

Support Our Troops: The U.S. Media and the Narrative of the Persian Gulf War

Nobuo KAMIOKA

I

On January 17, 1991, U.S. president George Bush announced the commencement of air strikes against Iraq, justifying the bombings in terms of a narrative of the good defending the weak against evil. In his statement, Bush labeled Saddam Hussein "the dictator of Iraq," and characterized Kuwait as "a small and helpless neighbor" that had been "crushed, its people brutalized." Bush dramatized events as follows:

While the world waited, Saddam Hussein systematically raped, pillaged, and plundered a tiny nation no threat to his own. He subjected the people of Kuwait to unspeakable atrocities, and among those maimed and murdered innocent children.

Since the entire world supported the American troops, Bush argued, the Gulf War would never be "another Vietnam," the "fighting [would] not go on for long, and . . . casualties [would] be held to an absolute minimum."

The logic that Bush employed in constructing this narrative was as clear as its purpose. Bush cast Hussein as the sole "bad guy," a killer of innocent children, and America as the "good guy" called upon to struggle

Copyright © 2001 Nobuo Kamioka. All rights reserved. This work may be used, with this notice included, for noncommercial purposes. No copies of this work may be distributed, electronically or otherwise, in whole or in part, without permission from the author.



against Hussein's evil. Some critics have inferred that in constantly referring to Hussein as "Saddam," Bush intended to associate Hussein directly with Satan or Sodom.² Entitled in Bush's assessment to the support of the entire world, virtuous America could look forward to defeating Saddam easily, with minimum casualties. By thus making Hussein into an unambiguous figure of evil—and thereby contrasting the Gulf War with the Vietnam War—Bush attempted to win support for his decision to wage war.

Numerous critics have pointed out the falsity of Bush's logic. Fiercest among these critics is lawyer and human rights activist Ramsey Clark, who accused the Bush administration of intentionally luring Iraq into the war. According to Clark, "the U.S. government used the Kuwaiti royal family to provoke an Iraqi invasion that would justify a massive assault on Iraq to establish U.S. dominion in the Gulf."³

Though Clark may have gone too far here, other critics have agreed that in order to justify his decision, Bush exaggerated Hussein's aggressiveness—and specifically his assertions of atrocities against the Kuwaiti people—on the basis of little evidence. While Hussein was expressing willingness to negotiate a solution to the Gulf crisis, Bush was stirring up ill feelings against him with hints that Iraq might next invade Saudi Arabia. By reducing the question to a choice of opposing evil or not, Bush made the decision to attack Iraq seem only natural.⁴

Critics have also argued that the American mass media cooperated with the U.S. government and military by accepting Bush's logic uncritically. In most portrayals, the media employed Satanic imagery to represent Hussein, ignoring the historical and social context of the Gulf crisis, that is, "the political economy of oil in the region, the division between rich and poor Arab nations, and . . . complex inter-Arab relations."⁵ Furthermore, by portraying American soldiers favorably, the mass media reinforced a key phrase that the Bush administration had used to rally public opinion: "support our troops." As media critic Douglas Rushkoff has noted, this phrase served to distract people from the more immediate question, "do you support this war?"⁶

Although TV news coverage exercises a powerful influence over public opinion—and is widely expected to be objective—close consideration of the media during the Persian Gulf War demonstrates the contingency of the media's purported fairness. In this essay, a survey of secondary sources will provide an overview of contemporary criticism of media bias during the Gulf War, and direct examination of major net-

work coverage of the war will yield an assessment of media sympathy for the American government and troops. Through their news coverage and programming, the major U.S. TV networks aided the U.S. military and government in creating a consensus among Americans to support the war; this essay will reveal the nature, agency, and function of the narrative that was constructed to achieve this aim.

II

Much has been written on American media coverage of the Persian Gulf War, and most media critics have indicated how biased they found mass media coverage of the war to have been. Relying mainly on Douglas Kellner's *The Persian Gulf TV War* and essays in *Seeing Through the Media* (eds. Susan Jeffords and Lauren Rabinovitz), the following survey pulls together varied examples of coverage that critics have cited in an effort to characterize media response to the war in general.

