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# TELEVISION'S IMPACT ON EXECUTIVE DECISIONMAKING AND DIPLOMACY

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Satellite television reports put information on fast-forward and create a communal knowledge with visceral impact. Whether it was tanks in Tiananmen Square, Berliners dancing atop the Wall, Scud missiles striking Tel Aviv, or Lenin statues toppling in Moscow, the televised images of fantastic change over the past three and a half years have been vivid and charged with emotion because the world could see them unfolding in real time. The seeds of this global communication network go back more than forty years to the introduction of television as a mass media instrument in the United States. And just over a decade ago, the global impact of television was significantly altered when Ted Turner introduced the Cable News Network, a twenty-four-hour news channel with state-of-the-art technology. Like a visual wire service, CNN began to affect the world's dialogue without many noticing, not at least until the momentous events of 1989 when change toward democracy in Eastern Europe and away from democracy in China brought everyone to attention. Not only the speed but the repetition of 24-hour television saturated viewers with information; doctors have even described a form of anxiety as "CNN syndrome."

The impact of live television has also influenced decision-making and diplomacy at the highest levels, altering the ways governments communicate with each other and with their own people. Particularly during crises, television images are deeply imprinted on White House decision-making; they permeate discussions from the earliest senior staff meeting and the president's intelligence briefings an hour later to those meetings conducted at the end of the day in the Oval Office or over drinks upstairs in the official residence. News cycles on the hour and half-hour and constant news updates, both day and night, force the president and his advisers to act or react quickly to changing world events. To make one comparison, in 1961 President John F. Kennedy waited eight days before making a public policy statement on the construction of the Berlin Wall.<sup>1</sup> When the wall was breached in October 1989, President Bush was compelled to make a statement within hours.

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1. Michael Beschloss, *The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960 to 1963* (Harper Collins, 1991).

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Hence, the ability to see events in real time speeds up the decision-making process and accelerates diplomatic exchange; television broadcast also affects the decision itself by providing current information to government officials and immediately sharing that information across the spectrum of friends, enemies, and the governed. That adds political and personal pressure on officials to respond swiftly but also in ways acceptable to both domestic and foreign audiences and constituencies.

### **The Changing Impact of Television on Politics**

The first transcontinental television broadcast in the United States was in 1951, but it was not until the spring of 1954, when networks broadcast the U.S. Senate's emotion-packed Army-McCarthy hearings, that more than fifty percent of American households reported owning black and white television sets. Later that decade, another Senate hearing would rivet the nation as Americans tuned into the live drama and on-camera tension of the young Kennedy brothers, John and Robert, pitted against Teamster's chief Jimmy Hoffa in Estes Kefauver's investigation into racketeering. U.S. citizens came to expect such compelling up to the minute drama from Capitol Hill over the next decades, including the investigation into the Watergate break-in and coverage that led to the downfall of former President Richard Nixon in the 1970s and the complex revelations surrounding the late 1980s scandal over illegal weapons sales to Iran and the consequent distribution of aid to the Contra rebels in Nicaragua. Most recently, live television captivated the nation's viewers with its unblinking look at the nominations of two Supreme Court justices: the unsuccessful nomination of Robert Bork and the winning, but intensely controversial, confirmation of Clarence Thomas.

In terms of the American political process, September 26, 1960, the day of the first debates between presidential candidates John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, is commonly accepted as a watershed in the transformation of live television. Those who listened to the debate on radio were evenly divided about who came out ahead; the majority who watched the debate on television, however, believed that Kennedy was the clear winner. It was a lesson that no politician has ever forgotten: television can make or break a candidate.

Three years later, and only two months after the broadcast networks doubled their daily news coverage to thirty minutes a night, Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas and, marking yet another milestone in live television coverage, the nation was drawn together for an entire weekend, transfixed not only by the tragedy of a young leader but by the on-camera shooting of his assailant. Subsequently, each American president in the last thirty years has had to deal intimately with television — some more successfully than others.

President Lyndon B. Johnson, for instance, never got used to the idea of live television. James Jones, president of the American Stock Exchange and a former White House Chief of Staff for President Johnson recalls that "the strength of LBJ was his overpowering personality. When he came into a room, he domi-

nated it. He was the genuine article. But in television," Jones added, "basically when he was looking into a camera he did not warm up. He froze up. He came across as being sappy and insincere. But in December 1967, we moved all the cameras to the back of the East Room. We had no podium, no prepared statement. He came walking in, greeting people, grabbing shoulders, bandying about. It was a one-of-a-kind performance. He really came across on camera. But he never did it again; he thought it was too informal."<sup>2</sup>

Twenty-five years later, President Bush came to be known as the "President of informality" on television. During a press conference at a summit of hemispheric leaders in Costa Rica, while he was listening to a question from a Central American reporter in the room, Bush overheard two regular White House correspondents comment on his new Rockport shoes, a brand with formal-looking leather top and comfortable synthetic soles. Without any recognition of their whispered conversation, Bush answered the journalist's question and at the same instant raised one foot behind him to show the two correspondents the bottom of his shoe.

