BATTLEGROUND

THE MEDIA

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PRESIDENTIAL STAGECRAFT AND MILITAINMENT

In an age of mass media, the public learns about war and understands its life and death consequences through television images and the many other sources of news narratives across the media spectrum. In addition to news, entertainment formats (frequently based on real combat) also present forceful images of war, weaponry, and the soldiers who fight and die in continuing global conflict. In recent years, a hybrid format that blurs the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, referred to as militainment, has been employed by the media and the military to represent war in our time. In addition, defining moments in the reporting of war and conflict are increasingly stage-managed by the Pentagon and White House public relations professionals.

Militainment and stagecraft are attempts to control media imagery and the meanings of war through fictional formatting, information management, and media choreography. These sophisticated strategies raise issues about the public's ability to receive accurate information and a true picture of what war and conflict are actually like.

War is understood and interpreted, justified and judged through the media that tell the stories of war. Most civilians experience military conflict through the media, their impressions derived not from the battles in distant lands but from the manner they are rendered at home. Struggles over war's true meaning, its values and necessities, play out on movie and television screens and in the photographs of newspapers and magazines. These representations are influenced by the demands of commercial media, politics, and military pressures. By the twenty-first century, the media has become the battleground where the struggle to win the hearts and minds of the public is carried out through the increasingly persuasive media management strategies of militainment and stagecraft.

THE BATTLE OVER PUBLIC OPINION

The process of negotiating the meaning of war and its depictions has been going on for centuries, but with mass media and new digital technology, that process has come to play a profound role in global conflict. Over the last century, the American public has at times expressed both favorable and disdainful

opinions about war and its necessities, and those attitudes have influenced the path of conflict. Over the years, elected officials and military planners have faced significant public opposition to war. Convincing the public that war is necessary, that all diplomatic channels have been exhausted, and that the call to military action justifies the inevitable loss of life in its wake requires persuasive and well-planned campaigns. Indeed, once war is waged, problems with battlefield logistics, military conduct, and casualty figures can be an even greater deterrent to favorable public opinion, or what has been referred to as "homefront morale." Homefront morale and the public's resolve to continue the fight depend on a complicated equation that compares the war's justification with its destructive force. Once the public perceives that the cost in human life is too high a price to pay for the stated goals, opinion quickly turns against the war effort.

By the twenty-first century, images of soldiers and civilians who inevitably die in conflict, once prevalent on television during the Vietnam War, were all but eliminated from media coverage of the war in Iraq. In the absence of pictures of death and suffering, war is more easily depicted in favorable terms, as either an exciting video game, an action-packed battle film, or a rousing victory celebration. Shaping war narratives according to these formats lessens the emotional impact that grisly images from the actual battlefield might have. In doing so, the public is removed from the killing, which in a democratic system, is being carried out in its name.

PRESIDENT BUSH AND THE THANKSGIVING TURKEY WITH TROOPS IN THE GREEN ZONE, 2003

On Thanksgiving Day 2003, Air Force One left Washington, DC, on a secret trip that would carry a small group of aides with the president to the Baghdad Airport for a two-and-a-half-hour visit and photo-op with 600 U.S. troops lucky enough to be stationed in the Green Zone. The widely published image from this trip shows a beaming president wearing an Army flight jacket, cradling a bountiful golden-brown turkey generously garnished with grapes and all the trimmings. He appears to be serving dinner to the grateful soldiers who surround him. A moment of high patriotism, the picture was ubiquitous in the days that followed, and the president's poll numbers shot up five points as criticism for his seeming indifference to the suffering of American troops was quieted.

It would take a week for the *Washington Post* to report that the president was not actually serving the soldiers, who were eating presliced turkey from canteen-style hot plates. It was six o'clock in the morning, and the turkey Bush held was inedible. White House officials rebuked those who called the turkey fake, insisting it was not a presidential prop, but a standard decoration supplied by contractors for the chow hall. In a burst of spontaneous enthusiasm, the president had raised the platter and the shutter clicked. To the company that produced a limited-edition Turkey Dinner Action Figure of the President for $34.95, it did not matter that some viewed the secret trip as a ploy, or even a cowardly act, because the president had been criticized for not attending services at U.S. military bases where the bodies of the fallen return home. It became "a piece of our nation's history."