First, as mentioned above, the mass media joined in propagating satanic or otherwise negative imagery of Hussein. A number of media outlets used the phrase "the rape of Kuwait"⁷ and described Hussein as a brutal savage cruelly torturing the Kuwaiti people. Among the phrases that the media employed to refer to Hussein were "one of the world's most dangerous men," "the Butcher of Baghdad," "a madman who wants to rule the Middle East," "delusional," "doomed," "godfather of terrorists," "keeper of hostages," and "scourge of the Kurds."⁸ One tabloid paper featured an article titled "Hussein's Bizarre Sex Life" that included an image of Hussein as a crossdresser in a mini skirt.⁹

Hussein was furthermore frequently compared to Hitler. He was referred to as "the Hitler of the 1990s," and *The New Republic* airbrushed a photo of Hussein to transform his mustache into one like Hitler's.¹⁰ When Iraqi Scuds hit Tel Aviv, it was rumored that Iraqi missiles had carried nerve gas (they had not), and footage of Israeli children putting on gas masks was widely broadcast; this rumor clearly fueled Holocaust comparisons, reinforcing Hussein's identification with Hitler.¹¹

With regard to Hussein's minions, Iraqi soldiers were described as "devils." Rumors that Iraqi soldiers were raping captive female American soldiers and Kuwaitis were circulated through unsubstantiated articles.¹² The media also circulated a rumor that Iraqi soldiers removed fifteen Kuwaiti babies from incubators and left them to die on the floor

of the hospital, a rumor that was later revealed to have been forged by the public relations firm of Hill and Knowlton, the president of which had been Bush's former chief of staff.¹³

The cumulative image evoked by these news stories was this: swarthy rapists were attacking helpless women and children, and Americans were honor-bound to save them. Prejudice toward Arabs and Muslims was implicit in this image; Iraqis were reduced to "Arab terrorists", "Muslim extremists", and "generic enemies of America's troubled past."¹⁴ In keeping with this image, a number of reports emphasized the backwardness of Arab societies in general and the oppression of Arab women in particular.¹⁵

Such reports furthermore spoke to another common theme of the media coverage that Americans were morally superior and went to Kuwait as civilized liberators. Videos were repeatedly broadcast of laser-guided bombs dropping with pinpoint accuracy on their assigned military targets, apparently without killing human beings. The constant airing of such demonstrations of technological superiority reinforced the message of moral superiority, while diminishing the reality that U.S. weapons, not all of which were necessarily "smart," killed great numbers of Iraqis, including civilians.¹⁶

Against the backdrop of this American good guy vs. Iraqi bad guy narrative, the mass news media sharply contrasted the Gulf War with Vietnam, superimposing instead more "patriotic" images of wars past. Newscasts repeatedly showed footage of American soldiers leaving their families, as well as interviews with family members that stressed the families' concern for their soldiers. Such stories obviously worked to evoke viewer sympathy, and thus emotional identification with the families' positions. According to one study, the TV networks spent more time on these "family support stories" than on any other kind of war-related news story by a ratio of almost two to one.¹⁷ With coverage that in contrast ignored or marginalized the anti-war movement,¹⁸ the American news media created the impression that Americans were united in their support for the war.

American popular culture contributed to this impression. TV talk shows featured programs on the families of soldiers, and these programs predictably lingered on family members' emotional remarks about the soldiers, thus evoking a sense of the importance of supporting these soldiers, and by implication the war effort. Anti-war statements were occasionally allowed, but these were invariably rebuffed in emotional terms

by other guests, who regarded such sentiments as undermining both the soldiers and the families who bore the hardship.¹⁹

In the Super Bowl telecast of January 27, 1991, images of Whitney Houston singing “The Star-Spangled Banner” were crosscut “with a montage of U.S. flags and athletic-looking, young male representatives of U.S. combat units.” At half-time, a live-satellite feed delivered interviews of U.S. soldiers gathered to watch the game at Saudi Arabian bases. After the interviews, two thousand sons and daughters of Persian Gulf military personnel marched onto the field, wearing yellow ribbons and small U.S. flags, and thus, as Lauren Rabinovitz observes, “families broken by the war were made whole by the television apparatus.”²⁰ America’s preeminent athletic competition was thus transformed into a patriotic display to boost American troop morale and public support for the war effort.

Elsewhere in pop culture, the situation comedy *Major Dad* aired a special episode dealing with the Gulf War on February 4, 1991, just after the opening of the war. This program usually sought humor in the two main characters’ political differences—the wife’s liberalism vs. the husband’s militarism. However, in this special episode the husband seeks his wife’s approval of his decision to go to the Persian Gulf, explaining to her that he has “two families,” a private family and an official family. His point is that it is his duty to fight for his official family, the U.S. army, and ultimately his wife recognizes that to protect the private family, she has no choice but to support his decision. The episode evoked an emotional sense of soldiers as members of one big national family, America, and that support for this family should transcend any differences in political views.²¹

