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Military Reporters and Editors Forum Luncheon Address



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Normally, I start out when I'm speaking to people by asking the question, "Is there any Press in the room?" I guess the right question here, "Is there anyone here that is not in the Press?" And I see at least -- I know of at least two people, but beyond that I think most of you are with the Press Corps.

But some of you may not believe this but I'm definitely glad to be here. When Sig [Christensen] asked me if I would consider addressing this group, there was absolutely no doubt in my mind that I should come into the lion's den. Okay? (So, I am...aware of where I am, Jim.) You know, this was important because I have firmly believed since Desert Shield that it is necessary for the strength of our democracy that the Military and the Press Corps maintain a strong, mutually respectful and enabling relationship. This continues to be problematic for our country, especially during times of war. Now one of the greatest military correspondents of our time -- the award that was just presented is named after him -- Joe Galloway, made me an absolute believer when he joined the 24th infantry division during Desert Storm. That was the first time I met Joe, and he and I have a friendship that dates back to winter in -- of 1990.

Now today -- today I will attempt to do two things. First I will give you my assessment of the Military and Press relationship as I see it -- and I hope that you take it for what it is; it is the observation of a military commander that has had extensive Press engagements, both good and bad -- and then I will provide you some of my thoughts on the current state of the war effort.



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Now as I stated, as you -- as you all know I have had a wide range of relationships and experiences with our nation's military reporters and editors. There are some in your ranks who I consider to be the epitome of journalistic professionalism: Joe Galloway, Thom Shanker, Sig, and John Burns immediately come to mind. They exemplify what America should demand of our journalists: tough reporting that relies upon integrity, objectivity, and fairness to give accurate and thorough accounts that strengthen our freedom of the press and in turn our great democracy.

On the other hand, unfortunately, I have had to issue ultimatums to some of you for unscrupulous reporting that was solely focused on supporting your agenda and preconceived notions of what our military had done or not done. I also refused to talk to the *European Stars and Stripes* for the last two years of my command in Germany for their extreme bias and single-minded focus on Abu Ghraib.

Now let me review some of the descriptive phrases that have been used by some of you that have made my own personal interfaces with the Press Corps difficult: "dictatorial and somewhat dense," "a liar," "a torturer" "does not get it." In -- In some cases I have never even met those that use those comments. Yet they felt qualified to make character judgments that are communicated to the world. My experience is not unique and we can find other such examples as the treatment of Secretary Brown during Katrina. In my opinion, this is the worst display of journalism imaginable by those of us that are bound by a strict value system of selfless service, honor, and integrity.

Almost invariably, my perception is that the sensationalistic value of these assessments is what provided the edge that they sought for self-aggrandizement or to advance their individual quests for getting on the front page with their stories. As I understand it, your measure of worth is how many front page stories you have written, and unfortunately some within your ranks will compromise their integrity and display questionable ethics as they seek to keep America informed. This is much like the intel analysts whose effectiveness is measured by the number of intelligence reports he provides and not by the value that it is to the commander. For some, it seems that as long as you get a front page story there is little or no regard for the "collateral damage" that will be caused. Personal reputations sometimes have no value; they report with total impunity and are rarely held accountable for unethical conduct.

Given the near instantaneous ability to report actions on the ground, the responsibility to accurately and truthfully report takes on an unprecedented importance. The speculative and often uninformed initial reporting that characterizes our media appears to be rapidly becoming the standard of the industry. An Arab proverb states: "Four things come not back: the spoken word, the spent arrow, the past, the neglected opportunity." Once reported, your assessments become conventional wisdom and nearly impossible to change. Other major challenges are your willingness sometimes to allow manipulation by "high level authorities" who leak stories and by lawyers who seek to strengthen their arguments through the use of hyperbole. Your unwillingness to accurately and prominently correct your mistakes and your agenda driven biases sometimes contribute to this corrosive environment.



All of these challenges combined create a media environment that does a tremendous disservice to America -- in some instances. Over the course of this war tactically insignificant events have become strategic defeats for our country because of the tremendous power and impact of the media and by extension you, individually, the journalist. We realize that because of the near real time reporting environment that you face it is difficult to report accurately in some cases. In my business one of our fundamental truths is that "the first report is always wrong." Unfortunately, in your business "the first report" gives Americans who rely on the snippets of CNN, if you will, their "truths" and perspectives on an issue.

As a corollary to this deadline driven need to publish initial impressions or observations versus objective facts, there is an additional challenge for us who are the subject of your reporting. When you assume that you're correct and on the moral high ground on a story because we have not responded to questions you provided, I think this is the ultimate in arrogance and distortion of ethics.

One of your highly respected fellow journalists once told me that there are some amongst you who "feed from a pig's trough." If that is who I am dealing with then I will never respond, otherwise we will both get dirty and the pigs then will love it and I can't control it. Now this does not mean that your story is accurate or inaccurate. It just means that your subject chooses not to respond.