Such comfort on camera is not shared by every leader. Israeli officials noted that former prime minister Yitzhak Shamir had no interest in learning how to project himself in his on-camera appearances. And during one of his first television speeches, former Czecho-Slovakian leader and playwright Vaclav Havel deliberately overruled his advisers who insisted he should use a Teleprompter to help him look directly into the camera. Havel explained to his advisers that he had been held for four years in jail and there learned that one way to keep a distance from interrogators was to never look them in the eye. More than that, he told them, he wanted to read his speech from a paper to show the people that it was a real speech that he had written himself.<sup>3</sup>

In another example, Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney once lamented to a White House official that under Canada's parliamentary system of government, the members of the House of Commons routinely grilled him with questions while under the public eye of television to put him on the defensive about government policy. When those sessions were first aired, Mulroney noticed that his popularity ratings dropped twenty-six points in one month. Mulroney soon concluded that television not only gave his questioners a wider public forum, but that live broadcast under these circumstances was not discriminatory: it gave the questions, allegations, and attacks — no matter how gratuitous or unsubstantiated — equal weight to his answers.<sup>4</sup>

"Television legitimizes the question and television legitimizes a story or a rumor," said White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater who commiserated with Mulroney. "That's basically why I don't do [White House] briefings on camera. It gives me a flexibility that Pete [Pentagon Spokesman Pete Williams] and Margaret [State Department Spokeswoman Margaret Tutwiler] don't have.

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2. Telephone interview, September 1991.

3. Interview with Madeleine Albright, President of the Center for National Policy, July 1991.

4. Interview with senior White House official, August 1991.

If I were doing briefings on camera I would read my answers right out of the book just like they do."<sup>5</sup>

At the same time television pinpoints weaknesses of political leaders, it can also magnify strengths of particular government policies and the officials who made them. In the spring of 1991, a study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington charted Bush's approval ratings for his first two years in office. It found that Bush enjoyed his most favorable ratings when he was highly visible on national television during foreign crises; but when he spoke about domestic issues, the media coverage and the public perception of his performance tended to be negative.<sup>6</sup>

Hence, the growth of satellite television technology has a large domestic impact in the U.S. It not only provides immediate viewing of the president's speeches anywhere in the world, but it allows the executive branch of government to easily bypass the traditional news judgements and time constraints of the national network.

Seizing on the new technology gingerly, live satellite television also gives elected leaders the ability to target selected audiences in the United States by region or interest group and even by congressional district. For example, before the vote last year to win congressional approval on "fast-track" legislation to negotiate a trade treaty with Mexico, the White House aimed a public relations campaign directly at television audiences in the districts of senators and congressmen who opposed the president's position or were thought to be wavering in their support of administration policy.<sup>7</sup>

### Live Television and Political Decision-Making

From the earliest hours of the day, policymakers feel pressure to act and react to live video images. It was well before 7:00 a.m. one day in February 1991, for instance, when American television networks began broadcasting excerpts from a Saddam Hussein speech being read in Arabic on Iraqi television. Hussein appeared to be making peace overtures, which many believed would constrain the U.S. and its allies from further hostilities in the Gulf. Assembling five of his top advisers in a study off the Oval Office, President Bush talked with the group about formulating a suitable response: "We've got to get an answer out there fast. Everybody in the world is going to say, 'Take them up on it.' If it's not adequate, we've got to know."<sup>8</sup>

Within twenty minutes, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak called the President advising him to ignore the Iraqi offer, whatever it may be. Minutes later, National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft took a call from his British counter-

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5. Interview with Marlin Fitzwater, Washington, D.C., May 1991.

6. Center for Media and Public Affairs, "TV News and Public Approval of Bush," *Media Monitor* (March 1991).

7. Interview with Clayton Yuetter, former Chairman of the Republican National Committee, Washington D.C., September 1991.

8. Interviews with senior Bush Administration officials, July 1991.

part, Charles Powell, who wanted to know what the U.S. intended to do. While Scowcroft was on one line, then Secretary of State James A. Baker III took another call from French Foreign Minister Roland Dumas, who suggested that Bush should consider the offer.

