the meaning of the French revolution, he is reported to have said that it was too soon to tell.² Official history, written from the point of view of rulers, is typically the story of the inevitable unfolding of the glorious present. As written by losers, history is tragedy crying for redemption. When roles change, or when long-hidden facts come to light, it takes time to sort things out.

But there comes a time when the sorting-out process itself changes. Add heat to a pot of water and at one point it begins to boil. A confluence of controls, technologies and power reached that point in the war in the Persian Gulf.

A scholar of media technology, Frederick Williams, compared the Gulf War to the first moon landing in 1969: "It was one feat to put two astronauts on the surface of the moon, but another, perhaps just as amazing, to broadcast live that first human step on the moon's surface." Technology-based immediacy, Williams concluded, was a preview of the shape of things to come.³ In 1991 the preview led to the main event.

When that other astute observer of the world scene, Saudi financier of Irangate fame, Adnan Khassoghi, was asked what he thought about the war in the Persian Gulf, he said it was "like going to a movie: we paid our money, we went to the theater, we laughed, we cried, the movie ended and an hour later we had forgotten about it."⁴

The observation marked a change that came about after a long buildup. Cheap parchment replaced rare papyrus. The printing press replaced the quill. The telegraph and telephone replaced the pony express. We went from oral to scribal, to literate, to audio-visual-digital-cybernetic mass-produced culture. The quantum-leap occurred when satellites connected them all, all around the world. The stage was set for centrally-scripted real-time live global imagery evoking instant reaction and feeding media events back to influence an ongoing crisis.

Historiography is a communicative activity that relates the past to the present and future.⁵ But, as any communicative activity, it depends not only on the events to be communicated about and the skill of the communicating parties but also on the means and modes of communication. When the means change, as Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, Elizabeth Eisenstein and others have observed, access to and control over communications change and the telling of stories, including history, also changes.

The boiling point is reached when the power to create a crisis merges with the power to direct the movie about it. Participation, witness and confirmation hitherto limited to those on the scene can now be a vicarious global experience and response, or cooptation, while the event is still in progress. Having achieved the desired outcome, the movie ends, but the images remain in memories and archives.

The convergence of new communicative technologies confers controls, concentrates power, shrinks time and speeds action to the point where reporting, making, and writing history merge. Marshall McLuhan's "simultaneous happening," in which, as Ian Ang described it, "the whole world presumably participated through the electronic collapsing of time and space,"⁶ tends to occur in crises, climactic trials,

hearings, disasters,⁷ uprisings, and wars. These are situations when, one would think, deliberate speed and careful consideration are needed the most. Instead, however, past, present, and future can now be packaged, witnessed, and frozen into memorable moving imagery of instant history -- scripted, cast, directed, and produced by the winners.

Speaking of the Russian coup and looming dictatorship, Pavel Litvinov said that "though history is always full of options, there must be some real historical forces behind every option."⁸ ~~By~~ By triggering the rapid breakup of the Soviet Union, instant history robbed it of the transition time needed to develop a coalition of self-sustaining as well as self-governing republics.⁹ A new real historical force had come into play and gave the deliberate sorting out of things a swift kick in the pants.

Instant history -- image history

Instant history is made when access to video-satellite-computer systems blankets the world in real time with selected images that provoke immediate reactions, influence the outcome, and then quick-freeze into received history.

Instant history is image history. The crisis unfolds before our eyes, too fast for thoughtful consideration of antecedents, alternatives, or long-range consequences, but just in time for conditioned reflex. The show is on, we're in it, and the deed must be done before second thoughts, counter-acts, and regrets ~~can~~ *can* derail the action.

Films of Vietnam took hours or days to reach us, after the fact. It may have been the first "living room war" but not for the first few years and not in real-time. Starting with the make-believe incident in the Gulf of Tonkin, it was a long, slow, duplicitous buildup. It lasted 11 years, destroyed three countries, and left behind some 2 million dead and continuing hardship (including economic sanctions) for the living.

"Body-counts" were in headlines but did not have public witness. The tide of public reaction turned after victory eluded policy-makers and cameras began to record unsettling images: the Tet offensive, a summary execution of an "enemy" suspect, naked "enemy" children fleeing napalm, thatched "enemy" huts being put to the torch. When cameras turn to focus on the fallen, the war is lost, or soon will be. The press was barred from Dover Air Force Base where Gulf War body bags landed. It took a freelance reporter posing as a mortician to get an estimate of the casualties.

The Iraq-Iran war, totally out of sight, dragged on for over eight years, claimed more than a million casualties, and ended in exhaustion. Chaotic perestroika, made visible by glasnost, rolled into Eastern Europe where each successive counter-revolution took half the time of the previous one. The long pent-up Soviet backlash led to the attempted coup of August 1991, or, as the plotters saw it, counter-coup, intended to prevent disaster. But the plotters lost control. The magic lantern was snatched from their hands. Defiant imagery swamped their timorous stance. A tidal-wave of domestic and world reaction swept them from power in 72 hours. Instead of victory, they fell victim of instant history.

Speed and controlled imagery give instant history its thrust -- and its burden. When emphasis shifts to image, complex verbal explanations and interpretations, if

Instant history is a magic lantern projecting images on a blank screen in a temporal void. The show has a clear beginning, middle and end. It telescopes roles, parts, and outcome into the same act. It appeals to prior beliefs and predilections. It triggers familiar responses. It blends into our repertory of imagery. It is not easily dislodged, re-interpreted, or even attributed to one particular show. We have forgotten the title.

The scenario

The war in the Persian Gulf was an unprecedented motion picture experience. As authoritative as it was far from reality, it crammed into its first month alone the entire filmic imagery -- and firepower -- of four years of bombing in World War II. But unlike a carpet of explosives leveling cities and setting off firestorms, or of G.I.'s "flushing out" Vietcong from their hiding places, we were shown "seeing-eye" bombs zooming in on their targets followed by computer graphics tracing the ground offensive against an invisible enemy.

General Schwartzkopf forbade casualty estimates, so sortie-counts replaced body counts. Photographs of battle or of Iraqi (or American) dead were censored. Sleek aircraft "sortied" over unmentionable people in unfought battles in an unseen country. The few unauthorized shots of bombs falling on civilian targets were attacked as treasonous or rationalized as "collateral damage" (defined by *Time* magazine as "a term meaning dead or wounded civilians who should have picked a safer neighborhood." ¹⁷). Never before were selected glimpses of actuality strung together with sound-bites of photogenic crews, omniscient voice-overs of safari-clad reporters, and a parade of military experts with maps and charts at the ready, so mesmerizing, so coherent, and so contrived.

Desert Storm was the first major global media crisis orchestration that made instant history. The Soviet coup six months later was the first attempt that miscarried. A year before the coup Gorbachev had signed a new press law that gave editorial staffs a degree of autonomy not known in the democratic West. It made for a relatively fragmented and leaky communication system that may have saved his life, if not his job. When the coup came, the plotters could not shut down or control the increasingly cacophonous media orchestra. What happened then also made instant history, but that is another story.

Opportunities for making instant history may be few and far between, but when they come they unloose a landslide that shifts the political landscape. ("I came back to another country," said Gorbachev returning from Crimean captivity, and soon to be buried in the avalanche.) Bush created the opportunity and proclaimed his "New World Order."

It takes a crisis and five strategic moves to seize (or create) such an opportunity. Here are instructions for successful crisis-management by instant history as learned in the Persian Gulf War: (1) control, (2) orchestrate, (3) offer guided witness, (4) evoke feedback, and (5) quick-freeze. Each move consists of several steps. Let us spell them out.

(1) Control. Access to real-time global imagery (inherent in centralized transnational ownership, management, and technology), confers the power to control what is known (and, more importantly, not known) about events leading up to and making up the crisis. To keep control, (a) ignore history and marginalize dissent, and (b) speed the action.

(b) Ignore history and marginalize dissent: Invoking history leading to the crisis would spoil the scenario of sudden and irrational provocation. Few know or care, so history is easily ignored. But do not ignore or suppress dissenting voices. That would provoke and alienate too many and, in any case, may give rise to exaggerated estimates of its extent. Report it through soundbites and voiceovers in its most limited, perhaps trivial, and preferably offensive or bizarre forms. Imply that opposition is merely the obligatory nuisance-protest to almost anything in a true democracy. But guard against imagery that can show and tell from another perspective. Beware of defiant opponents speaking for themselves (without soundbites or voiceovers) and, even more importantly, controlling the cameras from their points of view.