The tabloid press also lent its support to the war effort with numerous articles on TV and movie stars’ responses to the war; in general, war-supporting celebrities were treated favorably while those who expressed anti-war sentiments were castigated. After actor Woody Harrelson participated in an anti-war meeting, for example, one tabloid featured an article headlined “Baghdad Woody” that described how Harrelson was “under furious attack from the outraged members of the cast and crew.” Another tabloid featured an article on Jane Fonda—dubbed “Hanoi Jane” during the Vietnam era for her anti-war activism—which centered on the maturity that she demonstrated in supporting the American war effort this time around.²²

One reason for the widespread failure of the mass media to exercise

objectivity in its treatment of the war was the enforcement of strict news censorship. The military developed a “pool system” for the Gulf War whereby they provided information to the press exclusively through official briefings, rather than allowing reporters to collect news material on their own. All photos and articles were censored, access to soldiers was controlled, and reporters had no option but to rely on official military press releases. Furthermore, as the military withheld information from those who provided negative coverage, reporters were under constant pressure to treat the American war effort favorably to maintain access. Discouraged from broadcasting photos of dead bodies, the networks repeatedly televised footage of missiles dropping on military targets, creating an impression of a clean, video game-like techno-war that was devoid of human suffering and death.

Needless to say, the American military developed this “pool system” of censorship in reaction to their failure to control events during the Vietnam War. In the Vietnam era, reporters were allowed to accompany American platoons, reporting freely on the most horrific aspects of the war. They photographed dead bodies, reported on the American soldiers’ poor morale, and even publicized atrocities against the Vietnamese people (including women and children). Such reportage, of course, fueled the anti-war fervor at home.

To prevent the Gulf War from becoming “another Vietnam,” the military emphasized control of information and command of media cooperation. The “pool system” succeeded in focusing the media on the army’s successful attacks on enemy weapons rather than on Iraqi people, and thereby helped win near unanimous support from the American people. The media thus contributed greatly to the American “triumph,” a victory said to have “exorcised the ghosts of Vietnam.”²³

Douglas Kellner points out another reason for media cooperation with the military: “interlocking connections between the military and television networks.” To cite one example of such connections, General Electric, which owns NBC, manufactured many of the weapons that the U.S. military used during the Gulf War, including the Patriot and Tomahawk Cruise missiles, the Stealth bomber, and the B-52 bomber. In Kellner’s words, “when correspondents and paid consultants on NBC television praised the performance of U.S. weapons, they were extolling equipment made by GE, the corporation that pays their salary.”²⁴ As the other major networks also have ties to the military-industrial complex, similar con-

clusions can be drawn on their tendencies to avoid unfavorable coverage of the military.

Daniel C. Hallin finds another reason for the media's support for the war in the business climate of the U.S. television industry. Television had become "far more competitive than it was in the early days of the Vietnam War," and because "news divisions [were] under much greater pressure to produce high audience ratings," they tended "to give audiences what they [were] assumed to want, to play to strong popular sentiments." Hallin regards this as one of the reasons for "television's intense patriotism during the Persian Gulf War."²⁵

As the issues surveyed above demonstrate, the U.S. government, military, and mass media cooperated in conducting a public campaign in support of the war, and indeed the American people responded with sympathy for the soldiers and approval of the war effort. An ABC/Washington Post poll, taken hours after the war began, showed that 76 percent of Americans approved of the war effort, while 22 percent disapproved.²⁶ According to another poll conducted on the eve of the war, 58 percent of women and 82 percent of men supported the war. After U.S. bombs began falling on Baghdad, approval ratings rose overall to 71 percent of women and 81 percent of men.²⁷ These polls clearly reflect the efficacy of the media campaign in influencing the American people, including women. There follows a discussion of the specific contribution of major network TV news coverage to this campaign.

III

Although primary sources of Gulf War TV news coverage are no longer readily available, a number of videos were released immediately after the war that consist largely of footage and reportage drawn directly from news shows broadcast during the war period. These videos provide good evidence of how TV news coverage represented the war. A close analysis of these videos will reveal the nature and means of the influence that the major television networks exercised over viewer responses to the war.

In a fine essay contributed to *Seeing Through Media*,²⁸ Michelle Kendrick observes how in their videos on the war, CNN and CBS emphasized the differences between the Vietnam War and the Gulf War. Using the Vietnam War "as a secondary, embedded narrative," and represent-

ing the Vietnam War as chaotic and nonlinear, CNN and CBS presented the Gulf War as, in contrast, a coherent narrative culminating in American victory. Overall, Kendrick argues, the networks strove to “kick the Vietnam syndrome” and restore American pride.

Expanding the discussion to encompass other videos, additional noteworthy issues emerge. Of particular interest are images of “family” invoked in the videos, that is, the portrayal of soldiers (including General Schwarzkopf) not only as heroes but also as family members. The treatment of female soldiers in the videos, as well as the enshrinement of the Gulf War as one of the great conflicts of American history, also bear consideration.