Morning television anchors and commentators were quick to suggest that this could be the breakthrough to end the war and to obviate the need for a ground assault. Said one CBS correspondent: "This war, for a lot of intents and purposes, is over." But saying so would not make it so. As it turned out, Hussein's statement was not a surrender or even much of a counter-offer to negotiate. He did not address most of the West's concerns nor agree to an unconditional pullout of Iraqi troops from Kuwait—the central United Nations demand. Even before hearing the full report, Bush understood his immediate diplomatic problem with the coalition of nations he helped put together: "We've got to get on the air fast to answer all these people who either don't know what to do or want us to do something we don't want to," Bush told his advisers.<sup>9</sup>

Soon after, one of the president's advisers placed a call to the Saudi Arabian ambassador, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, asking not only for a translation of Hussein's speech but for his assessment of whether this was a serious offer, a "peace feeler," or just another torrent of words to throw the coalition off track. Bandar quickly called back, saying the offer was loaded with unacceptable conditions and ignored U.N. demands that Iraq withdraw from Kuwait. Bush then immediately directed his spokesman, Marlin Fitzwater, to issue a statement rejecting Hussein's proposals. Thus, within two hours of the initial report by satellite, Baghdad understood through additional televised images that the offer had been rejected. Marlin Fitzwater later spoke of the incident:

The course of action was set. There was no talk of cables back to the embassies or phone calls back to heads of state. In most of these kinds of international crises now, we virtually cut out the State Department and the desk officers. . . . Their reports are still important, but they often don't get here in time for the basic decisions to be made.<sup>10</sup>

Hence, while the media of television does not appear to have changed the actual number of people who are likely to participate in the decision-making process, the normal information flow into the Oval Office was vastly altered by live video images. Traditionally in U.S. foreign policy-making, each president has maintained a small circle of advisers, sometimes consisting of appointed officials, sometimes a "kitchen cabinet."<sup>11</sup> During a crisis, the group may be comprised of agency heads, plus a few trusted White House aides, or in Bush's case during the Gulf conflict, it was known as the Group of Eight: men from the National Security Council, Pentagon officials, and Secretary Baker.

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9. Two participants in the room confirmed the hectic nature of the discussion that morning. Interviews with senior Bush Administration officials, July 1991.

10. May 1991.

11. A term first applied to Franklin Roosevelt's informal group of advisers.

It is among members of these trusted teams that the full impact of television is felt. Under normal circumstances, these officials receive information through reports and advice from their deputies, especially from the so-called Deputies' Committee which meets regularly on a secure video link between the White House Situation Room and their various agencies. In these situations, the government "stuffs" a problem by bringing together officials with experience and expertise in a particular area who analyze a situation, pass on relevant data, and recommend policy options to the agency heads. Especially during crises, however, those within the inner power circle of recent administrations also monitor and are influenced by the sights captured in the public camera eye and by the journalistic commentary that inevitably follows the live scene.

Carnes Lord, who served as Vice President Dan Quayle's National Security Adviser, notes that the reality of instant, live television "gets inside the decisions cycle. . . . There's really no time to digest this information, so the reaction tends to be from the gut, just like the reaction of the man on the street. It is worrisome that high-level people are being forced essentially to act or to formulate responses or policy positions on the basis of information that is of very uncertain reliability."<sup>12</sup>

The emotive characteristics of journalism, particularly televised journalism, can also make an event or scene seem more or less important than it really is. Such reporting can be aimed deliberately at swaying policymakers as well as the public. In one example, Michael Bohn, a former Navy intelligence officer and director of the White House situation room during Ronald Reagan's last years in office, observed the televised images that eventually made it back from the Soviet Union's Chernobyl incident, "It doesn't matter how many descriptions you have of the black hole where Chernobyl used to be. Until you saw a picture of this stinking, smoking mass it didn't hit you, the enormity of it. So pictures are a big deal."<sup>13</sup> In fact, it was only after the public viewed televised reports of beleaguered Kurds fleeing Iraq and put pressure on the government that the U.S. sent military support to help with relief efforts — even though the previous week Bush had said that U.S. troops would not intervene under any circumstances. Most recently in Somalia, U.S. and foreign officials have been forced to focus more attention on that distressed region of Africa because of television coverage highlighting mass famine and civil war.

In his book, *Mass Media and American Foreign Policy*, Patrick O'Heffernan claims television creates a world view in the minds of policymakers that sets their agenda of what is important. "The president isn't going to read a 35-page report from the CIA. He may read the executive summary, but what he does see is what's on CNN," said O'Heffernan, an expert on foreign policy and the media at the Georgia Institute of Technology.<sup>14</sup> In bureaucratic terms, televised information creates a top-down approach to problem-solving. Thus, in this era, opinions are forming long before the analysis from normal policymaking

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12. Telephone interview with Carnes Lord, July 1991.

13. Telephone interview, July 1991.

14. Interview, Atlanta, Georgia, June 1991.

channels arrives.