Widely used protest footage showed opponents waving the Iraqi flag and engaging in other provocative action. Independent documentaries from the field were censored or suppressed, even when commissioned by and delivered to a television network.

(c) Speed the action: One brief burst of saturation coverage is all you have before unauthorized voices and audiences missing their daily ritual blunt the momentum. Don't let opposition build, or network preemptions of sponsored programs drive the cost too high.

Steps are taken to reduce that cost in the next crisis. The trade journal Broadcasting reported on February 3, 1992: "The three major networks, stung by the defection of many advertisers during the Gulf War, are making a joint appeal to advertisers to stay on the air during unscheduled coverage of national or global crises." The appeal highlighted the advantages of "good demographics, high ratings, and unusually rapt viewers." "If you are an advertiser," said the executive vice president of NBC News, "you've got a captivated audience."

(2) **Orchestrate.** Instant history requires a coherent environment of actuality, images, talk shows, slogans and other evocative manifestations. In order to combine mainstream media-events, signs and symbols into a harmonious whole, (a) use language that fits the scenario, (b) integrate signs and actions, (c) channel upheaval into support, and (d) mobilize mystery.

(a) **Language:** Invent code names and terms that fit the scenario. Demonize the enemy and wrap jarring realities in playful euphemisms. Leave no alternative to the "them vs. us" construction of the crisis.

They employ "terror weapons;" we use "surgical strikes." They unplug incubators to kill babies, we fight with high-tech weapons to keep casualties down (explained NBC's Tom Brokaw). " If we fail's it's just "collateral damage" Our "High-Tech Hardware" asked Newsweek's cover, "How Many Lives Can it Save?" The lives worth saving are, of course ours. Theirs don't count and so are are not to be counted.

(b) **Signs and actions:** Encourage integration of supportive signs into everyday life, sports, and commerce.

Yellow ribbons on cars and on Kent cigarettes; Super Bowl half-time pro-war pageant with President and Mrs. Bush on tape and Peter Jennnings live giving upbeat reports on the destruction in progress.

(c) Support, not turnoff: Orchestration means blending images and messages into an intricate symphony that combines crisis mentality with the need to keep business going as usual. Glory travels well; gory does not deliver audiences in a receptive mood (unless it can be attributed to the enemy).

The appeal to advertisers featured in Broadcasting stressed network "sensitivity" to potentially discordant notes: "To avoid embarrassing juxtapositions of gory footage and ads, the networks generally insert a buffer between cutting to a commercial," it stated. The only shot of burned children being carried out of a Baghdad shelter -- "collateral damage" -- was dismissed on the MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour as "heavy-handed manipulation" by Iraqi propaganda.

(e) Mobilize mystery: Invoke the Deity, appeal to the highest values, and promote miracles.

President Bush spoke to religious leaders of praying before he ordered the ground attack "as Christ ordained." He affirmed his belief in "The first value...that is universal...the sanctity of life." The icon of St. Irene gained worldwide attention when congregants in a Chicago church reported that it wept "tears of grief" on the eve of the Persian Gulf War.¹⁸⁾

(3) Offer guided witness. "Participating" in a global "simultaneous happening" is a compelling experience. To simplify the crisis and isolate it from distracting complexities and unwanted alternatives, (a) offer the audience a sense of "being there" at what appear to be spontaneous occasions such as "photo opportunities", press conferences and briefings; (b) strive for simple meanings and soft questions; and (c) don't let unscripted reality intrude and backfire.

(a) Briefings: Properly staged briefings are especially useful because they promise inside dope straight from the photogenic source.

Reviewing The Best of 1991 Television, "Newsweek compared Schwartzkopf's briefing to John Wayne's farewell to the troops in another movie, "She Wore a Yellow Ribbon:" "the general embodied a nation's ideal of the perfect warrior: tough, professional, charismatic, compassionate."¹⁹⁾

(b) Soft questions: They invite disarming (if tortured) answers.

After the attack, the toughest question President Bush was asked was whether he should be on a golf course in Maine while "our boys" are in the Gulf.

(4) Evoke feedback. Translate witness into participation and supportive feedback from polls and letters to the editor to driving with lights on and horns honking. Make it "like going to a movie" to evoke conventionally cultivated responses. Let this feedback reverberate across all media, crystallize in public opinion (i.e. published opinion), and hasten the desired resolution.

(5) Quick-freeze. Celebrate the desired outcome as the Happy Ending. Quickly produce and distribute videos, CD-Rom disks, paperback books and lavishly illustrated texts. Saturate the market for instant nostalgia and school use. Use the triumphant imagery to preempt historians, fight political opposition, and resist revisionists.

So much for the model scenario. Now the story of how it was put together, produced, and performed. We may have "forgotten the title," but we can and should prepare for the sequel.

Prologue

U.S. administrations have attempted to project military power into the Middle East, overt and covert, ever since the French and British were forced out. Eisenhower landed troops there. Reagan landed troops there, only to have 241 Marines killed in one bombing attack. He also condoned Israel's invasion of Lebanon and bombed Druse villages from the sea. Iraq seemed to have benefited from the U.S. break with Iran. The Reagan administration began supplying secret intelligence to Hussein already in 1982, and secret shipments of U.S. arms via Israel helped Iraq in its war with Iran.²⁰

Iraq's use of poison gas against the Kurds was ignored by the Reagan administration despite Congressional sanctions, as was Iraq's bombing of the U.S. frigate Stark, killing 37. The policy of "normal relations" and expanding trade was reaffirmed as late as January 1990. The U.S. head of Amnesty International complained that "There was no presidential indignation ...in 1989, when Amnesty released its findings about the torture of Iraq children. And just a few weeks before the invasion of Kuwait, the Bush administration refused to conclude that Iraq had engaged in a consistent pattern of gross human-right violation."²¹

Hussein had no reason to believe that he was blundering into a trap even when, after building up Iraq's war machine (but also secretly arming Iran in its war with Iraq), U.S. diplomacy encouraged the Saudi and Kuwaiti economic offensive against Iraq. But still more was afoot. *The U.S. News and World Report* revealed later that several weeks before the invasion, U.S. intelligence agents inserted a computer virus into Iraq's air defense system. Soon thereafter, Iraq's historic claims, grievances, and offers to negotiate a settlement were ignored, as was Hussein's advance notice of his intentions. Yet ten days before the invasion, the State Department still insisted that "We do not have any defense treaties with Kuwait and there are no special defense or security commitments to Kuwait." A week before the invasion the U.S. Ambassador was summoned to Hussein who complained of the economic "war against Iraq" and made barely veiled threats, only to be told that "we have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts like your border disagreement with Kuwait." Three days before the invasion, the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs was asked in Congress whether it is correct to say that if Iraq charged across the border into Kuwait, "we have no treaty commitment which would obligate us to engage U.S. forces?" He replied: "That is correct."²² Hussein finally took the bait and struck.

After the invasion, Hussein released parts of a transcript of his meeting with the U.S. Ambassador in which she gave him no clear warning against the impending move. The Ambassador related at an "informal" Senate Committee meeting (not officially a "hearing" so she did not have to testify under oath) that she indeed warned Hussein in no uncertain terms. The State Department backed her up. When, under more Congressional pressure, the diplomatic cables were declassified, the facts became clear: they lied.

No attention was paid to Hussein's brutalities until he marched on cue. When Hussein invaded Kuwait, however, gruesome atrocity stories filled the media. The most effective was an account of Kuwaiti babies torn from their incubators and

left to die on the hospital floor. The atrocities were mentioned in six speeches by Bush and cited by seven Senators as a reason for voting for the war resolution (which passed by six votes). Human rights monitors and hospital interviews by ABC reporter John Martin later discredited the story. It was also revealed that the "anonymous" account was related to Congress by the daughter of Kuwait's ambassador whose appearance was arranged by Hill & Knowlton, the Washington public relations firm hired by a Kuwaiti group lobbying for military intervention.²³

The first stage, "Operation Desert Shield," was to stop Hussein from marching into Saudi Arabia, although there was no evidence he intended to do so and the U.S. had no treaty or prior policy to defend the Saudis. "The mission of our troops," Bush declared, "is wholly defensive.... They will not initiate hostilities."