As might be inferred from its title, CBS’s three-videocassette collection *Desert Triumph* sings the praises of American victory in no uncertain terms.²⁹ The series begins with CBS news anchor Dan Rather intoning, “by February 28, 1991, it was over,” as images of the desert, the wreckage of a tank, and abandoned boots play across the screen. Thus at its outset the CBS video gives the impression that the war had been decisively concluded and American troops withdrawn by that time. As Kendrick points out, this impression conceals “the fact that the biggest battle took place well after the cease-fire.”³⁰ Moreover, insofar as Hussein remained president after the war “concluded,” America’s “triumph” was anything but clear-cut. However, by foregrounding the closure of the war and emphasizing the success of the American effort, the CBS video succeeds in implying that the Gulf War was distinctly different from the war in Vietnam.

The CBS video continues with an explanation of the causes of the conflict. According to Rather’s narration, the war was waged “not so much against a nation as against a single person.” That person, of course, was Saddam Hussein, who boasted that “if he was challenged, the American soldiers would drown in their own blood.” Hussein was characterized as the “unelected president of Iraq” who “had risen to power using murder and terror to destroy his opposition and control his people.” Through his unrestrained ambition to rule the entire region, he had prosecuted “a horrible eight-year conflict” with Iran, in which “a million people died.” After failing to control Iran, Hussein found another victim—the tiny kingdom of Kuwait. The narration continues in this vein, tracing the story of the war chronologically from the dispatch of American troops to the Middle East to the opening of the war. All blame is attributed to Hussein and the historical and social context of the war is largely ignored, in

accord with the official narrative promoted by the U.S. government and military.

In the course of the narration, mention is also made of anti-war peace demonstrators, but they are quickly dismissed as unimportant: “their protests never shook the nation like they had during the Vietnam conflict.” What the video does find important is the superiority of the weapons, soldiers, and command system of the Gulf War relative to those of the Vietnam War; the video largely revolves around the boasts of retired army officers in the roles of analysts.

In contrasting the Vietnam and Gulf wars, one retired Marine Corps general representative of these analysts asserts that the soldiers of the Vietnam War were “an army of draftees, an army taken off the streets of ghettos,” while the soldiers of the Gulf War are “a true professional’s army,” whose “officers were graduates of school after school after school.” As Kendrick points out, this remark contains a racial bias, implying that “the Vietnam War was fought primarily by people of color who lacked commitment, education, and dedication.”³¹ Another point worthy of note here is that as a retired general, this analyst repeatedly refers to the army and the soldiers as “we,” a perspective which works to encourage viewers to identify with them.

The CBS video also devotes a great deal of attention to the history of weaponry from the world wars and Vietnam through the Gulf War. The angle here is obviously to demonstrate the superiority of the weapons of the Gulf War over those of the Vietnam War. Emphasizing the “pinpoint accuracy” of smart bombs that strike nothing but military targets, the video claims that the American military kept civilian casualties in the Gulf to the minimum. This point is driven home by contrasting footage of indiscriminate bombing that resulted in high civilian casualties in past wars. Beyond smart bombs, the CBS video presents each high-tech American weapon in detail, demonstrating the superiority of the American army, and implying how misguided “primitive” Hussein had been in believing that he could defeat America.

A key aspect of the CBS video that Kendrick does not address is the portrayal of soldiers not only as heroes but also as family members. Since the Gulf War was the first in which female soldiers went to battle for America, the network availed itself of the opportunity to craft an image of the entire American family—male and female alike—joining forces to vanquish evil. The CBS video features footage of mother-soldiers taking leave of their crying children, mother-soldiers in tears hugging their

children, and a child reading a letter from her mother in the Persian Gulf. Such footage clearly aimed to elicit viewer—particularly female viewer—sympathy for the American troops. A military analyst is also presented observing that the female soldiers “proved to be as courageous and hard-working” as male soldiers, an impression that must also have appealed to the pride of female viewers.

The father figure in this family drama was General Norman Schwarzkopf, who expressed “enormous concern for the welfare” of his soldiers. The CBS video features footage of Schwarzkopf strolling around a military base and trading jokes with the soldiers, as if to demonstrate the unity of the great American family—parents and children together—in its fight against evil.