Now I do not believe that all of these challenges is what our forefathers intended of this great profession.

The code of ethics for the Society of Professional Journalists states -- and I don't mean to preach to you, but I'll quote:

"...public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues. Conscientious journalists from all media and specialties strive to serve the public with thoroughness and honesty."

And, *"Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility"* -- end quote.

The basic ethics of a journalist is laid out here -- of seeing truth, fair and comprehensive accounting of events and issues, thoroughness and honesty -- all are sometimes victims of a massive agenda-driven competition for economic or political supremacy. The death knell of your ethics has been enabled by your -- some parent organizations who have chosen to align themselves with political agendas. Now what is clear to me is that you are perpetuating the corrosive partisan politics that is destroying our country and killing our service members who are at war -- in some cases.



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My assessment is that your profession, to some extent, has strayed from these worthy ethical standards and have allowed external agendas to -- to manipulate what the American public sees on TV, what they read in our newspapers, and what they see and read on the web. For some of you, just like some of our politicians, the truth is of little-to-no-value if it does not fit your own preconceived notions, biases, or agendas.

It is astounding to me when I hear the vehement disagreements with the military's foray into information operations that seek to disseminate the truth and inform the Iraqi people in order to counter our enemy's blatant propaganda. As I assess various media entities, some are unquestionably engaged in political propaganda within our own country that is uncontrolled. There is no question in my mind that the strength of our democracy and our freedom remains linked to your ability to exercise this freedom that we fight for.

Freedom of the Press, I adamantly support and because this is the basic foundation of our democracy and I -- and I have completely supported the embedding of media into our formations up until my very last day in uniform. And I will continue to do so. The issue is -- is one of maintaining professional ethics and standards from within your institution.

Military leaders must unquestionably accept that these injustices will happen and whether they like what you print or not they must deal with you and they must enable you in order for you to enlighten the American people. But you must be ethical.

Finally, I will leave this subject with a question that we must ask ourselves: Who is responsible for maintaining the ethical standards of the profession in order to ensure that our democracy does not continue to be threatened by this -- what I consider -- a dangerous shift away from your sacred duty of public enlightenment?

Let me now transition to our current national security condition.

As we all know war is an extension of politics¹ and when a nation goes to war it must bring to bear all elements of power in order to win. War fighting is not solely the responsibility of the military commander unless he has been given the responsibility and the resources to synchronize the political, economic, and informational power of the nation during the conduct of that war; and that has not been the case in this war in Iraq.

So who is responsible for developing the grand strategy that will allow America to emerge victorious from this generational struggle against extremism?

After more than four years of fighting, America continues its desperate struggle in Iraq without any concerted effort to devise a strategy that will achieve victory in that war torn country or in the greater conflict against extremism. From a catastrophically flawed, unrealistically optimistic war plan to the Administration's latest surge strategy, this Administration has failed to employ and -- and synchronize its political, economic, and military power.



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The latest revised strategy is a desperate attempt by the Administration that has not accepted the political and economic realities of this war and they have definitely not been able to communicate effectively that reality to the American people. An even worse and probably more disturbing assessment would be that America can not achieve the political consensus that is necessary to devise a grand strategy that will in fact synchronize and commit our national power to achieve victory. Some of you have heard me talk about our nation's crisis in leadership.

Let me elaborate.

While the politicians espouse their rhetoric designed to preserve their reputations and their political power, our soldiers die. Our national leadership ignored the lessons of World War II as we entered into this war and to this day continue to believe that victory can be achieved through the application of military power alone. Our forefathers understood that tremendous economic and political capacity had to be mobilized, synchronized, and applied if we were to achieve victory in the global wars of last century. That has been and continues to be the key to victory in Iraq. Continued manipulations and adjustments to our military strategy will not achieve victory. The best we can do with this flawed approach is stave off defeat. The Administration, Congress, and the entire interagency, especially the State Department, must shoulder the responsibility for this catastrophic failure and the American people must hold them accountable.

There has been a glaring, unfortunate, display of incompetent strategic leadership within our national leaders. As a Japanese proverb says, "Action without vision is a nightmare." There is no question that America is living a nightmare with no end in sight.

Since 2003, the politics of war have been characterized by partisanship as the Republican and Democratic parties struggled for power in Washington. National efforts to date have been corrupted by partisan politics that have prevented us from devising as effective, executable, and supportable strategies. At times, these partisan struggles have led us to political decisions that endangered the lives of our sons and daughters on the battlefield. The unmistakable message was that political power had greater priority than our national security objectives. Overcoming this strategic failure is the first step towards achieving victory in Iraq. Without bipartisan cooperation we are doomed to fail. There is nothing going on today in Washington that would give us hope.

If we succeed in crafting a bipartisan strategy for victory, then America must hold all national agencies accountable for developing and executing the political and economic initiatives that will bring about stability, security, political, and economic hope for all Iraqis. That has not been successful to date.