Soon, however, the operation became a simple and unconditional offensive to rebuff "naked aggression." No mention was made of the colonial and recent history of Western aggression and shifting of artificial boundaries of Middle East non-nations (including carving Kuwait out of the British protectorate that also included Iraq), or of other invasions, occupations and repeated violations of U.N. resolutions and international law by the U.S. and its allies.

The United Nations itself was brought out of media mothballs. *The New York Times*, after spearheading the successful campaign for U.S. withdrawal from Unesco²⁴, and mostly ignoring U.N. actions, now editorially complimented the U.N. on September 11, 1990, for having "provided legal and political armor" for the operation. A vague resolution authorizing force to expel Iraq from Kuwait was rammed through the Security Council without significant opposition (absent on the world scene since the collapse of Soviet power). The resolution concealed, but was later used to justify, the ultimate aim of Iraq's devastation.

Another resolution passed by the General Assembly a week later by a vote of 144 to 2 called for a Middle East peace conference. But instead of acting on that resolution, the allies exploded the equivalent in bombs of the next 12-15 years of the entire United Nations global budget. Other resolutions condemning the invasion of Lebanon and the continuing military rule of the occupied territories by Israel were also ignored.

The U.S. was still withholding \$720 million in overdue membership payments. The long-standing pressure tactic soon drove the U.N. to the brink of bankruptcy. (Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar had to report in the fall of 1991 that "It is a source of profound concern to me that the same membership which sees it appropriate to entrust the United Nations Secretariat with unprecedented new responsibilities has not taken the necessary action to insure that the minimum financial resources required to carry out those responsibilities are provided on a reliable and predictable basis."²⁵ The unrelenting pressure prompted the new Secretary General, Boutros Ghali, to announce, barely a month after taking office, a sweeping reorganization designed to streamline the U.N. "to devote more time to peacekeeping" in the "post-cold war era." The reorganization followed the recommendations of an informal group of 20 members, including the U.S., but ignored a key provision that the five permanent members of the Security Council agree not to claim any top posts for a few years. In fact, the top post of Administration and Management, in charge of budget and personnel, was expected to go to Bush's former U.S. Attorney General and defeated candidate for the Senate from Pennsylvania, Dick Thornburgh. Within a year, instant history made the U.N. into a tool of the New World Order.)²⁶

While preparations for war proceeded, diplomacy was faked for the media. Bob Woodward's book, *The Commanders*, described the panic in the White House when it seemed that the Saudis might "bug out" (in Bush's words) and accept some settlement. King Fahd did not buy the excuse of Iraqi threat to Saudi Arabia. Neither did the satellite photos published in the *St. Petersburg [Fla.] Times* on January 6, 1991, but refused by the U.S. wire services. (This was rated one of "The Ten Best Censored Stories of 1991" by the media watch group Project Censored. But even a year later, when Bush was asked about the war, he said "If I had had to listen to advice from the United States Senate leadership, the Democrats -- or from the House, the leadership over there -- to do something about the Persian Gulf, we'd have still been sitting there in the United States, fat, dumb, and happy, with Saddam Hussein maybe in Saudi Arabia."²⁷)

But then the White House sent Secretary of Defense Cheney to Saudi Arabia with an offer the King could not refuse, apparently a promise to push for favorable regional settlement after Hussein was safely out of the way. While Secretary of State Baker went to Baghdad to "negotiate," National Security Adviser Scowcroft told Saudi Ambassador Bandar that "the President has made up his mind" and diplomatic efforts "are all exercises."

A loose coalition was patched together with the U.S. contributing most of the military might, Arabs the location, and the oil Sheiks, Germans, and Japanese most of the cash.

Exaggerated estimates of nuclear capability, "the world's fourth largest standing army" and Iraq's "crack Republican Guards" were fed to eager media. A vast and sophisticated U.S. intelligence community that five months later was able to warn Gorbachev of the impending coup in his own backyard (in vain, as it turned out), now seemed to be muted. Disinformation, rationalized as "confusing the enemy," confused everybody. Decision-making was restricted to a small group headed by former CIA-director (now President) George Bush. "It was apparent even before the Gulf War..." wrote Maureen Dowd in *The New York Times* (Nov. 22, 1991, p. 1) that "This White House does not have a traditional policy-making process..." Dowd cited a "top Administration official" as saying "It's hard to debate decisions because there is a lot of secrecy."

In the preparation for Desert Storm, even the National Security Council was held at arms-length,²⁸ and the commanders "disinformed." Woodward reported that the Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell, and other commanders advised "containment or strangulation" and found themselves excluded from decision-making. Later they complained that "faulty intelligence" was fed to them. The order to attack came from a White House apparently acting on tightly-held superior intelligence.

Final planning for an attack was known to have begun in September but not reported until much later. *The New York Times* published the "news" on March 3, after the war had ended. *Newsweek's* account of the preparations, published on Jan 28, quoted "one of his closest advisers" saying "This is a fight George Bush has been preparing for all his life." Elizabeth Drew wrote in *The New Yorker* of January 25: "John Sununu...was telling people that a short successful war would be pure political gold for the President." Reporters who rush on the air and into print with every scoop, now held back. "The road from Watergate to the Gulf War is marked by ever greater cautiousness and opportunism on the part of the press," wrote Michael

Massing. "Bob Woodward [who saved revealing details for his book] provides a particularly disquieting example of the change."²⁹

The full history of the swift and large military buildup still remains to be told. A nearly Vietnam-size military force was built up in months in the desert. Information, communication and coordination were key elements. Williams reported that more communications networks were put into full use during the buildup and war than in all of World War II. As late as December 1990, the Pentagon sent out a call for \$30 million worth of computers to be shipped to Saudi Arabia in six weeks. A small and little-known Texas company called Compuadd got the contract and did the job. Its full reward came when, ten months, later it shared in the biggest Defense Department computer order ever awarded.

The mass media by-and-large cheered on the massive buildup. Aside from glimpses of the debate in the Senate, the public heard little dissent and rarely, if at all, in a context that allowed those expressing other points of view to speak for themselves. The Military Family Support Network tried to place an ad opposing intervention on Washington, D.C. area stations. They were refused while supporting ads were aired. Operation Real Security, another anti-war group, produced a video that was also rejected in the major market areas. On the other hand, the giant public relations firm Hill & Knowlton, hired by Kuwait, was successful in placing many of the more than two dozen video news releases sent to over 700 stations around the world.³⁰

Forming the backbone of the new instant-history-making machine in the field were the portable television transmitters, the global satellite network (including the collaborating Soviet satellite), dedicated direct "four wire" telephone lines, fax machines, mobil phones and computer links. This versatile system, tightly guarded at the source and self-censored by mainstream media gatekeepers, made it possible to provide controlled real-time simultaneous live global coverage in several selected sites, even when nothing much was going on.

Suspenseful "live" boredom filled with breathless analysis and photo opportunities gave audiences around the world a realistic sensation of "being there." Donning gas masks enhanced the feeling of spontaneity, even, or perhaps especially, when it turned out to be a false alarm. At the height of the crisis, CNN's audience share rose more than five times its normal 3 percent.

The prologue ended with the U.S. ultimatum of January 15, 1991. The deception, suppression, misinformation, and disinformation that characterized the buildup overwhelmed and disoriented the public. Many watched in disbelief as the juggernaut assembled in the Gulf was set to strike. When the non-negotiable ultimatum was about to expire, the public was still deeply divided: 4 out of 10 responding to a *Times Mirror* poll thought sanctions should be given more time. The same number also wanted to hear more about the views of 41 percent of Americans who did *not* think Bush "did the right thing" sending troops to the Gulf.³¹

Even though the Congressional authorization had passed by only six votes, once the war started dissenting voices fell silent, or were silenced, and the media-driven instant history blitz kicked in.

The main event

"As the skies cleared ... an American officer proclaimed it 'a beautiful day for bombing'" wrote R. W. Apple, Jr. in *The New York Times* on February 12, 1991. Before the day was over, 750 bombing missions were completed. "There is more stuff up there than I'd see in 20 lifetimes," said an Air Force pilot."