Richard Haass, special assistant to the president for Middle East affairs on the National Security Council staff, complained after the Gulf War that he could see an event or speech live on CNN at 2:00 p.m. but he had to wait three hours or more before the CIA could deliver its own updated news and commentary to the NSC office.<sup>15</sup> "We can do better than a diplomat banging a typewriter in a besieged embassy somewhere," confirmed Peter Vesey, director of CNN International.<sup>16</sup> In addition, U.S. diplomat Mark Mohr told a Harvard conference examining the role of media during the Tiananmen incident that American diplomats stationed in Beijing at the time were proscribed from venturing outside at night; instead, they kept up with events by monitoring television correspondents and cameramen talking with their producers on two-way radios.<sup>17</sup>

The effects of public satellite broadcasts are thus strongly felt among intelligence agencies who must monitor public as well as private communications, speed up their own assessments of reported events, answer questions, and occasionally defend their interpretations against the evidence witnessed on the television screen. Robert Gates, the U.S. government's Director of Central Intelligence, promised to streamline the CIA's daily intelligence assessments, providing updated and computerized information to follow public reports. At his confirmation hearings before the Senate, Gates acknowledged that intelligence agencies had failed to take emerging public technology into account. "As a result," he said, "I think much of our current intelligence is in fact old news by the time that it reaches many of the policymakers."<sup>18</sup> Gates has subsequently made television a personal and professional interest because, after serving as the president's deputy national security adviser, he has seen the value of live satellite broadcasts in his capacity both as an intelligence analyst and as a policy-making consumer of intelligence assessments.

Currently, the CIA technical staff is working on an advanced delivery system that combines existing technologies to allow policymakers to interact with databased information, graphics, and even video. The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) has also consulted CNN to determine how to coordinate reporting from around the world into coherent and interactive communications between their headquarters and bases overseas.

### Satellite Diplomacy

Televised images, if nothing else, have raised the political stakes for public officials. It "puts everybody on real time," said former Secretary of State George

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15. Richard Haass, speech delivered at an Annenberg Washington Program conference, Washington, D.C., 26 September 1991.

16. Interview, CNN headquarters, Atlanta, Georgia, June 1991.

17. Conference on the role of the media in Tiananmen Square, Joan Shorenstein-Barone Center, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Cambridge, MA, 30-31 May 1991.

18. Testimony of Robert Gates, U.S. Senate Confirmation Hearing, 16-25 August 1991.

Shultz, "because everyone is seeing the same thing."<sup>19</sup>

The peculiar effects of television on diplomacy were keenly felt in early June 1989 when two White House aides, Andrew Card, then deputy chief of staff, and Marlin Fitzwater, the president's press secretary, were sitting in a room at the Nonatum Hotel in Kennebunkport, Maine, watching televised scenes of Chinese soldiers descending on Tiananmen Square. The two officials had been with President Bush in the same square only four months before, and what they were witnessing on television was so startling that one of them picked up the telephone and asked the White House operator to connect him to Walkers Point. "Mister President," he said without preamble, "you've got to see this."

Just five months into his presidency, Bush had been aware of the escalating tensions in Beijing, but he had hoped the standoff between the government and the students demonstrating for democracy could be resolved peacefully. Only days before, the president had returned from NATO headquarters in Brussels where he had negotiated a compromise with the West Germans, and he was enjoying the glow of his first major success in handling foreign affairs. As the United States ambassador to the Peoples Republic of China in the mid-1970s, Bush believed he had a good understanding of the internal problems in China and special insight into the leadership of the nation, and he therefore had a substantial personal interest in U.S.-China relations. So when Card and Fitzwater called on the new president and urged him to see what was happening half a world away, Bush left his oceanfront family home and walked down the new asphalt driveway to the shingled building that was used as the Secret Service command post. It was the only place on the property capable of receiving the Cable News Network signal; the president's own home was not yet equipped for cable.

Whatever impact those images had on the president personally, they had an immediate effect on America's view of China and its hardline leadership. "The tragedy of Tiananmen Square could not have been more vivid if it had been at Times Square," said Susan Zirinsky, one of the CBS network senior producers who was in Beijing at the time.<sup>20</sup> Regarding the impact of televised images on the magnitude of the event, Fitzwater recalled in an interview, "We were the first government to respond, labeling it an outrage and so forth, and it was based almost entirely on what we were seeing on television. We were getting reporting cables from Beijing, but they did not have the sting, the demand for a government response that the television pictures had." Almost overnight, the popular U.S. perception of China changed from that of the intriguing giant but benign Communist state to the malevolent gerontocracy that would turn on its young to preserve its rulers. "You couldn't devise words to match the images. There was no word too 'hot.' For example, we were saying words like 'outrage' and 'brutality' — pretty tough words — and they were just being dismissed as not

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19. Telephone communication with Secretary Shultz's office, June 1991.

20. Conversation at the Sharonstein-Barone Center, Cambridge, MA.

caring," said Fitzwater. "We needed words like 'bloody,' 'guts,' and 'murder' just to break through the perception that was created by those pictures."<sup>21</sup> As Susan Zirinsky observed, "... the technology has created a global village that Marshall McLuhan would have been proud of."<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, it is hard to imagine any future president or world leader being without access to live television reports. In the past year, both the White House and Walkers Point have been equipped with fiber-optic cables to receive and transmit live television images via ground stations to circling satellites. Television sets are on twenty-four hours a day in the White House situation room, and the same is true in other world capitals. Beside the television sets in his upstairs residence and in the two small studies off the Oval Office, Bush also watches broadcast television in his limousine, and he has even carried a Watchman television in his hand as he walks his son's dog, Ranger, around the White House grounds and along the wooded paths of Camp David.