PRESIDENT BUSH AND THE TOP GUN FLIGHT

One of the best illustrations of presidential stagecraft during the war in Iraq came after "major combat operations" were over. This dramatic visual event was staged in real time and performed by President George W. Bush. The president garnered much media attention when, dressed in a military flight suit in the cockpit of a fighter jet, he flew the plane and made a successful landing onto the aircraft carrier the *U.S.S. Lincoln*. He was welcomed by the military personnel who had just returned from Iraq. In front of a banner that hung from the ship's upper deck proclaiming "Mission Accomplished," President Bush told the country that the successful invasion of Iraq was over. The White House said the flight on the jet fighter was necessary because the carrier was too far out to sea to be reached by helicopter. In fact, a few columnists and alternative news sources reported that the ship was so close that it had to be turned around to prevent television cameras from catching the San Diego coastline in the background. More importantly, as history would show, the invasion of Iraq was just the beginning of a long, drawn-out conflict that would cost many more Iraqi and American lives. In hindsight, this incident has come to symbolically underscore a lack of military planning for a clear exit strategy from the country.

The stage-managed event was reported as news, and some television personalities, most notably Robert Novak, pointed out how well the flight suit fit the president. However, independent video editors revealed that the dramatic landing was virtually identical to visual sequences in the popular Tom Cruise film of 1986, *Top Gun* (see "Hollywood Victory," distributed by Paper Tiger Television, New York). Mainstream commercial broadcasters made few critical comments that might have exposed the flight's choreography, and question its message and purpose, most likely because such production values and fictional referencing have become standard features in commercial media's programming design.

MERGING NEWS AND ENTERTAINMENT

After the September 11, 2001, attacks on America, the Pentagon met with media industry producers and directors and requested that Hollywood join the fight against terrorism. The military and the media collaborated on such films and television programs as *Behind Enemy Lines* and ABC's *Profiles from the Front Line*. This direct request from the White House formalized what was already an ongoing relationship between the film industry and the Department of Defense. Film scripts must be given the stamp of approval from the military, and the Pentagon is quite selective in choosing which movies it officially endorses with access to bases and ultra-high-tech weaponry. The films of Jerry Bruckheimer are popular with the Pentagon, and posters of his films hang on the walls there. *Pearl Harbor* got mixed reviews from critics, but its patriotic themes passed muster with the Department of Defense, and it was well supplied by the military.

RESISTING PENTAGON INFLUENCE

The first significant film to be set in the Persian Gulf depicting Desert Storm was Edward Zwick's *Courage Under Fire* (1996). The film features Lieutenant Colonel Nathan Sterling (Denzel Washington), the leader of a tank battalion, who during the war had directed fire at a suspected enemy vehicle, only to find that he had destroyed one of his own. After the war he struggles to come to terms with this incident of friendly fire that bears an uncomfortably close resemblance to actual conduct in the war. Sterling is dispatched to investigate events surrounding the death of Captain Karen Walden (Meg Ryan), a Medivac helicopter pilot killed in action. The film's dark cast of the military goes further than friendly fire and portrays the mutiny, cowardliness, and incompetence of the soldiers Captain Walden helped save. Unable to accept orders from a woman, one soldier under her command leaves her wounded in the desert, telling the rescue pilot that she is already dead. The U.S. Army refused to supply equipment for the film unless Zwick changed the script. Refusing to depict the military and the war in a better light, Zwick made the film without assistance from the Pentagon.

When the United States began a bombing campaign over Afghanistan, press requests for access to the war were refused, but working for ABC's entertainment division, Jerry Bruckheimer shot *Profiles from the Front Line* with full cooperation from the U.S. military. The series from Afghanistan aired on ABC during the buildup to war in Iraq, and *Profiles* was the first program to present a war through the same visual and narrative style used in reality television. Television news would later take its cues from movie producer Bruckheimer when the war on Iraq began.

This first "reality show" treatment of the war on terror made no attempt to cover civilians killed in the bombing of Afghanistan, and certainly offered no pictures of that reality. Much of the media coverage of the invasion of Iraq was foreshadowed by *Profiles from the Front Line*, and Iraq became the first war to be televised in real time with embedded journalists providing videophone pictures live from the desert battlefield. These compelling images featured brave soldiers fighting, but almost no images of death or suffering. Some alternative Internet sources showed the casualties of war, some of which were shut down by the Pentagon.

THE STORY OF SAVING PRIVATE LYNCH

At one point, the initial invasion of Iraq was stalled by sandstorms and heavy resistance around the capital of Baghdad. At that point, in the early morning hours of April 2, 2003, the military announced to reporters at Central Command in Qatar that a crack commando unit had rescued a young female private named Jessica Lynch. Commandos had stormed a Nasiriyah hospital and carried her to safety in a waiting Black Hawk helicopter. The gripping story was ubiquitously described in the mainstream media as a daring raid. *Time*

magazine asserted, on April 14, 2003, that Hollywood could not have dreamed up a more singular tale.