What may have been happening on the Iraqi ground could only be surmised from a safe distance. John Balzar of the *Los Angeles Times* reported "relentless rumbling" as "the skyline flickers hot orange." "Through the soles of their boots, the Marines feel the ground quiver" as they look toward "one of the most fearsome sights of modern warfare -- the carpet bombing by B-52s." A British defense expert calculated that in the first month "the tonnage of high explosive bombs already released has exceeded the combined allied air offensive of World War II."³² But the military terminology that permeated the reporting was more sports than slaughter. "Our team has carried out its game beautifully," exulted a military expert on NBC. "We ran our first play, it worked great," said a pilot interviewed on CBS. "We scored a touchdown."³³ Not censorship but media cheerleading prompted ABC's Peter Jennings to exult in the "brilliance of laser-guided bombs," or CBS reporter Charles Osgood call the bombing "a marvel," or his colleague Jim Stewart speak of "two days of almost picture-perfect assaults."³⁴ Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney told U.S. airforce personnel they conducted "the most successful air campaign in the history of the world."³⁵

The precision-bombing spectacular was, in fact, the dumping of the equivalent of five Hiroshimas on a small country of ancient culture. Targeted were life-sustaining infrastructure of water, power, and transportation facilities. When the bombing was over, the carnage of hunger and disease began.

"Although the near-total destruction of the civilian power-grid had dubious military value," reported an intelligence analyst after the war, "it crippled public health by knocking out water purification and distribution stations, sewage treatment systems, health care facilities and refrigeration." A Harvard University study team estimated a million children malnourished and 170,000 under five years dying of hunger, cholera and typhoid within a year from the delayed effects of the bombing. The U.S. Census Bureau reported a year later that in 1991 the life expectancy of Iraqi males dropped 20 years from 66 to 46 years, and of women 10 years, to 57.³⁶

Middle East Watch, an affiliate of the international Human Rights Watch organization, reported that allied decisions to drop unguided bombs in daytime over populated areas without warning civilians of imminent attacks violated generally accepted practice and international law "both in the selection of targets and the choice of means and methods of attack."³⁷

Brave Patriots slaying deadly Scuds was probably the most memorable action of the Persian Gulf War movie. About 158 Patriot missiles were fired, costing \$700,000 each, in what was billed the first real "Star Wars" battle. What was not shown is that they missed eight out of ten times. When they found their targets, the resulting debris caused more destruction than the Scuds alone.

The most thorough analysis of the Patriot antimissile system appeared in the January 1992 issue of *International Security*, a peer-reviewed journal published by Harvard University. The assessment was made by Theodore A. Postol, a physicist, Pentagon science adviser and Professor of National Security Policy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He called the system "an almost total failure

to intercept quite primitive attacking missiles." Displays of thunder and flame seen around the world were an illusion, he said. Patriots would rush toward speeding fragments of poorly designed Iraqi Scuds that fell apart in the atmosphere as they approached their targets. The resulting fireball was mistaken as a successful interception while the Scud warhead streaked by unscathed.³⁸ Postol also told the House Arms services Committee that 13 Scuds that fell unopposed near Tel Aviv caused no deaths, fewer injuries, and less than half the property damage than 11 Scuds in the same area that were intercepted by Patriots. Marc S. Miller, senior editor of *Technology Review* magazine called Patriot "the anti-truth missile."³⁹ Roger N. Johnson concludes in his study of war damage that the Patriots were "successful mainly as psychological weapons used to fool the public."⁴⁰ Their success is shown in the survey by Morgan, Lewis, and Jholly: 81 percent of their respondents knew about the Patriots while only 42 percent could identify Colin Powell.

The mighty armies that brutalized Kuwait and were supposed to march on to Saudi Arabia, if not beyond, could not be found. Poorly equipped and demoralized troops, sitting in trenches, caves, and bunkers without air cover, were napalmed to deprive those inside of oxygen, and then bulldozed burying dead and alive alike in some 70 miles of trenches. (Bodies of soldiers who "suffocated in their bunkers after U.S. tanks plowed them under" were still being discovered nine months after the war.⁴¹)

Defenseless convoys fleeing in panic were bombed and strafed into oblivion in what pilots called a "turkey shoot." "Nothing prepared me for the utter devastation," wrote a Western reporter. "To judge by the...heat-blasted wrecks piled crazily one on top of the another, the U.S. Navy fighters responsible for much of the slaughter must have used a combination of fuel-air explosives and cluster bombs against the hopelessly snarled convoy of vehicles... The trail of destruction stretches a full thirty miles...and fans out into the desert as far as the eye can see. 'It must have been the nearest thing to hell that can be imagined,' said Lt. Commander Gareth Derryck of the British Royal Navy, one of the first allied officers to arrive on the scene...Many on that convey were innocent civilian hostages the Iraqis took with them. None was spared, nor anything else... Within a mile-long section of the destroyed convoy, I counted more than a dozen ambulances and other vehicles bearing Red Crescent signs. These are entitled to absolute protection from attack under the 1949 Geneva Conventions, not to mention the Pentagon's own rules...On the ground, launching indiscriminate attacks likely to cause civilians deaths, by destroying identifiable vehicles carryibng the sick and wounded - the allies could be charged with war crimes, at least for one terrible night's work."⁴²

There was much media concern expressed about Iraqi chemical and missile threats. The erratic Scuds and the even more erratic Patriots got extensive coverage. *The New York Times* marked their first anniversary featuring Israeli anguish and lingering fear of Scud attacks, and goading the White House to "finish the job." Missing were signs that the roughly four-week \$61 billion⁴³ massacre inflicted on Iraq was more lethal than any nuclear, chemical, or biological warfare has ever been.

One may question, as Noam Chomsky does, whether there really was a war. If by war we mean a conflict in which an enemy shoots back, the Persian Gulf operation was a slaughter. Official estimates ranged from 15,000 to 100,000 in direct casualties. But in a secret report, former Navy Secretary John Lehman gave a Pentagon estimate of 200,000.⁴⁴ Whatever is the correct figure, its kill-ratio to 146

U.S. soldiers, at least 35 of them, as it later turned out, killed by "friendly fire,"⁴⁵ is unprecedented in military history.

The size of the U.S. operation and scarcity of enemy troops to shoot at might have accounted for the fact that the percentage of "friendly fire"-inflicted U.S. casualties was 10 times higher than in any other twentieth century war.

The main facts of cost, casualties and damage were carefully kept out of the briefings and censored from the reports. U.S. and allied reporters were rigidly controlled, and few other journalists were even admitted to Saudi Arabia. The few independent reporters who managed to obtain information on their own, and analysts who might have contributed more diverse perspectives, were excluded from the media mainstream.

NBC first commissioned then refused to broadcast uncensored footage of heavy civilian casualties. (The broadcast was vetoed by NBC President Michael Gartner who led a media crusade for freedom of press in the 1980's.) The video was then offered to CBS. The night before it was to air on the *CBS Evening News*, the show's executive producer was fired and the report canceled.⁴⁶ The media watch group Project Censored selected this "the top censored story of 1991."

Roger N. Johnson monitored CNN for the climactic 27-hour final pre-war period when Iraq proposed conditional withdrawal and Soviet and Iranian peace initiatives were advanced. The study revealed that 30 military experts but no peace experts were interviewed. George Bush, the most frequently shown, brushed aside peace talk. Others interviewed included mostly right-wing hawks such as Oliver North, Robert McFarlane, Jeanne Kirkpatrick, Pat Buchanan, Richard Allen, Richard Perle, Dan Quayle, and Ronald Reagan. And CNN may have been the most open to a diversity of views. Another media watch group, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), found that only 1.5 percent of Gulf war news sources who appeared on ABC, CBS and NBC nightly news were against the war and only one of 878 sources cited represented a national peace organization. Opposition to U.S. action was most frequently attributed to "the enemy." (NBC is owned by General Electric, a supplier for every weapons system used in the Gulf. Major military contractors sponsor news programs and sit on the boards of directors of networks and other leading media such as *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*.⁴⁷)

Instead of full and accurate reports and documentaries, network "docudramas" shot in sync sound on location and in Hollywood studios took audiences to the Persian Gulf War movie purporting to be the real thing. Realistic shots of training, tanks maneuvering in the sand, simulated trench warfare, attacks on the enemy lurking in the darkness, scripted scenes of camp life and the "home front", patrols on a mission firing into the darkness, a full sequence of mission control launching a Patriot and scoring a "hit," and even "hostages" being beaten, alternated with promos of *Die Hard 2* and *Terminator 2*. Spectacular explosions lit distant horizons, hurled vehicles and blasted bodies in both movies. The docudrama's happy ending showed jubilant faces while the voiceover spoke of "an outpouring of joy not seen since World War II." The real documentary footage of the conflict is locked in Pentagon vaults.