Bush publicly revealed his thinking about televised images during a visit to Kiev in August 1991, shortly before the aborted coup in the Soviet Union, when he told a welcoming audience, "I will shorten these remarks because our lives are controlled by satellite these days." Though hyperbole, when looking at the changes in world politics during the span of George Bush's presidency, satellite technology did indeed determine a great many of the dramatic moments influencing his foreign policy decisions.

The possibilities of conducting diplomatic exchanges by live satellite transmission were most evident later that month when a hardline coup left Mikhail Gorbachev held under house arrest at his dacha on the Black Sea and Boris Yeltsin barricaded with his supporters inside the White Palace of the Russian Parliament in Moscow. For some inexplicable reasons, the coup plotters failed to stop all satellite links as they tried to consolidate power, leaving Western journalists the ability to send live reports. More importantly, it also allowed the ruling elite, including the military, to receive the Moscow news and other reports on their satellite dishes and western-made televisions. Thus, the top echelon of Soviet society, who were unable to see or hear about Yeltsin's opposition to the coup attempt on state-run television, learned of the depth of the resistance to the coup from news reports and from the American President in Western broadcasts.

On the first morning of the coup attempt, Bush and his advisers weighed how harshly they should condemn the overthrow. If it was irreversible, they would have to deal with new leaders; if it failed, they had to show their own commitment to democratic changes. Within eight hours, the CIA had already questioned whether the coup could succeed because the ancillary signs (reassigned troops, communications control, etc.) were not evident in the Soviet Union. At the White House that morning, Deputy CIA Director Richard Kerr briefed several national security officials concerning these discrepancies. And

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21. Fitzwater, May 1991.

22. Zirinsky conversation.

within hours of this briefing Bush watched a televised image that he took to heart: Yeltsin himself was there on television, clambering onto a Soviet tank outside the Parliament building reading a statement of opposition.

"When the president saw that, that was the key for us," said a senior Bush adviser, who was with him that day.<sup>23</sup> Overnight, Yeltsin had sent a message to the U.S. Charge d'Affaires in Moscow, James Collins, telling him that the coup could be reversed, but some intelligence officials were concerned that calls claiming to be from Yeltsin could be fake. For the president and his top advisers, however, the sight of the white-haired Yeltsin atop the tank was enough, making it "visible and verifiable" that he was willing to fight the coup plotters. Bush subsequently went ahead with condemning the overthrow.

Satellite communication aided Yeltsin in another way. Moments after talking to Yeltsin for the third time, Bush told his aides he wanted to go on live television. The coup, now two days old, was in its terminal and possibly most dangerous, potentially violent, phase. Bush asked Yeltsin if it would help to make another public statement. "Yes, Yes, Yes," the U.S. president recalled the Russian leader answering, "It is very important." What both men knew was that two planes had taken off from Moscow, heading toward Gorbachev's dacha: one transported plotters of the coup while the other carried Yeltsin's representatives. Bush and Yeltsin were concerned that Gorbachev, in his isolation and fear, might sign something to undermine his position just as the coup was failing.

"Information was a key factor, and a lack of information is what they [the coup plotters] were counting on," said a senior adviser. "Our big fear was that he [Gorbachev] was sitting there knowing nothing about what had happened. So what if Yazov [Dmitri Yazov, the former defense minister who had joined the coup] showed up at his door first, on the first plane, and told him, 'It's all over, we have it under control, join us and get on the plane?'"<sup>24</sup>

Bush didn't know that Gorbachev had received information during the coup from outside sources until the next day when, after being freed, he returned to Moscow and held a live news conference. As Bush sat in his living room in Kennebunkport lunching on turkey salad and corn muffins, he heard the recently freed Soviet leader recall how his personal KGB guards had rigged a makeshift antenna to receive the BBC, the Voice of America, and Radio Liberty. A week later, Gorbachev told CNN president Tom Johnson that he immediately ordered a satellite dish installed at his dacha.

But at the moment of uncertainty during the attempted coup, Bush had another worry: Gorbachev's safety. "At that time it still wasn't over. We thought it [Bush's televised appearance] might make the difference. It might be the difference between a guy pulling the trigger and not pulling the trigger."<sup>25</sup>

If world leaders are getting a great deal of their information from television,

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23. Senior White House officials, Kennebunkport, Maine, 20 August 1991.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*

Robert Lichter, head of the Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington, suggested "This has, in some instances, made journalists into diplomatic brokers."<sup>26</sup> "With Bush, the antennae are functioning in a much more sensitive way [than with his predecessor, Ronald Reagan]," said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Dean of the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School of Communication. "What that means is the ability to influence George Bush by using CNN channels is fairly high. Ordinarily to get to the president, you've got to go through whole layers of bureaucracy. Once you know he watches CNN, if you're a world leader, you go on CNN."<sup>27</sup>

The idea that diplomacy can be conducted in part through televised images is not new, but improved satellite technology and the resulting methods of reporting and disseminating information has certainly heightened the effect. More than a decade ago, ABC's *Roone Arledge* decided it was time for television to stop interviewing other journalists during its public affairs or foreign policy programs and go directly to the news or policymaker. Out of that came Ted Koppel's "Nightline" program, which had begun as a temporary nightly report updating the latest in the crisis of the U.S. embassy hostages held in Iran. Even before that, the late Israeli premier Menachem Begin and the late Egyptian President Anwar Sadat were the first to engage in a kind of "television diplomacy" as they agreed to meet for the first time, a process that led to Camp David and the peace accord between the two nations.