Evil, in this case, is of course represented by Saddam Hussein, presented in the CBS video in his role as “ecological terrorist.” The video contains widely disseminated footage of oil spilling into the Persian Gulf and a cormorant covered with oil. When first distributed, this footage—which attributed blame for the oil spill to Iraq—incited sensational anger toward Hussein and support for the American troops around the world. This footage furthermore contributed to winning approval of the war from environmentalists, who had previously voiced opposition. However, it was subsequently revealed in a Japanese press report that this oil spill originated in Saudi Arabia.³² In the post-war CBS video, Dan Rather nevertheless asserts without qualification that Iraq caused the spill by sabotaging the Kuwait Sea Island terminal, and adds that “nature itself became another casualty of Saddam Hussein.” Throughout the CBS video, large-scale destruction of the environment in the Gulf is repeatedly attributed to Hussein’s “holy war.”

In general, the CBS video constructs its narrative of a nature-loving, peaceable America defeating the satanic dictator in perfect harmony with the official narrative promoted by the U.S. government and military. The extent to which this video (and the CBS news coverage it contains) conforms to this official narrative becomes even clearer in the video’s treatment of General Schwarzkopf’s climactic final briefing. In short, the video presents Schwarzkopf’s briefing without any critical commentary whatsoever, and thus adopts as its own *Schwarzkopf’s* narrative—that every American operation was a success, that Hussein is a cruel but primitive dictator, that Iraqi soldiers committed “unspeakable atrocities,” and that the number of American casualties was miraculously small.

The video ends with Bush’s declaration of victory and footage of

American soldiers coming home. Shwarzkopf addresses the soldiers as they prepare to leave the Gulf, saying “the world is proud of you . . . God bless you, and God bless America.” The soldiers return to America, their families meet them with American flags in hand, and hug them amid tears of joy. This footage is accompanied by the patriotic tune “When Johnny Comes Marching Home,” a song that was originally composed to celebrate the return of Union Army soldiers after the Civil War, and that has been sung in every American war since. Thus in conclusion the video enshrines the Gulf War and its soldiers as equivalent in greatness to every other American war and army. The ending of the CBS video is clearly designed to make every American feel proud to be American.

The basic narrative presented in the ABC video *Saddam Hussein vs. the Coalition* is essentially same.³³ Here too a great deal of attention is devoted to explanations of U.S. military strategy and weaponry, with military analysts boasting of America’s technological superiority relative to Iraq, and of the high quality of U.S. soldiers and officers relative to the Vietnam-era military. Like the CBS video, *Saddam Hussein vs. the Coalition* also pronounces the legacy of Vietnam to have been overcome, declaring that through the Gulf War America has rid “itself of the ghosts that have haunted it for a quarter of a century.” Focusing on the Vietnam War connection, the ABC video offers footage of General Westmoreland, the Chief of General Staff during the Vietnam War era, with the comment that “there was a widening gap between what was said and what happened.” The video then cuts to Generals Powell and Schwarzkopf and the narrator’s proudly delivered comment that “this time there was no credibility gap,” and therefore “everything seemed to work.”

What is interesting about ABC’s response to the war is that they produced a video specifically intended for children. Originally broadcast on January 26, 1991, *War in the Gulf: Answering Children’s Questions* is a live call-in program in which ABC news anchor Peter Jennings fields questions about the Gulf War from American children.³⁴ Predictably enough, in order to justify the American war effort in the most easily comprehended terms, this video simplifies the good-guy vs. bad-guy narrative even further than the adult version. When a child asks, for example, “can Saddam Hussein bomb us in the United States?” Jennings immediately replies “no way,” and before explaining how far Iraq is from the United States, adds that “Saddam Hussein did a lot of bad things, but he cannot bomb us in the United States.”

In like manner, the ABC video for children continually directs attention to Hussein's perfidy. When a child asks about the oil spill in the Persian Gulf, the footage of cormorants covered with oil is shown, and a correspondent in Saudi Arabia takes the American perspective that although "no one is quite sure," it is likely that Hussein "purposely dumped the oil into the Persian Gulf . . . to prevent the Marines from easily traveling over the water," or "to set the oil on fire to create a problem." Jennings asks, "are we trying to fight Saddam Hussein or Iraq?" and answers his own question to the effect that Hussein is a dictator, so Iraqis have no choice but to obey him. Jennings goes on to suggest that Hussein might use chemical weapons, and an expert appears to explain how dangerous these weapons are. Demonstrating to viewers how dangerous Hussein is, the ABC video justifies the decision to fight him to American children.

Rounding out the emotional import of this video, taped interviews are included of children who have parents serving in the Gulf. The children naturally say that they miss their parents and hope for their safe return, thus eliciting viewer sympathy not only for the children but for the American troops as well. Jennings concludes by admonishing children not to hate innocent Iraqis involved in the war, but he allows that children might have "good reason to hate Saddam Hussein." The ABC video ends with this comment, concentrating children's hatred on Hussein.

