

Managing the Media

Philip L. Geyelin

Does the spotlight of press attention sincerely illuminate a newsmaker or sensationally create a news event? Philip Geyelin suggests that government actions set the foreign policy agenda, placing journalists at the mercy of policymakers and the events themselves.

It is impossible to judge the role of the news media in foreign policymaking (or school board elections, for that matter) without a quick preliminary word about how they work — how the press, television, and radio fit into the general scheme of life in an open society. The media (a dreadful word now so entrenched in the language to take into account electronic journalism that its use is unavoidable) are called many things: a nuisance, a menace to national security, a high calling, a fourth branch of government. And they are a little bit of all those things. But they are first and foremost a *transmitter*; that is to say the media do not create or originate the news. True, there are those in the news business who invent or twist what they supposedly receive from their sources. (There is malpractice in every profession, and it succeeds no better, and for no longer, in journalism than it does in medicine, the law, or whatever.) The reality is that almost everything you read in newspapers and news magazines or see on television news shows or hear on radio newscasts is *received* before it is transmitted, whether we are talking about the statement of a White House spokesman, a talk-show appearance by the secretary of state, a government document, congressional testimony, press briefings, or individual interviews. Its reliability, then, depends heavily on the reliability and/or integrity not only of the transmitter but of the source.

From this, two conclusions can be drawn. One is that this is an enormously complex process, a sort of coaxial cable with all sorts of strands, some stronger than others, but all of them subject to abuse and breakdown of one kind or another and at every point along the way. The manipulation, the misperceptions, the plain and simple mistakes occur not only with the initiators of the news and the transmitters, but also with the ultimate recipients, the public. Just as a dozen witnesses of the same automobile accident may give you almost a dozen different accounts of what happened, so different readers, viewers and listeners may well derive widely different impressions of the same event. The consumers of news, after all, are also human, and bring to the printed page or the television screen or a radio newscast their own prejudices and predilections.

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The process, it needs to be noted, is all the more complicated in the case of foreign policy, where everything said by the policymakers and the politicians has to take into account not just domestic reaction but the sensitivities and the national interests of third parties — the allies and adversaries with which we conduct foreign relations. The interests of our own national security impose a far greater need for secrecy. International politics, otherwise known as diplomacy, accordingly puts the usually adversarial relationship between the news business and the business of government under a particular strain. We are dealing, then, with a natural state of imperfection.

We are also talking — and this is the second, and perhaps more important conclusion — about a state of affairs in which the *transmitter* is, in a real sense, at the mercy of the initiators of policy, even when the original impulse comes in the form of a reporter's question. Policymakers are, after all, free to pick and choose the questions to which they wish to respond. The government controls the information because it creates it. It owns, so to say, the opinions and insights as well as the intelligence material and the secrets that the media are trying to get at. An example that comes most forcefully to mind is President Ronald Reagan's celebrated launch-without-warning of his Strategic

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Defense Initiative (a.k.a. "Star Wars") in March, 1983. Nothing better illustrates the power of government to overwhelm the means of communication than the case history of how a trusted president, with not much more to work with than "the lift of a driving dream," as Richard Nixon used to say, was able in just a few hundred words on nationwide television to capture the imagination of the public, incite and reshape a national debate, substantially transform the course of nuclear arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union, and invite the most profound questioning at home and abroad of the reliability of what was thought to be an established and accepted US strategic doctrine.

The element of surprise was certainly a factor, together with the ability of the government not only to initiate news but to control its presentation. The record suggests that once the SDI genie had been released from the bottle by the president, the debate about it, and the news coverage of the debate, was well-balanced. The weight of informed opinion was clearly against the presi-

dent's position as it was initially presented and remains so to this day even in light of subsequent refinement and redefinition of what the president actually had in mind. All this was diligently investigated and reported. But there was never even the remotest possibility that the genie could be rebottled in a way that would restore the status quo ante, resolve the debate, and reconcile the president's original proposals with the realities.

It was not for lack of trying by the critics. Still less was it a case of the media allowing themselves to be used to the point of abuse by government. It was simply in the nature of a relationship in which the government, except in rare instances of scandal or malpractice, inherently holds the high ground. Or put another way, the high ground in this adversarial relationship is the government's to lose.

This is not to suggest that the communications revolution of the last few decades has not vastly increased the impact, the influence, and yes, the power and the pervasive presence of news casting in all of its contemporary forms. Inevitably, this sense of an explosion of news has given rise to the conventional wisdom that the media have become too powerful; that they increasingly distort, exaggerate, sensationalize; that they simply miss the point of what the government is saying or what the policymakers are up to or up against; that they abuse their use of unattributed sources; that they are, in short, less and less a reliable instrument in the performance of their fundamental service to the workings of the democratic process.

There is some truth in all of this. But there is also no basis for the conclusion that, as a consequence, the balance of power between the media and the government has been fundamentally altered. The playing field for the games played by the media and the policymakers has never been level. It has now been substantially expanded. But the rules, the conditions, the opportunities and the inhibitions on both sides remain the same. And in just about every important respect, they continue to work in favor of the government.