But it was Koppel over the last twelve years who pioneered live satellite interviews with foreign leaders, making it a staple of television journalism. He has brought together, electronically at least, opposing leaders such as the late Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos and his successor, Corazon Aquino; former South African President D.W. Botha and Nobel Peace Prize winner Bishop Desmond Tutu.

By hosting "town meetings" from Israel to South Africa, individuals and groups, many of whom had never spoken to each other publicly, were joined on camera. In September 1991, after the 72-hour coup attempt on the Kremlin had failed, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and Russian leader Boris Yeltsin sat side-by-side in a room in the Kremlin, answering questions put to them by ABC anchorman Peter Jennings and individuals in studio audiences around the country.

Because policymakers tend to rely more on people than on paper, there is a special impact when they see a state leader go on television to explain his or her message to the world community or to a specific leader. "In cold print you miss the inflection, or the bat of the eye, the sneer, the smile or whatever," said Peter Vesey.<sup>28</sup> The ability to witness people as they deliver messages "instead of all these little bits of paper floating about" is especially important in the Middle East, said British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd.<sup>29</sup>

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26. Telephone interview, August 1991.

27. Telephone interview, September 1991.

28. Vesey interview, June 1991.

29. Conversation with author, Washington, D.C., June 1991.

### Visualizing War

The visual impact of war has been recognized probably from the earliest cave painting depictions of past battles. The photographic imagery of war was first seen in the United States with the publication of Matthew Brady's scenes of dead Union and Confederate bodies on the battlefields of the American Civil War. The Vietnam conflict, of course, was known in the U.S. as the first "living room war" because of the ability to transmit tapes of battle scenes and their aftermath within days, and often within twelve hours, of the fighting.

But the visualization of war has moved well beyond that now. The Gulf War demonstrated that television was capable of showing, for the first time since the frolicking residents of Washington travelled by carriage out to the Bull Run battlefield, the sight of American troops going into combat live. For the policy-maker, instant access from the battlefield to the conference table and back again has enormous political implications both good and bad.

The government's use of and reaction to visual images is not a new phenomenon. A World War II photograph of three soldiers did not show faces, only lifeless bodies washed by the tide and splayed along a South Pacific beach; yet for those Americans who saw the photo in the pages of *Life* magazine in September 1943, it was graphic evidence that the war effort was both difficult and costly. The fighting had been underway for nearly two years, and the assault in which the soldiers were killed — on Buna Beach, New Guinea — had occurred nine months before, but this photograph was one of the first to be published during World War II showing Americans killed in action.

Policymaking was far different for President Franklin Roosevelt than for President Bush. During World War II there was no concern about losing public support or being blamed personally for the loss of young American lives. Roosevelt decided, for instance, that the nation's newspapers and magazines should show the deadly effects of war. His purpose, according to military historian Peter Malowski, was to try to make the homefront understand the difficulties that soldiers faced in the field.<sup>30</sup> Roosevelt was particularly upset about civilian griping over rationing and other inconveniences created by the massive war effort. He thought that if the American people had a better realization of the hardships the soldiers were undergoing, it would toughen up the civilian population. But it was only *after* this hardening process that the media was encouraged to show American substantial suffering on the battlefield.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps more important during Roosevelt's day, the flow of information from the battlefield to the homefront could be strictly controlled.

In contrast, during the Persian Gulf conflict, the media had virtually no access to the mortuary at Dover Air Force Base, the military's main East Coast receiving station for those killed in accidents or war. Bush's reasons for blocking media access were both political and personal. Perhaps from lessons learned about the graphic portrayal of images during the Vietnam War, and possibly even from

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30. Telephone interview, August 1991.

31. *Ibid.*

Matthew Brady's daguerreotype Civil War prints, images of dead soldiers and body bags have historically undercut public morale in the United States. But President Bush was also particularly sensitive to televised images of U.S. war casualties after he was deeply embarrassed in the days following the invasion of Panama in December 1989, when two of the four networks used a split-screen technique to juxtapose President Bush's whimsical demeanor in the White House against the first coffins of American servicemen being unloaded at Dover. By chance, at the moment when the body bags were carried off the plane, in the White House briefing room, Bush jokingly answered a question about an unrelated subject. The televised images contrasted the president's light-hearted laughter with the somber sight of the invasion's first casualties. Though at least one network formally apologized to Bush for televising his unwitting actions, White House officials were determined that it would never happen again.