Deborah Amos, who covered the Gulf War for National Public Radio, scoffed at the adage that truth is the first casualty of war. "In this war," she wrote,

"truth was more than a casualty. Truth was hit over the head, dragged into a closet, and held hostage to the public relations needs of the United States military."⁴⁸

The cult of violence

"It was a colossal failure of politics that plunged us into the war" said *The New Yorker* on January 28, 1991 (p. 21). How did it become a triumph of politics? How is it possible that the engineering of a vast and unnecessary human catastrophe was made to seem not only acceptable but politically advantageous, even triumphant, and a virtual --if temporary -- breeding-ground for presidential prospects?

The buildup, orchestration, saturation, and fabrications that make up the instant history movie experience provide only part of the answer. Another part comes from the speed and image-driven isolation of that experience from the broader historical context. That absence of perspective throws the spectator-witness back upon conventional conceptions of how things work in the world. In our culture many of those conceptions stem from what we should recognize as the cult of violence.

Violence has many faces. Wholesale mass executions of people otherwise known as war or genocide have become increasingly technical, scientific, and deadly,⁴⁹ but no more precise. They have killed an ever increasing percentage of civilians, eventually far outnumbering military casualties. The German terror-bombing of the small Spanish city of Guernica provoked world-wide outrage and Picasso's anti-war mural. By the end of World War II, thousands of large-scale air raids and a genocide later, the calculated destruction of Dresden's historic center, the fire-bombing of Tokyo, and the pulverizing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki for little, if any, military advantage (but more likely to impress Stalin before the agreed-upon entry of the Soviets into the war in the Pacific), numbed our senses.

It became possible, for many, to rationalize further escalation of firepower and the chemical poisoning of Vietnam's countryside. The trend toward increasingly skewed kill-ratios culminated, so far, in the Persian Gulf War. Recounting such facts of "cultural evolution and war," Roger N. Johnson observed that political bombing of civilians is no longer considered an act of barbarism. Wholesale violence against basically innocent people is seen, if at all, as potentially embarrassing information to be sanitized and wrapped in euphemisms.

Retail violence is not far behind. The U.S. is the undisputed homicide capital of the world. We also lead industrialized countries in jailing and executing people.⁵⁰ Our streets, our schools, our homes have become places of fear and brutality, widely publicized and profitably dramatized. Killings in the workplace doubled in the 1980's over the previous decade.⁵¹ And yet, the cult of violence is neither simply a reflection of these trends nor just a stimulus for them. It is more like a charged environment affecting many aspects of social relations, control, and power.

The facts of violence are both celebrated and concealed in the cult of violence that surrounds us. Never was a culture as filled with images of violence as ours at the present. We are awash in a tide of violent representations the world has never seen. There is no escape from the massive invasion of colorful mayhem into the homes and cultural life of ever larger areas of the world.

Of course, there was blood in fairy tales, gore in mythology, murder in Shakespeare, lurid crimes in tabloids, battles and wars in textbooks. The representation of violence is a legitimate cultural expression, even necessary to balance tragic consequences against deadly compulsions. But the historically defined, individually crafted and selectively used symbolic violence of heroism, cruelty or misanthropy of authentic tragedy has been swamped by violence with happy endings produced on the dramatic assembly-line.

The violence we see on the screen and read about in our press bears little relationship either in volume or in type, and especially in its consequences, to violence in real life.⁵² Yet much of it looks realistic; growing up with it tends to make us project it onto the real world. The sleight-of-hand robs us of a tragic sense of life necessary for compassion. "To be hip," writes Gitlin, "is to be injured, and more -- to require a steadily increasing boost in the size of the dose required."⁵³

Our children are born into a symbolic environment of six to eight violent episodes per prime-time hour alone, four times as many in presumably humorous children's programs, and an average of at least two entertaining murders a night. They are "the first to react to the environment around them," writes playwright Steve Tesich.⁵⁴ "Unless we are willing to change that environment, we must accept the verdict that our children have become the victims of choice for most Americans."

The dominant portrayals of mayhem and crime misrepresent in important respects the actual nature, demography, and patterns of victimization of real-life violence. Contrary to the hype that promoted them, most uses of cable, video, and other new technologies make the dominant patterns penetrate even more deeply (but not more cheaply) into everyday life. No historical, esthetic or even commercial rationalization can justify drenching every home with images of expertly choreographed brutality.

Movies cash in on the cult, and increase the dosage. Escalation of the cinematic body count seems to be one way to get attention from a public punch-drunk on video mayhem.

"Robocop's" first rampage for law and order in 1987 killed 32 people. The 1990 "Robocop 2," targeting a 12-year-old "drug lord," among others, slaughtered 81.

The sick movie "Death Wish" claimed 9 victims in 1974. In the 1988 version the "bleeding heart liberal" turned vigilante disposed of 52.

"Rambo: First Blood," released in 1985, rambled through Southeast Asia leaving 62 corpses. In the 1988 release "Rambo III" visited Afghanistan, killing 106.

Godfather I produced 12 corpses, Godfather II put away 18, and Godfather III killed no less than 53.

The daredevil cop in the original "Die Hard" in 1988 saved the day with a modest 18 dead. Two years later, "Die Hard 2" thwarted a plot to rescue "the biggest drug dealer in the world," coincidentally a Central American dictator to be tried in a U.S. court, achieving a phenomenal body count of 264.

The decade's record goes to the 1990 children's movie and tie-in marketing sensation and glorification of martial-arts, "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles." Released as the Gulf War buildup began, with its 133 acts of mayhem per hour, it is

the most violent film that has ever been marketed to children. Undaunted by the outrage of trapped parents and overworked psychiatrists, *Turtles II*, appropriately subtitled "Secrets of the Ooze," followed the success of the *Ninjas* (and of the Gulf War) as another nonstop punchup and kick-in-the-teeth opera in which the martial artists continue their rampage.

The infamous "Faces of Death" videos, withdrawn from circulation in 1987, were quietly re-released in the fall of 1991.⁵⁵ The October 14, 1991 International Edition of *Variety* featured 123 pages of ads for new movies, with pictures of shooting, killing, or corpses on every other page and a verbal appeal to violence, on the average, on every page. Leading the verbal procession were "kill," "murder," "death," "deadly," and "dead," (33 times). and "terror," "fatal," "lethal," and "dangerous" (12 times). Bringing up the rear are "rage," "frenzy," "revenge," "guncrazy," "kickboxer," "maniac," "warrior," "invader," "hawk," "battle," "war," "shoot," "fight," "slaughter," and "blood."

"Terminator 2" dominated the list box-office block-busters from 14 major movie markets around the world and became the top-grossing U.S. film of 1991. Its leading actor, promoter, and role model, Arnold Schwarzenegger, made \$15 million on the movie (which works out to \$21,429 for every word he spoke). He was named "the most violent actor" by the National Coalition on Television Violence (10 of his movies averaged 109 often graphic and gruesome violent acts per hour). He was appointed head of President Bush's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports and campaigned by his side in the 1992 elections.

Growing up in a violence-laden cultural environment cultivates aggressiveness in some and desensitization, insecurity, mistrust, and anger in most people.⁵⁶ These are highly exploitable sentiments. They set up a scenario of violence and victimization in which some take on the role of violent but most the role, and psychology, of victims. They demand protection and condone, if not welcome, violent solutions to domestic and world problems.

"It's beginning to seem," wrote Barbara Ehrenreich in a year-end essay, "as if anger is our national emotion. You can feel it crackling along our highways...It smolders in our cities, where rich and poor, often meaning white and black, face off across a gulf...It shines, all too often, from the faces of our politicians and their handlers...The [Gulf] war was...the perfect outlet for a diffuse sense of grievance."⁵⁷ The scenario contributes to the appeal of punitive and vindictive action against dark forces in a mean world, especially when presented as quick and decisive and enhancing a sense of control and security.

The Cold War is over and the cultural props for imperial policy are shifting from their anti-communist rationalizations to sharp and selective offensives against real and concocted terrorists, narco-terrorists, petro-terrorists, unauthorized aggressors and other unfriendly (as opposed to friendly) demons of the Third World. The cult of violence is the ritual demonstration and celebration of brute power, and its projection into sex, family, job, politics and war.