Doubts about the story's authenticity were first raised by the London *Times* on April 16, 2003. After a thorough investigation, the BBC concluded that Lynch's rescue was a staged operation. No embedded journalist accompanied the raid, and the green night footage was shot and cleverly edited by the military's own Combat Camera as proof that a battle to free Lynch had occurred when it had not. On May 18, 2003, the BBC pointed out the fictional aspects of the raid, and observed that the Pentagon had been influenced by Hollywood producers of reality television and action movies, most notably Jerry Bruckheimer.

U.S. news headlines embellished the story, saying that Jessica had fought for her life, and had sustained multiple gunshot wounds. Some added that Jessica was stabbed by Iraqi forces, and even raped. Months later, it was reported that, in fact, no fighting had occurred, but rather Lynch suffered only accident injuries when her vehicle overturned. A medical checkup by U.S. doctors confirmed that Iraqi doctors had tended her injuries, a broken arm and leg and a dislocated ankle.

The incident demonstrates the use of militainment. The rescue of Jessica was a classic rescue narrative of mythic proportions told at a difficult time in the fighting to boost American morale and public support for the war. After the Lynch story, the downed statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad's Firdos Square would become the icon of victory over Iraq. Only later would an internal Army study find that the statue toppling was a psychological operations maneuver—another staged event.

WAR GAMES

America's Army was the first video game created by the military and was offered free to kids to download off the Internet on July 4, 2002. It became the number-one online action game in the country with more than 3 million registered players. Players are positioned as first-person shooters, and after basic training, the advanced "marksmanship" is so realistic that the computer screen moves in time to the digital soldier's breathing under fire. The online actors are patterned after the actions of real soldiers. Though the weapons, graphics, and settings are highly realistic, the violent consequences of killing are downplayed. The enemy is faceless and masked, and when hit releases a puff of red smoke and falls to the ground. As CNN reported, "From a propaganda perspective the Army has seemingly hit the jackpot. (And the Army readily admits the games are a propaganda device)" (CNN/money.com, June 3, 2002).

When video games depict violent combat but downplay the graphic images of death or other horrific aspects of war, they offer a sanitized version of fantasy combat, even while depicting actual battles. The visual styles and compelling participation offered to gamers turn the otherwise disturbing aspects of war and killing into excitement and entertainment. The recognizable imagery of video war games has become popular as a graphic style in many feature films depicting combat. Computer-based imaging is also seen in news coverage of war,

which often features digital graphics of high-tech weapons systems supplied by the Pentagon.

Video games are now used by the military for recruitment and training. The Department of Defense contracted with the company Ubisoft to help market and distribute *America's Army*. At a computer-gaming conference in early 2005, Ubisoft deployed the Frag Dolls, a group of young women gamers with names like Jinx and Eekers, to demonstrate *America's Army*. The "booth babes" posed for pictures as they played the games, inviting young men to enter and occupy the gaming space. Eekers's promotional blog about her Combat Convoy Experience can be found on the *America's Army* Web site. These and the other points of convergence between the media and the Department of Defense have led to what some critics have called the military/entertainment complex.

The ongoing merger between the entertainment and military industries, together with the use of sophisticated media managing and stagecraft by the government, have raised serious issues for those concerned with the role of the media in a democratic society, especially during times of war. The public relies on the media to report the consequences of war, but when the industry is economically and culturally invested in the technologies of war, critics question its ability to be an independent source of information. Parents and educators worry that young people, especially military recruits, will be unprepared for the actual consequences of war. The audio-visual milieu that turns war into entertainment also lessens the public's ability to feel alarm and compassion for those who die in wars carried out in its name.

See also Bias and Objectivity; Embedding Journalists; Government Censorship and Freedom of Speech; Media Watch Groups; Nationalism and the Media; Paparazzi and Photographic Ethics; Political Documentary; Political Entertainment; Propaganda Model; Public Opinion; Reality Television; Representations of Masculinity; Representations of Women; Sensationalism, Fear Mongering, and Tabloid Media; Video Games.

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PRODUCT PLACEMENT

Product placement is the intentional and strategic positioning of brand-name products and services in various media for the purposes of advertising and brand promotion. Examples include movies, TV shows, video and computer games, comics, novels, theater productions, even news shows. Why has this practice, sometimes called "branded entertainment," grown into a $4 billion