CNN produced a six-videocassette collection entitled *War in the Gulf* with themes similar to those of the videos discussed above.³⁵ As in the CBS and ABC videos, the CNN collection portrays Hussein as a bad guy, focuses attention on Iraqi atrocities, and elicits sympathy for the American troops. Hussein is accused of dumping oil into the gulf, as well as of setting oil wells afire. American and Iraqi weapons are compared, with emphasis on how "inaccurate" the Iraqi Scud missiles were; America's technological superiority is asserted with pride.

Also as in the CBS and ABC videos, the CNN collection invites viewers to empathize with soldiers and their families by means of footage of the daily lives of soldiers in the field and interviews with their families in the United States. An interview with a female soldier who was subsequently killed in action naturally evokes sympathy, particularly from female viewers. Soldiers returning home are represented sentimentally, hugging their families amid tears, and as in the CBS video, "When Johnny Comes Marching Home" is featured as accompanying music.

Also as in the other network's videos, the CNN collection devotes con-

siderable attention to differences between the Gulf War and the Vietnam War. Similar conclusions are drawn: where the Vietnam War was shaped by confusion in the command system and weapons that did not match the terrain, everything worked well in the Gulf.

Despite the similarities, several points distinguish the CNN videos from those of ABC and CBS. First, CNN was the only network to keep its reporters in Baghdad during the air strikes, and when the bombing began three CNN reporters in a hotel in Baghdad provided live coverage of what they saw. One video in the CNN collection, entitled *The Air War*, features interviews with these reporters as well as footage from their live broadcasts, footage that still conveys the excitement these broadcasts must have conveyed, as well as a sense of concern that viewers must have felt for those reporters' lives. Mimi White points out that although it was American missiles causing the danger, the CNN reporters were perceived as heroes resisting the enemy, Iraq. The broadcasts thus worked to elicit viewer empathy for the reporters consonant with their empathy for American soldiers. White also points out that the live broadcasts from Baghdad were used by the Pentagon to demonstrate to the public how accurate and successful their bombings were.³⁶ On all of these points, the CNN live broadcasts clearly worked in the interests of the U.S. government and military.

Another distinguishing feature of the CNN collection is the level of attention devoted to General Norman Schwarzkopf, including one video, entitled *The General*, dedicated to him exclusively. *The General* begins with interviews of those who have known Schwarzkopf singing his praises; classmates from West Point and officers who have worked with him offer such comments as "Norm is this generation's Doug MacArthur"; "he's a good guy to go to war with because he's a good solid commander"; "he's a superb strategist, a brilliant tactician"; and "he's a fighter's fighter." CNN anchor Bernard Shaw then appears on screen, remarking by way of introduction that Schwarzkopf is now added to the "gallery of great generals" that also includes Washington, Jackson, Grant, Patton, Eisenhower, and MacArthur.

The video goes on to profile Schwarzkopf's life from his birth to the Gulf War, admiring him not only for his leadership and military insight, but also for being a good family man, an opera and ballet fan, and a fluent speaker of French and German. Overall, this profile constructs an image of a man who is competent, friendly, and trustworthy—in short the ideal American father.

The next segment of *The General* consists mainly of Schwarzkopf interviews and official briefings, including the same final briefing featured in the CBS video. Since here as in the CBS video this briefing is presented without critical comment, the same analysis applies: the CNN video adopts Schwarzkopf's narrative as its own, and in so doing helps to propagate the official military and government line.

The last segment of the video shows Schwarzkopf returning to America to the welcome of "admiring fans" and the embrace of his wife and three children; the American father has come home to his family. The video concludes with Schwarzkopf's homecoming address to a joint session of Congress on May 8, 1991. The general is enthusiastically received by congressmen—"accorded a hero's welcome seldom seen on Capitol Hill," in the words of *The New York Times*.³⁷ Schwarzkopf's address begins with thanks to the Congress, thanks to the soldiers for their "dedicated service," and an assertion of army solidarity extending beyond race, religion, and gender: "when our blood was shed in the desert, it didn't separate by race." Schwarzkopf then relates the Gulf War to the war in Vietnam: "we feel a particular pride in joining ranks with that special group who served their country in the mountains, jungles and deltas of Vietnam." He continues with a comment clearly intended to ease the pain of Vietnam era soldiers (and of America itself): "they served just as proudly as we served in the Middle East." By thus admiring the soldiers of the Vietnam War and equating them with those of the Gulf War, Schwarzkopf places the theme of Vietnam closure at the center of the official Gulf War narrative. *The General* ends showing members of congress shaking Schwarzkopf's hand and sending him off with a standing ovation.