This is so even when allowance is made for the fact that, more often than not, the foreign policy agenda is fixed by neither the government nor the media but by events. To the extent that events are the prime mover in the agenda-setting process, however, we are back more or less to the same question put in somewhat different ways. In the case of external events beyond the control of either the media or the government, which of the two institutions has the greater capacity to manipulate them in ways that are favorable to their purposes or their interests? Or, in the case of what might be called internal events, when the government itself is the prime mover at least initially until the consequences spin out of government control, to what extent can the media be held accountable for compounding calamity?

The record, as far back as you may wish to pursue it, suggests at least some tentative — but persuasive — answers. Legend has it that warmongering press lords inflamed public passions and carried us into the Spanish-American War. But the historical record has it that Theodore Roosevelt incited the press lords by exploiting, to his purposes, the sinking of the battleship Maine in Havana harbor under circumstances that were beyond the power of the press

to investigate at the time and still remain, in the minds of many historians, a mystery. The same may be said of the famous incidents in the Gulf of Tonkin, similarly exploited by President Lyndon Johnson to ram through Congress a resolution granting him sweeping authority to involve the nation in the Vietnam War. The media proved incapable of raising in any timely way the serious questions, still unanswered conclusively, about exactly what was done by North Vietnamese torpedo boats, if anything, to justify the retaliatory US air strikes against North Vietnam.

The American press did not unmask the Reagan administration's arms-for-hostages trafficking with Iran; Attorney General Meese revealed the "Contra" connection; and the whole thing might not have been blown up had not unknown Iranians planted a story in "that Beirut rag," as Reagan called it. Even then, the story might have died if it had not been confirmed several days later by the speaker of the Iranian Parliament. In any event, this was an "agenda" — if that's the right word — that was secretly set in the Reagan White House and carried forward for at least a year and a half without attracting public notice.

No doubt, legitimate instances could be cited of genuine agenda-setting by the media — some investigations or disclosures that focused public attention on particular problems and forced some positive government response. And there may be cases of leaks and disclosures that influenced or altered a particular course of action by the government. But by and large there are more instances of the media exercising self-restraint often under extreme government pressure (the Bay of Pigs, the Glomar Explorer, the Pelton spy case) than there are instances of the media running amok in defiance of national interests. And there are many more cases of the government running roughshod over the media, whether we are talking about military interventions, diplomatic initiatives, or the launching of large undertakings with the media serving as nothing more than a monitor — or a megaphone.

We have a recent example: the Reagan administration's decision last year to reflag eleven Kuwaiti tankers. Members of Congress and editorial writers huffed and puffed. The media uncovered all manner of evidence suggesting that this might be a misguided and dangerous move. But the commitment, once made, was impossible to reverse and Congress had no desire to take responsibility for the consequences of reversing it by a legislative ban. The government put the Persian Gulf high up on the foreign policy agenda.

President Eisenhower did the same thing for the Middle East with his Eisenhower Doctrine, which provided the shaky diplomatic underpinnings for his decision to land the Marines in Lebanon in 1958. Just as Reagan put Grenada on the agenda in 1982, so did Lyndon Johnson put the Dominican Republic on the agenda in 1965; in both cases a threat to American citizens was the pretext for a larger, geopolitical purpose. The media found all sorts of flaws in the performance in both cases and in the justifications that were made for both actions, but to no particular avail.

The business of agenda-setting, let me quickly concede, is a good deal more complicated than these episodes might suggest — as complicated, you could

say, as attempting to establish where, when, or how a particular idea was born. Reducing the question to a choice between the media and the government oversimplifies the process by which public opinion is shaped or inspired by excluding the role of the academic community, private foundations and other opinion-shaping councils, institutes and study groups. It also leaves out of the calculation which branches of "government" we have in mind. But to start down this road would be to embark on an endless errand; the president's command of the high ground derives from the power of the executive, more so than the other two branches of the government, to create and to initiate. Yet another built-in advantage to the government is its monopoly on secret intelligence or other classified information — its ability to say, as government officials have so often said to so many of us in the news business, something to the general effect of "If-you-only-knew-what-we-know." In any government initiative, the government has control of the timing and the circumstances (a president can demand prime time with a telephone call). Thus, to the extent that first impressions matter, the government controls the first impression. To the extent that packaging and presentation are important, the government controls them as well. It has not only the power to classify what it does not want the public to know but to declassify whatever may advance its purposes.

In ordinary times, the administration of the moment is granted, at least by a majority of Americans, the benefit of the doubt; the burden of the proof that this benefit is unwarranted rests with the media unless, as has happened all too frequently in recent years, a president or an administration is careless or arrogant enough to squander its credibility (and even then this tells you more about human frailty than it does about the power of the press). There is, in short, a presumption of authority as well as regularity which is one more reason why — in the interplay between the media and the government in the making of foreign policy — the government ordinarily holds the high ground.