An overkill of violent imagery helps to instill the military attitude toward killing and to mobilize support for taking charge of the unruly at home and abroad. It prepares us for America's role in the New World Order. No longer in the economic or social front lines, a U.S. military protectorate, preferably under the aegis of the United Nations, can still dominate (or at least exercise the power of

veto over) the newly emerging coalitions of transnational conglomerates that will be the real, if not formal, constituents of the new order

Bombarding viewers by violent images of a mean and dangerous world, without illuminating the real costs of violence and war, is, in the last analysis, an instrument of intimidation and terror. It was indispensable to the triumph of instant history in the Persian Gulf. It is a preview of the shape of things to come in a unipolar world with no effective democratic opposition or geopolitical counter-force.

Epilogue

What was represented as a clean, swift, surgical strike to punish aggression, get rid of Hussein, and secure cheap oil, petrodollars, peace, jobs and democracy, became, in fact, a human and ecological disaster of "cataclysmic proportions" (in the words of the U.N. inspection team) that achieved few of its purported aims.

The war "changed almost nothing," concluded *Newsweek* on June 28. "Most of the same faces and the same tired policies remain.... Internally, the regime's capacity for repression seems undiminished." Hussein was riding high. U.S.-inspired revolts of Kurds in the north and Shiites in the South were crushed. A Palestinian settlement was as far away as ever.

At year's end, Human Rights Watch issued a comprehensive report saying that Washington had sacrificed principle to political interest, promoting rights "only when it is cost-free." "When competing interests arose," the report observed, "...maintaining warm relations with Saudi oil sheiks,...or avoiding politically embarrassing questions about why the United States went to war to restore the Kuwaiti Emir -- human rights took a back seat at the White House."⁵⁸

The war and its global imagery traumatized many Third World countries. It paralyzed the already weakened Non-Aligned Movement which "had done absolutely nothing to stop the war," observed the *Christian Conference of Asia News* in its November-December 1991 issue. "It is a cruel irony," the *News* noted, "that it took the blood bath of the Gulf War...to bring these cold realities home to the Non-Aligned Movement members." The disruption of trade and travel and the shutting of Iraq's pipelines deepened the Third World's economic distress and political paralysis.

The Middle East was in turmoil. Syria, Iran and widespread fundamentalist backlash were gaining power. Arabs vs. Arabs were arming faster than ever. (Saudi Arabia alone was getting 20 new Patriot batteries, for better or worse, at the cost of \$3.3 billion.⁵⁹) Syria, invader of Lebanon and new-found U.S. ally, spent the \$2 billion earned for good behavior in the Gulf on buying North Korean Scuds, Czech tanks, and Soviet MIG's.⁶⁰)

The full scope of nuclear disinformation was still unclear. "U.S. intelligence officers" had been cited in the press as predicting that Iraq will produce nuclear weapons in 12-18 months. That became one of the chief justifications for the attack. Contrary views were not generally reported. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) had inspected the Iraqi facilities in November 1990 and found them to be in compliance with IAEA safeguards, meaning that nuclear fuel was not diverted to weapons use. The *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* estimated in March 1991 that Iraq was 5-10 years away from producing a useable nuclear device. Not

reported were the further facts that Article 56 of the Geneva Protocols explicitly forbade the targeting of live reactors; that both IAEA and U.N. General Assembly resolutions had called for a ban on attacks on nuclear facilities; and that the IAEA had declared any such attack "a violation of the Charter of the United Nations and of the Statutes of [this] Agency." Many proliferation experts considered the targeted reactors to be of dubious military value, and the bombing of operating reactors with probably "hot" cores potentially more harmful than either necessary or effective.⁶¹

Nevertheless, the bombing of nuclear plants was ordered and Iraq's nuclear menace was prominently featured in the prewar, war, and postwar scenario. "To thwart Iraq's plans, U.S. bombers destroyed nearly 20 facilities where Iraq was believed to be working on nuclear weapons development" reported the Associated Press on August 9, 1991. Bush declared that the bombing "put Saddam out of the nuclear bomb-building business for a long time to come." Former U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency official Thomas W. Graham wrote in the September 1991 issue of the journal *Arms Control Today* that any attempt to rebuild a covert nuclear weapons program would be extremely difficult. It requires "a wide array of advanced technology, and a huge and expensive industrial infrastructure." But four months later the newly named Director of the C.I.A., Robert M. Gates, warned that Iraq could quickly rebuild its nuclear weapons program. *The New York Times* headlined the story on January 16, 1992 "IRAQIS COULD POSE A THREAT SOON, C.I.A. CHIEF SAYS. The press, and especially *The Times*, kept up an almost daily barrage of stories about Iraq's hidden and/or renewed "nuclear threat."⁶² That story and not the story of the human misery the continuing blockade was inflicting on the people of Iraq became the largest single topic of postwar coverage.

The Western alliance had been strained. The arm-twisting to contribute troops, in contradiction to the U.S.-dictated constitution, divided Japan (which resisted, though agreed to contribute minesweepers and \$13 billion), and started a political backlash. The backlash in the Moslem world led to the defeat of the Turkish government, deepened the crises in North Africa, and even shook the Saudi dynasty. The loss of trade and increased energy costs added to the trauma of the Third World. Kuwait's oligarchy was restored, more repressive than before. The Kurds had been abandoned again, as had the democratic forces in Iraq, who, apparently, posed a greater threat to the New World Order than a weakened Saddam.

The day the war ended, the Bechtel Corporation, from which U.S. Secretaries of State and Defense had been recruited, announced a multi-billion dollar contract for the reconstruction of Kuwait. While extinguishing the oil well fires was a gigantic international effort, Bechtel found Kuwait "generally intact." Restoration estimates "dropped sharply from the original \$100 billion-plus figures."⁶³ *The New York Times* also reported on December 20, 1991, "the discovery that the country suffered less damage than originally estimated..." and was "recapturing its former affluence.")

Stock prices rose but the economy slumped and consumer confidence declined. The high costs and mounting deficits incurred to pay for the war and its aftermath contributed to the recession in the U.S. After an initial rise in the price of oil, friendly Gulf states boosted oil production. By year's end, falling prices (and revenues) plunged OPEC into a crisis, and further postponed serious discussion of an effective U.S. energy policy.

The only clear successes have been the extension of American power into an increasingly troubled region, the renewed flow of Kuwaiti petrodollars propping up increasingly shaky economies, and the domestic "political gold." And of course the blockbuster movie.

Within weeks of the victory, Time Warner completed, in record time, the collection and compression of imagery that would fill 500 floppy disks into a single CD-Rom history of Desert Storm, and its speedy distribution to stores and school libraries. (The job ordinarily takes several months.) *CNN: War in the Gulf*, advertised as "authoritative chronicle of the world's first 'real-time television war,'" was published soon thereafter. Pentagon-aided victory parades, an ABC-TV docudrama "Heroes of Desert Storm" (with a 30-second introduction by President Bush), and the first deployment of Gulf war imagery in an election campaign⁶⁴ rounded out the triumphant quick-freeze stage of instant history.⁶⁵

In a fitting and perceptive tribute, *Time* magazine named CNN owner Ted Turner its Man of the Year "For influencing the dynamic of events and turning viewers in 150 countries into instant witnesses of history." (Time Warner is also one-fifth owner of the Turner Broadcasting System.)

The National Religious Broadcaster's Association (NRBA), dominated by the big electronic evangelists, blessed the event (unlike the National Council of Churches, the World Association of Christian Communicators, and many other religious leaders). Speaking to the NRBA convention immediately after the war, President Bush declared it "a just war...for good versus evil...right versus wrong, dignity versus oppression." He cried as he told the Southern Baptist Convention about praying as he ordered the ground attack. A year later he thanked the NRBA for supporting the war "as Christ ordained to be a light unto the world." (About the same time the World Association of Christian Communicators declared the Gulf War story "a prime example of the neglect of media ethics."⁶⁶)

A review of the year in *Modern Maturity*, the largest-circulation magazine in America, was titled (appropriately to the promised "gentler, kinder nation") "The Gentle Giant." Sent to 32 million "mature" readers, the review summarized the war as "A Stunning Success in the Gulf," and concluded:

The Bush Administration's conduct of the crisis had been in the purest American spirit of respect for international law, winning the widest international support for joint action and the use of minimum force. It was a model of successful modern diplomacy.⁶⁷

Anatomy of a triumph

Let us now consider how this model of success played out on the home front. Once the saturation bombing started, dissent was marginalized, challenge was suppressed, and the tide of saturation coverage rose, most respondents to the Times Mirror poll were swept up in the flow. The response itself became news and sped the rush of events. Half of the respondents, most of whom wanted more diverse views before, now said they heard **too much** opposition.⁶⁸

As the operation entered its second full week, instant history found its true believers. Nearly 8 out of 10 believed that the censors were not hiding bad news; 57 percent wanted **increased** military control over reporting. Martin Shaw reports that

in a British poll 82 percent agreed the sorties were "precise strikes against strategic targets with minimum civilian casualties."