As close examination of the CBS, ABC, and CNN videos has demonstrated, the major U.S. TV networks cooperated in propagating the official U.S. government and military narrative of the Gulf War. All offered uncritical admiration of the American victory, and all offered idealized images of American solidarity. Portraying soldiers as members of an American national family—with a special emphasis on sentimentalizing female soldiers—the networks all sought to elicit empathy from both male and female viewers. Finally, by simultaneously stressing differences between the Gulf War and the Vietnam War and admiring the heroism of American soldiers of all wars, the networks sought to exorcise the ghosts of Vietnam. Thus did the U.S. military, government, and mass

media join forces to accomplish a shared national goal: recovering the confidence that America had lost through the Vietnam War.

IV

As we have seen, the narrative of the Gulf War was constructed to cure Americans of the pain they had suffered in losing the Vietnam War. This narrative was intended to restore American confidence and reunite a people who were divided over lingering Vietnam War issues. Perhaps the most significant goal of this narrative was to convince the majority of Americans to once again believe that the United States was and had always been on the side of right. The U.S. had been right to interfere in Vietnam; the only mistake—rectified in the Gulf—had been to lose. The right to make war lay in winning, and in doing so with minimum casualties. This is the narrative that the U.S. government and military wanted the American people to accept, and the majority seems to have done so through the agency of this official narrative.

The mass media contributed greatly to the construction and delivery of this narrative. Major TV network news coverage was clearly biased in favor of the war, and by both attributing all blame for the conflict to Hussein and representing America as morally and technologically superior, the networks put viewers—as war-supporting Americans—on the side of right. By portraying soldiers as family members, the networks evoked sympathy for the war effort that made viewers uncritical and that encouraged viewers to pray for and later praise the American victory. Thus did the major network news coverage function effectively in propagating the official narrative of the war.

In 1992, President George Bush accused Democratic presidential candidate Bill Clinton of seeking to escape military service in the Vietnam War. As Bush characterized it, Clinton had protested the Vietnam War in the 1960s, then fled to Europe to evade the draft. Bush's attack, however, found little traction with the American public, and ultimately Bush lost to Clinton. The draft issue most likely did not resonate with the majority of Americans because it was outdated; by means of the Gulf War America had "kicked the Vietnam syndrome." America had always been on the side of right, and was entitled to make war if it could win; the Vietnam War had been a historical aberration because America had lost, so having protested it was acceptable. As Bush himself had

propagated this narrative in prosecuting the Gulf War, his attacks on Clinton's resistance to the Vietnam era failed to convince.

Benefiting once again from Bush's narrative, President Clinton—a former draft evader—ordered the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 and met with little public resistance. It seems to demonstrate how firmly the American narrative of the Persian Gulf War had been entrenched.

NOTES

¹ Quotations from Bush's statement are from "Transcript of the Comments by Bush on the Air Strikes Against the Iraqis," *New York Times*, Jan. 17, 1991.

² Ella Shohat, "The Media's War," in *Seeing Through the Media: The Persian Gulf War*, eds. Susan Jeffords & Lauren Rabinovitz (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 149; Douglas Kellner, *The Persian Gulf TV War* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 66.

³ Ramsey Clark, *The Fire This Time: U.S. War Crimes in the Gulf* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1992), 3. Clark further asserts: "It was not Iraq but powerful forces in the United States that wanted a new war in the Middle East: the Pentagon, to maintain its tremendous budget; the military-industrial complex, with its dependence on Middle East arms sales and domestic military contracts; the oil companies, which wanted more control over the price of crude oil and greater profits; and the Bush administration, which saw in the Soviet Union's disintegration its chance to establish a permanent military presence in the Middle East, securing the region and achieving vast geopolitical power into the next century through control of its oil resources" (12).

⁴ Cf. Kellner, *The Persian Gulf TV War*, 24.

⁵ Kellner, *The Persian Gulf TV War*, 92. See also Chapter 7 "The Role of the American Media in the Gulf Crisis" in Clark, *The Fire This Time*.

⁶ Douglas Rushkoff, *Media Virus: Hidden Agendas in Popular Culture* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 23.

⁷ Kellner, *The Persian Gulf TV War*, 71; Ella Shohat, "The Media's War," 153; Therese Saliba, "Military Presences and Absences: Arab Women and the Persian Gulf War" in *Seeing Through the Media*, eds. Jeffords & Rabinovitz, 271.

⁸ Masami Asano, *Eigo Media ni Miru Hyougen to Ronri* [Expressions and Logic in the English Media] (Tokyo: Kenkyu-sha, 1992), 14–15.

⁹ Shohat, "The Media's War," 148.

