

June 2005

**THE MEDIA AND THE WAR ON TERRORISM: HELPING OR
ENCUMBERING?**

Recently, *Newsweek* published an article claiming that American soldiers in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba desecrated the Koran by flushing it down a toilet. This small article sparked outrage across the Muslim world, causing 16 deaths and several hundred wounded souls. Shortly afterward, *The Sun* newspaper in London published surreptitiously taken photos of Saddam Hussein that were not so flattering. Again, the Muslim world became incensed with this display at what is perceived as the desecration of their religion and culture.

What could be more desecrating than the beheading of innocent human beings or the rape and defilement of Muslim women and children (or anyone for that matter) by their own Muslim men? It turned out the *Newsweek* article was incorrect but the damage was already done. Is this naked irresponsibility by the media, or reporters reporting the news? Should some information not be published if it has the potential to incite violence and create chaos?

This war on terror will severely test the inherently uneasy relationship between the government—especially the military—and the media. The chafing has already begun. While the Bush administration so far seems largely to have avoided the outright deceptions practiced by its predecessors, it has exhibited an unhealthy impulse to control the news by leaning on the media not to publish enemy “propaganda.” And while most of the news coverage has been superb, some journalists have exhibited a reckless indifference to endangering military and intelligence operations, the lives of coalition

forces, and a reflexive hostility toward the military. The military and the Administration have ample reason to distrust some reporters and editors.

Washington Post columnist E. J. Dionne once confidently claimed, “no reporter I know” wants to be responsible for “blowing the cover of individuals or military operations.”

Perhaps he does not know Loren Jenkins, senior foreign editor of National Public Radio, who explained his ethical principles to the *Chicago Tribune*. When asked whether his team of reporters would report the presence of an American commando unit operating covertly somewhere in Iraq or Afghanistan, Jenkins cockily answered, “You report it.” He continued, “I don’t represent the government. I represent history, information, what happened.” Of course, “what happens” might well be influenced – and American operations and lives endangered – by the kind of reporting that Jenkins vows to do.

To get this right, the government must not resort unnecessarily to secrecy (although some information is sacrosanct) or to lightly tarring independent journalists as disloyal. The media should not frivolously cry “censorship.” And each should work harder to understand the views and accommodate the needs of the other. But we must avoid the corrosive military-media hostility that started in Vietnam and has since been fed both by official deceptions and by the mindless anti-military bias inculcated in many of us by our college professors. This war – unlike Vietnam – really does pit good against evil, civilization against barbarism, life and liberty against nihilism. Journalistic neutrality is not a tenable stance.