Pan's survey of audience reactions a month after the war also found that most respondents felt satisfied with the coverage, agreed that the media "provided realistic accounts of the war," rejected the criticism that many important stories were missed, and yet agreed with the need for military censorship.⁶⁹

The triumph of orchestrated imagery over reality and reason can be gauged from the differences between responses of light and heavy television viewers of otherwise comparable groups. The Morgan, Lewis and Jholly survey shows that less than half (47 percent) of light viewers, compared to three-quarters (76 percent) of heavy viewers, "strongly supported" President Bush's decision to use military force against Iraq. Pan's study found that "Among all four media measures, only exposure to television seemed to have robust relations with the dependents variables. Heavy TV news viewers were more satisfied with media war coverage, appraised the quality of war coverage more highly, and were less likely to criticize the media... They were also more willing to accept the practice of stringent military controls over media access to information."

A panel study conducted as part of the 1991 American National Election Study also revealed some gender differences. During the buildup, 61 percent of male light viewers but 71 percent of male heavy viewers approved "the way George Bush is handling the crisis in the Persian Gulf," a highly significant 10-point difference. For women, less supportive to begin with, viewing made no difference: about half of both light and heavy viewers "approved." After the war, however, with even the "light viewers" saturated with selected images of the war, the approval rate for light and heavy male viewers rose to 83 and 86 percent, respectively, and for light and heavy female viewers it rose to 78 and 85 percent. Instant history closed the gender gap.

Heavy viewing also boosted the percentage of those who would vote for George Bush, especially among those otherwise least likely to vote for him: only 31 percent of low-income light viewers but 51 percent of low-income heavy viewers expressed inclination to vote for Bush in 1992. And, as the study by Morgan, Lewis, and Jholly demonstrates, the more viewers saw the more they remembered the misleading imagery but the less they knew about the background and facts of the war.

Two months after the war the public rated the coverage, military censorship, and general information about the war even higher. The *Times Mirror* percentage of "very favorable" rating of the military also rose 42 points from 18 to an unprecedented 60 percent. Secretary of Defense Dick Chaney's rating jumped from 3 to 33 percent (extraordinary for a Secretary of Defense). Desert Storm commander Norman Schwarzkopf's 51 percent was the highest "very favorable" score in over 150 *Times Mirror* public favorability surveys conducted since 1985, stimulating instant speculation about his political future.

The war in the Persian Gulf is fading to a few flickering images: Scuds streaking through the sky and Patriots rising to intercept them, or so we thought; bombs falling down factory smokestacks with deadly accuracy, or so, too, we thought. But that was no movie. Its consequences will linger in the real world for a long time to come. When the balance sheet of critical events of the 1990's is finally

tallied, the world will marvel at the mischief wrought by the new scenario of instant history.

Global immediacy gave us instant history. It is simultaneous, global, mass, living, telling, showing and reacting in brief and intensive bursts. Image-driven and violence-laden, compelling as it is contrived, instant history robs us of reflection time, political space, and access to alternatives. The horror of a holocaust can now be managed with glorious efficiency.

This is not an isolated problem that can be addressed by focusing on media violence or crisis coverage alone. It is an integral part of a global cultural condition that increasingly permeates, and poisons, the mainstream of the common symbolic environment. Only a new international cultural environment movement, dedicated to democratic participation in cultural policy-making and an alternative media system, can do justice to the challenge, and terror, of instant history. But that, too, is another story.

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NOTES

¹ An earlier version is in press as Chapter 20 in *Triumph of the Image: The Media's War in the Persian Gulf. A Global Perspective*, edited by Hamid Mowlana, George Gerbner, and Herbert I. Schiller. Boulder, CO: Westwood Press, 1992. A brief summary was presented as the first Wayne Danielson Award Lecture for Distinguished Contributions to Communication Scholarship at the University of Texas in Austin, November 13, 1991

² Cited in "Poland After Solidarity" by Timothy Garton Ash. *The New York Review of Books*, June 13, 1991, p. 57.

³ "The Shape of News to Come: The Gulf War as an Opportunity for TV News to Show Off, and to Raise Questions" by Frederick Williams. *Quill*, September 1991.

⁴ Cited in a review by Tom Masland, *Philadelphia Inquirer* bookreview section, September 1, 1991, p. 2-F.

⁵ Ernst Briesach on "Historiography" in the *International Encyclopedia of Communications*, Vol. 2, p. 280. Oxford University Press, 1989.

⁶ "Global Media/Local Meaning" by Ian Ang. *Media Information Australia*, November 1991, p. 4.

⁷ Disaster relief has been particularly vulnerable to the vagaries of instant history. A 1991 report to the United Nations concluded that "Far too often, thousands who are starving and uprooted in one part of the world receive the minimum of relief and succor, while aid pours forth for those who are suffering at the focus of international power politics and media attention." The highly politicized aid to the Kurds in Iraq was one case in point. (*The New York Times*, November 13, 1991, p. A9.)

⁸ "Waiting for the New Dictators," interview with Pavel Litvinov in *Index on Censorship*, January 1992, 21:1, p.2.

⁹ "A senior American diplomat based in Moscow" argued that "The coup plotters won; in the end they got their revenge" when the speed of the coup triggered the collapse. "They needed two, maybe three years to make the transition," the diplomat said. "But thanks to the coup...it all just happened overnight, before anybody was really ready." Thomas L. Friedman in *The New York Times*, February 16, 1992, p. 16.

- 10 Milburn, Michael and Ann B. McGrail. "The Dramatic Presentation of News and its Effects on Cognitive Complexity." Paper presented at the American Political Science convention, September 1990, San Francisco.
- 11 Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business by Neil Postman. New York: Penguin Books, 1985. P. 103.
- 12 "Encoding TV News Messages Into Memory" by Tom Grimes. *Journalism Quarterly*, 67:4, Winter 1990.
- 13 The "Tianenman Square massacre," which many claim to have witnessed on television, did not take place on Tianenman square; only the cameras were there, recording the clearing of the square by troops and tanks. The massacre took place in another part of town, off camera.
- 14 "On Being Sound-Bitten" by Todd Gitlin. *Boston Review*, December 1991.
- 15 "The Photo Op: Making Icons or Playing Politics?" *The New York Times*, February 9, 1992, pp. H2,28.
- 16 In *Media Development*, 38:4, 1991, pp. 6-8.
- 17 Cited by Norman Solomon in *Unreliable Sources; A Guide to Detecting Bias in News Media* (Carol Publishing Group, 1991) p. xviii.
- 18 The story of the "weeping icon" took on a life of its own when it reported stolen at gunpoint, then recovered, and finally called a hoax and a publicity stunt. (See e.g. *The New York Times* Dec. 29, 30, 1991; Jan. 1, 1992, and Associated Press stories during that time.)
- 19 *Newsweek*, January 6, 1992, p. 80. To be fair, the brief, glowing year-end account concluded: "Now if we could just figure out what it was all for."
- 20 "U.S. Secretly Gave Aid to Iraq Early in Its War Against Iran," by Seymour Hersh, *The New York Times*, January 25, 1992.
- 21 Cited by Deborah Amos, Middle East correspondent for National Public Radio, in *Nieman Reports*, Winter 1991, p.61.
- 22 See, e.g. "The Gulf War Reconsidered" by Theodore Draper, *The New York Review of Books*, January 16, 1992, p. 46. After the war, however, the U.S. signed a military treaty with Kuwait.
- 23 "Remember Nayirah, Witness for Kuwait?" Op-ed article by John R. MacArthur *The New York Times*, January 6, 1992, p. A17. In a letter to the editor of *The Times* (January 27, 1992, p. A20), Representative Tom Lantos, co-chair of the Congressional group that heard and publicized the testimony, argued that "The fact that Nayirah was the daughter of the Ambassador of Kuwait made her a more credible witness. The Kuwaiti government would have considerably more to lose if the daughter of the Ambassador were not telling the truth than if some man-in-the street lied."
- 24 "Unesco in the U.S. Press" by George Gerbner in *The Global Media Debate: Its Rise, Fall, and Renewal*. George Gerbner, Hamid Mowlana and Kaarle Nordenstreng (Eds.) New York: Ablex. In press.
- 25 "U.N. Asks Billion for Peacekeeper Fund." *The New York Times*, November 25, 1991, p. A3.
- 26 See *The New York Times* February 9 and 11, 1992.
- 27 *The New York Times*, November 9, 1991, p. 9.
- 28 "Twilight of the Gods" by John B. Judis, *Wilson Quarterly*, Autumn 1991, p. 55.
- 29 "Sitting on Top of the News" by Michael Massing, *The New York Review of Books*, June 27, 1991, p. 11.
- 30 "Dictating Content: How Advertisers Control Press Freedom." A Report Prepared by the Center for the Study of Commercialism, Washington, D.C., 1992.
- 31 "The 1990-91 Panel Study of the Political Consequences of War." *American National Election Study*, 1991. Center for Political Studies, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan.