¹⁰ Lauren Rabinovitz & Susan Jeffords, "Introduction," in *Seeing Through the Media*, eds. Jeffords & Rabinovitz, 12; Shohat, "The Media's War," 149.

¹¹ Victor J. Caldarola, "Time and the Television War," in *Seeing Through the Media*, eds. Jeffords & Rabinovitz, 101–02.

¹² Shohat, "The Media's War," 153.

¹³ Kellner, *The Persian Gulf TV War*, 67–68.

¹⁴ Caldarola, "Time and the Television War," 104.

¹⁵ Cynthia Enloe, "The Gendered Gulf," in *Seeing Through the Media*, eds. Jeffords & Rabinovitz, 217; Saliba, "Military Presences and Absences," 263.

¹⁶ For instance, see Caldarola, "Time and the Television War," 103: "Indications of the true destructive consequences of the conflict received little attention until after the war ended, and were thus removed from the real-time loop of war-related imagery. Among these postscripts was a U.S. Air Force revelation on March 15 that precision-guided

bombs made up only seven percent of the 88,500 tons of bombs dropped on Iraq and occupied Kuwait during 43 days of war, and that the remaining “dumb” bombs managed to hit their assigned targets only twenty-five percent of the time. As for Iraqi dead and wounded, post-war estimates ranged from the tens of thousands to more than a hundred thousand people, not including the estimated 170,000 Iraqi children who were expected to die from malnutrition and gastrointestinal infections within a year of the war’s conclusion.”

¹⁷ Dana L. Cloud, “Operation Desert Comfort,” in *Seeing Through the Media*, eds. Jeffords & Rabinovitz, 161.

¹⁸ Ramsey Clark reveals how his anti-war remarks were always interrupted on TV, and his taped film of Iraq badly damaged by the American military was refused by TV networks. See Chapter 7 “The Role of the American Media in the Gulf Crisis” in Clark, *The Fire This Time*.

¹⁹ Lauren Rabinovitz, “Soap Opera Woes: Genre, Gender, and the Persian Gulf War,” in *Seeing Through the Media*, eds. Jeffords & Rabinovitz, 190–01.

²⁰ Rabinovitz, “Soap Opera Woes,” 194–95.

²¹ Rabinovitz, “Soap Opera Woes,” 199.

²² Leonard Rifas, “Supermarket Tabloids and Persian Gulf War Dissent,” in *Seeing Through the Media*, eds. Jeffords & Rabinovitz, 232–34.

²³ Daniel Hallin, “Images of the Vietnam and the Persian Gulf Wars in U.S. Television,” in *Seeing Through the Media*, eds. Jeffords & Rabinovitz, 52.

²⁴ Kellner, *The Persian Gulf TV War*, 59–60.

²⁵ Hallin, “Images of the Vietnam and the Persian Gulf Wars in U.S. Television,” 53.

²⁶ Kellner, *The Persian Gulf TV War*, 132.

²⁷ Enloe, “The Gendered Gulf,” 219

²⁸ Michelle Kendrick, “Kicking the Vietnam Syndrome: CNN’s and CBS’s Video Narratives of the Persian Gulf War” in *Seeing Through the Media*, eds. Jeffords & Rabinovitz, 59–76.

²⁹ *Desert Triumph*, prod. Joel Heller, CBS Video, 1991.

³⁰ Kendrick, “Kicking the Vietnam Syndrome,” 75.

³¹ Kendrick, “Kicking the Vietnam Syndrome,” 71

³² Asahi Shimbun Shakaibu, *Media no Wangan Sensou* [The Media’s Gulf War] (Tokyo: Asahi Shimbunsha, 1991), 120–22. Ramsey Clark also attributes this oil spill to U.S. bombing on Iraqi oil tankers in the Persian Gulf. See Clark, *The Fire This Time*, 100.

³³ *Saddam Hussein vs. the Coalition: Behind the Military Strategies*, ABC News, MPI Home Video, 1991.

³⁴ *War in the Gulf: Answering Children’s Questions*, ABC News, MPI Home Video, 1991.

³⁵ *War in the Gulf*, Cable News Network, CNN Video, 1991. The six tapes are respectively entitled “The Conflict Begins,” “The Air War,” “The Ground War,” “The Aftermath,” “Saddam,” and “The General.”

³⁶ Mimi White, “Site Unseen: An Analysis of CNN’s War in the Gulf,” in *Seeing Through the Media*, eds. Jeffords & Rabinovitz, 133.

³⁷ “Congress Members Hail Schwarzkopf: Homecoming Address Brings Loud Standing Ovations in Crowded Chamber,” *New York Times*, May 9, 1991.