In negotiations between the Pentagon and the major media organizations after the Gulf War, newspapers and networks tried to persuade the U.S. general command and Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney that military restrictions not only hampered the legitimate reporting of events but that the advancing technology in communications made it necessary to find a different way of operating and coordinating the flow of information in wartime. But the Defense Department argued that particularly in the theater of military operations, live television along with instant radio and press reports, could pose an immediate danger for troop security and planning. Retired Lieutenant General Thomas Kelly, who was director of operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the war and became a media hero for his straight-forward talk during the war briefings stated, "We didn't have a problem in this war, even with the electronic press. However, in a closer conflict, where the outcome was not as clear, it could cause a problem." One example of when the government might insist on censorship, he said, is when satellite pictures are bought from another nation that show the battlefield, not only enemy troop emplacements but U.S. locations as well.<sup>32</sup>

On the allied side of the Gulf War, in Dhahran and Riyadh, all the networks and major newspapers talked with their correspondents by satellite telephone. Setting up three-foot satellite dishes on their hotel balconies, the journalists filed stories from their laptop computers straight up to the Inmarsat satellite. "The point that was made to Cheney was, look, in five years every journalist will have a [satellite] telephone in his hip pocket," CNN war correspondent Peter Arnett said in a telephone interview regarding media access to information during the Gulf War. "They [the military] can talk tough, but time is on our side and technology is on our side."<sup>33</sup>

As if to echo Arnett's predictions, the post-Gulf War standoff between Iraq and the United Nations showed just how far technology can permeate a news event. In September 1991, though forty-four UN inspectors were detained in a downtown Baghdad parking lot, they managed to keep up a daily conversation with the outside world for more than a week by way of hand-held satellite

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32. Telephone interview, August 1991.

33. Telephone interview, July 1991.

telephones. During the tense negotiations over the right of the inspectors to be there, a UN official in New York was quoted as saying the communications link that team leader David Kay had established with television networks around the world were an important aspect of the leverage on the UN employed. "These are our weapons," said the official.

Some have even claimed that the U.S. military relished having CNN's Peter Arnett and other television journalists in Baghdad throughout the Gulf war to confirm their own reports from the ground. Admiral Frank Kelso, the Chief of Naval Operations and a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said in a September 5, 1991 interview that Arnett's presence was helpful to the U.S. because, even though his reports were censored, Arnett confirmed what kind of damage the air war was inflicting on the Iraqi capitol. "The politicians, some of them, were aghast," said Arnett, who is writing a book on his experience. "But the military people were enjoying seeing it. It's that extra little window they have, that degree of confirmation."<sup>34</sup>

The Pentagon also recognized that satellite technology was ripe for use in psychological warfare. The crusty Kelly, who presented a pitch-perfect image of a career God-and-country soldier, recalled in an interview his own attempts to unsettle the enemy. "Every time I got asked a question about the use of special weapons, nuclear, chemical, or biological, I would look directly into the TV cameras and say that we would hold everybody responsible if those weapons were used," said Kelly. "My intent was to let not only Hussein but his subordinates know that that was a no-no."<sup>35</sup> Within the military, some officials therefore see television as an effective tool in building domestic and global support for American actions abroad.

But if this satellite technology is indeed a weapon for the press, negotiators, and the military, it has certainly added a new dimension to political and military decision-making and implementation as well. During a March 1991 conversation, General Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, intimated that the effect of satellite images on the decision-makers in Washington is subtle. "Live television coverage doesn't change the policy," he said, "but it does create the environment in which the policy is made." For example, as live satellite television becomes more prevalent, those who make political decisions about war and peace are more intimately connected to the consequences of their decisions on the battlefield. Detailed, up-to-the-minute satellite communication has been used extensively as a means for second-guessing military decisions, or at least for creating the impression of second-guessing. These perceptions are real enough to extend the same chagrin to current U.S. military leaders that British generals felt during the Crimean War when the ability to send signals and instructions by telegraph from London to Paris, then across the European continent to the Balkans, and then by hand to their encampments, was seen as a terrible civilian intrusion into the military conduct of war. "It may allow a

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34. July 1991.

35. August 1991.

great many more armchair quarterbacks," recites Carnes Lord. "The more widespread information is about things like this, the more congressmen you have becoming secretaries of state."<sup>36</sup> Not only congressmen, but the citizenry also form an opinion, and the collective domestic effect influences the government's pursuit of any foreign policy. General Norman Schwarzkopf in his recently-published memoirs recalled the ability of his military and civilian superiors to monitor the situation: "Washington was ready to overreact, as usual, to the slightest ripple in public opinion. I thought, but didn't say, that the best thing the White House could do would be to turn off the damn TV in the situation room."<sup>37</sup> Of course, it's on in many rooms.