- 32 Reported in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 5, 1991, p.6A)
- 33 For these and more examples see "Media Watch: Now for Sports and Weather" by Michael Parenti in *Z Magazine*, July/August, 1991, p. 104.
- 34 Noted by Norman Solomon on the Op-Ed page of *The New York Times*, May 24, 1991.
- 35 *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 9, 1991, p. A-1.
- 36 Reported by Tim Weiner of the *Inquirer* Washington Bureau in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 9, 1992, p. 3-A. Weiner also wrote that the Air Force refused to comment on civilian casualty reports. A few days after the U.S. Census reported the human devastation, Bush declared in an anti-abortion speech that "From the moment the miracle of life occurs, human beings must cherish that life, must hold it in awe, must preserve, protect and defend it.")
- 37 "Group Faults U.S. on War Deaths" by Melissa Healy of the *Los Angeles Times* in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 17, 1991. The law is a 1977 international treaty which has not been ratified by the U.S.
- 38 Reported in *The New York Times*, January 9, 1992. The Raytheon Corporation, with "billions of dollars of order for Patriot missiles" at stake, denied the charges but admitted that the success rate in Israel was "slightly under 50 percent," and added that "the exact details were classified."
- 39 "Patriotic Blindness and Anti-Truth Weapons." *Index on Censorship*, November-December 1991, p. 32.
- 40 "Cultural Evolution and War: From Science to Social Science" by Roger Johnson. *Bulletin of the International Society for Research on Aggression*. 13(2), 1991. Pp. 7-10.
- 41 Associated Press dispatch from Nicosia, Cyprus, November 5, 1991.
- 42 "Kuwait: The Last Forty-Eight Hours" by Andrew Whitley, *The New York Review of Books*, May 30, 1991, p. 17
- 43 Pentagon estimate, reported in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 6, 1991, p. 3-A
- 44 *People* magazine reporter Dirk Mathison crashed the highly confidential Bohemian Grove encampment in Northern California, assembling each year top male U.S. policy-makers, including media chiefs. His story of what he heard (before he was discovered and ejected by an executive of Time Warner), including the Lehman speech entitled "Smart Weapons", was killed by *People* magazine, owned by Time Warner. It was published under the title "Inside the Bohemian Grove: The Story People Magazine Won't Let You Read," in *Extra!*, November-December 1991, pp. 1, 12-14.
- 45 "Killed by Their Comrades," by David H. Hackworth, *Newsweek*, November 18, 1991. The *Index on Censorship* (January, 1992, p. 47) also reported that accidental attacks by U.S. forces also accounted for 72 of the 467 Americans wounded in action, and noted the unprecedented percentage of self-inflicted casualties.
- 46 "Sights Unseen" by Dennis Bernstein and Sasha Futran. *The San Francisco Bay Guardian*, March 20, 1991, p.23
- 47 See e.g. "Arms and the Media: Business as Usual" by Martin E. Lee. *Index on Censorship*, November-December 1991, pp. 29-31. Lee recalls that on the day U.S. bombs killed 400 men, women, and children in a Baghdad shelter, *Newsweek* (owned by the Washington Post Company) featured a Stealth bomber on its cover with a caption saying "How Many Lives Can It Save?" (P. 30)
- 48 "Seeing is Not Believing. *Nieman Reports*, Winter 1991, p. 61.
- 49 Wars in the 20th century have killed 99 million people (before the Gulf war), 12 times as many as in the 19th century and 22 times as many as in the 18th century. Other hostilities, not counting internal state terrorism, are resulting in an estimated 1,000 or more deaths per year. (*World Military and Social Expenditures*. Washington, D.C.: World Priorities, 1986, 52 pp.)

⁵⁰ One of every 133 Americans will become a murder victim. (*U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics Technical Report*, March 1987, NCJ-104274.) The U.S. rate of killings is 21.9 per 100,000 men 15 through 24. The rate, for example, for Austria is 0.3, for England 1.2, and for Scotland (highest after the U.S.) 5.0. (National Center for Health Statistics study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and reported in *The New York Times*, June 27, 1990, p. A10.) Between 1985 and 1989 the number of homicides nationwide increased 22 percent. (Congressional hearings reported in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* Aug. 1, 1990.) The U.S. rate of incarceration is 407 per 100,000 citizens. This compares to 36 in The Netherlands, 86 in West Germany, and 100 in England. While the prison population in the U.S. doubled in the 1980s, the crime rate rose 1.8 percent, suggesting that the "need to incarcerate" is out of proportion with the actual crime rate but is a political response to culturally generated insecurity and demand for repression. There is no evidence that capital punishment is a greater deterrent than a life sentence or that it relates to lower crime rates.

⁵¹ Associated Press dispatch by Fred Bayles, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 15, 1991, p. 3-A.

⁵² See, for example, *Media Crime and Criminal Justice; Images and Realities* by Ray Surette. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Co., 1992

⁵³ "On Thrills and Kills; Sadomasochism in the Movies" by Todd Gitlin. *Dissent*, Spring 1991, p. 247.

⁵⁴ "The Watergate Syndrome: A Government of Lies," *Nation*, January 13, 1992, p. 13.

⁵⁵ *Variety*, October 14, 1991, p. 61.

⁵⁶ See, for example, "Violence and Terror in the Mass Media" by George Gerbner. *Reports and Papers in Mass Communication*, No. 102. Paris: Unesco, 1988.

⁵⁷ "Cauldron of Anger," *Life*, January, 1992, pp. 62-69.

⁵⁸ *The New York Times*, December 30, 1991, p. A6.

⁵⁹ "Saudis to Buy 14 More Batteries of Patriot Missiles From the U.S." *The New York Times*, November 9, 1991, p. 3.

⁶⁰ "All Eyes on the Armourer" by Matthew d'Ancona, *Index on Censorship*, November-December 1991, p. 2.

⁶¹ For more details, see "Too Little, Too Late: How the Press Misses the Proliferation Story" by Mel Friedman, *Nuclear Times*, Winter 1991-92, pp. 27-32.

⁶² See e.g. *The New York Times*, January 22, 1992, p. A1.

⁶³ *Bechtel Briefs*, October 1991, p. 16.

⁶⁴ The "test run" by the National Republican Congressional Committee in a November 1991 race in central Virginia yielded positive results. The 30-second spot superimposed a photo of the Democratic candidate over an antiwar demonstration showing a "Victory to Iraq" banner. Although it was acknowledged (after the election) that the candidate did not attend that rally, she lost the election 37 to 63 percent.

⁶⁵ By year's end, also, the alternative press and more searching examinations began to challenge the instant history of the war, but were not likely to thaw the massive quick freeze of the mainstream media. The first "revisionist" book to appear was *Desert Mirage: The True Story of the Gulf War* by Ohio journalist Martin Yant. (Prometheus Books, 1991)

⁶⁶ *Study and Action Programme 1991-1995; Concepts and Priorities*. London: World Association for Christian Communication, 1991.

⁶⁷ John Keegan in *Modern Maturity*, December, 1991-January, 1992, p. 52.

⁶⁸ "The People, The Press and the War in the Gulf." Times Mirror Center for People and the Press, releases of January 10, January 31 and March 25, 1991, Washington, D.C.

69 "Audience Evaluations of U.S. News Media Performance During the Persian Gulf War" by Zhongdang Pan. In *Desert Storm and the Mass Media*, edited by Bradley S. Greenberg and Walter Gantz. Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, Inc. In press.