At times during the Persian Gulf conflict, the government wanted to cast its message in different tones and forms. It was important for domestic support, for example, that Bush not seem bent on war, but at the same time, he had to remain credible to Saddam Hussein. "He wanted to be a man of peace at home and a man of war abroad," recalled ABC White House correspondent Brit Hume, who also suggested that the level of difficulty in achieving such recognition was so great that even as late as January 9, 1991, Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz was not convinced that Bush would order a military intervention even after Iraq rejected Secretary Baker's final ultimatum to leave Kuwait.

At the start of the Gulf War, U.S. policymakers saw and heard images of the initial effects of their own decisions through live satellite hookup. On the evening of January 16, 1991, the president was sitting in his small study off the Oval Office watching the evening news shows when ABC aired a telephone report from correspondent Gary Shepard in Baghdad, who said there were flashes in the sky. Moments later, at 6:35 p.m., CNN's Bernard Shaw also in Baghdad, reported, "Something is happening outside," adding that loud explosions were rocking the Iraqi capital and that the war apparently had begun.

"What's going on?" Bush queried one of his aides as he wheeled around in his brown leather chair. "It's twenty minutes too early. . . ." He picked up his telephone with a secure line to the Pentagon and was immediately connected to Secretary Cheney, who assured him there was no premature strike.<sup>38</sup> What Bush and the rest of the nation was hearing from the television reports was only anti-aircraft fire, Cheney told the president. Because the Iraqi radar had picked up American planes lifting off from aircraft carriers and Saudi airfields and crossing into Iraqi airspace, they were prematurely shooting into the night sky.

The defense chief called back at 7:02 p.m. to report that the war against Iraq had begun: "The first bomb just hit, Mr. President, right on schedule."

"Right on schedule," Bush repeated, leaning back in his chair. One minute before Cheney called the White House, a senior Army strategist stood in the Pentagon's command center and listened as a television correspondent looked out his hotel window in Baghdad and talked on the phone about glistening fires

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36. Telephone interview, July 1991.

37. General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, with Peter Petri, *It Doesn't Take a Hero* (New York: Grey/Bantam, 1991).

38. Interview with senior Bush adviser at the White House, June 1991.

in the sky. The commander looked at his watch and turned to those around him. If the cruise missile is on target, he said, it will strike the Iraqi central communications tower, cutting off power for normal telephone communications, and the reporter will go off the air right about. . . . (He counted off several seconds.) . . . Now! All the lines out of Baghdad went dead.

"Beware the vividness of transient impressions; beware the vividness of transient events," warned General Powell quoting the 19th century German strategist Karl von Clausewitz, who understood that the foot soldier is less concerned about the big picture and more aware of the bullets whizzing over his head.<sup>39</sup> Military leaders must look beyond emotions in the pitch of battle, Powell told a convention of U.S. newspaper editors after the Gulf War; but he also acknowledged that it has become more difficult now that technology enables images of war to be broadcast instantly and simultaneously to more than 130 nations.

### Conclusion

The diplomatic importance of satellite television not only made the slower rhythms of the pouch and cable seem quaint but also began to alter the boundaries that used to define cultures as well as delineate countries. In a spring 1991 update of his famous speech 30 years ago in which he described television as a "vast wasteland," Former FCC Chairman Newton Minow described the changed role of televised communication: "Satellites," he said, "have no respect for political boundaries. Satellites cannot be stopped by Berlin Walls, by tanks in Tiananmen Square, or by dictators in Baghdad. In Manila, Warsaw, and Bucharest, we saw the television station become today's Electronic Bastille."<sup>40</sup> There is virtually no nation in the world not covered by a satellite "footprint," the area where electronic signals can be pulled down from the sky. In October 1991, the BBC launched a new satellite news service in Southeast Asia and plans to expand it worldwide. There are now several attempts to create a market viable all-European network. Last year, the Arab League financed a new, jointly-owned communications satellite, Arabsat, that makes news and entertainment (mostly Egyptian television shows) available across the Middle East and North Africa. It can also be seen in London, Paris, and Bonn.

Thus, television imagery transmitted by satellite is irrevocably altering the way governments deal with each other, just as it makes traditional diplomacy all but obsolete in times of crisis. Often outpacing the delivery of government intelligence networks, live satellite transmissions can focus on the essence of an event without the intervening interpretation from intelligence or foreign service officers and other layers of bureaucratic reporting. The downside, of course, is that video reporting also may focus on the less important but more telegenic

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39. Colin Powell, speech delivered to the National Newspaper Association, Washington, D.C., 15 March 1991.

40. Speech at the Gannett Foundation Media Center, Columbia University, New York, 9 May 1991.

occurrence while missing the main event.

The technological ability to send a videotape picture around the world and get into the corners of the most closed societies ultimately may have more impact than anyone can yet imagine; at the moment, it may even be too soon to understand the consequences. In any case, the presence of live satellite television heats up the domestic and international political climate and creates an atmosphere that pervades the decision-making cycle. At times, it deprives policy makers of secrecy and luxury of time. It forces them to deal with multiple audiences at once, and in the end, magnifies their failures as well as their successes.



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