Congress must shoulder a significant responsibility for this failure since there has been no focused oversight of the nation's political and economic initiatives in this war. Exhortations, encouragements, investigations, studies, and discussions will not produce success; this appears to be the nation's only alternative since the transfer of sovereignty.



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Our continued neglect will only extend the conflict. And America's dilemma is that we no longer control the ability to directly influence the Iraqi institutions. The sovereign Iraqi government must be cooperative in these long term efforts. That is not likely at the levels necessary in the near term.

Our commanders on the ground will continue to make progress and provide time for the development of a grand strategy. That will be wasted effort, as we have seen repeatedly since 2003. In the meantime our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines will continue to die.

Starting in July of 2003, the message that was repeatedly communicated to Washington by military commanders on the ground was that the military alone could never achieve victory. Our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines were destined to endure decades of fighting and killing people without the focused, synchronized application of all elements of national power. This was a necessary condition to stabilize Iraq. And any sequential solutions would lead to a prolonged conflict and increased resistance.

By neglect and incompetence at the National Security Council level, that is the path our political leaders chose and now America, more precisely the American military, finds itself in an intractable situation. Clearly, mistakes have been made by the American military in its application of power, but even its greatest failures in this war can be linked to America's lack of commitment, priority, and moral courage in this war effort. Without the sacrifices of our magnificent young men and women in uniform, Iraq would be chaotic well beyond anything that has been experienced to date.

What America must accept as a reality at this point in the war is that our Army and Marine Corps are struggling with the deployment schedules. What is clear is the deployment cycles of our formations have been totally disrupted, the resourcing and training challenges are significant, and America's ability to sustain a force level of 150,000 plus is nonexistent without drastic measures; and these drastic measures have been politically unacceptable to date. The drawdown of the surge to pre-surge levels was never a question. America must understand also that it will take the Army at least a decade to fix the damage that has been done to its full spectrum readiness.

Our Army and Marine Corps will execute as directed, perform magnificently, and never complain. That is the ethic of our warriors and that is what America expects of them. They will not disappoint us.

But America must know the pressures that are being placed on our military institutions as we fight this war. All Americans must demand that these deploying formations are properly resourced, properly trained, and we must never -- and this is the responsibility of every leader in this country -- we must never allow America's support for the soldier to falter. A critical, objective assessment of our nation's ability to execute our national security strategy must be conducted. If we are objective and honest, the results will be surprising to all Americans. There is unacceptable strategic risk.



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America has no choice but to continue our efforts in Iraq. A precipitous withdrawal will unquestionably lead to chaos, in my opinion, that would endanger the stability of the greater Middle East. If this occurs it would have significant adverse effects on the international community. Coalition and American force presence will be required at some level for the foreseeable future. Given the lack of a grand strategy we must move rapidly to minimize that force presence and allow the Iraqis maximum ability to exercise their sovereignty.

At no time in America's history has there been a greater need for bipartisan cooperation. The threat of extremism is real and demands unified action at the same levels demonstrated by our forefathers during World War I and World War II. America has failed to date.

This endeavor also has been further hampered by a coalition effort that can be characterized as hasty, un-resourced, often uncoordinated, and unmanaged. Desperately needed, but essentially ignored, were the political and economic coalitions that were the key to victory and stability in the immediate aftermath of the conventional war. The military coalition was probably the most effective, productive, and effective deployment of forces in decades.

And today, we continue our inept coalition management efforts and, in fact, we are facing ever decreasing troop commitments by our military coalition partners. America's "revised" strategy does not address coalition initiatives and challenges. And we cannot afford to continue this struggle without the support of our coalition partners across all elements of national power. Now, without the political and economic elements of power complementing the tremendous efforts of our -- of our military, we are assured of failure. We continue on that path. America's political leadership must come together and develop this bipartisan grand strategy to achieve victory in this conflict.

Achieving unity of effort in Iraq has been elusive to date primarily because there is no entity that has the authority to direct the actions of our interagency. As I stated before, our National Security Council has been a failure. Furthermore, America's ability to hold the -- the interagency accountable for their failures in this war is non-existent. This must change. We probably need to implement a Goldwater-Nichols Act for the interagency.

As a nation we must recognize that the enemy we face is committed to destroying our way of life. This enemy is arguably more dangerous than any threat we faced in the twentieth century. Our political leaders must place national security objectives above partisan politics, demand interagency unity of effort, and never again commit America to war without a grand strategy that embraces the basic tenets of the Powell Doctrine.

It seems that Congress recognizes the military cannot achieve victory alone in this war. Yet they continue to demand victory from our military. Who will demand accountability for the failure of our national political leadership involved in the management this war? They have unquestionably been derelict in the performance of their duty. In my profession, these types of leaders would immediately be relieved or court-martialed.



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America has sent her soldiers off to war and they must be supported at all costs until we achieve victory or until our political leaders decide to bring them home. Our political and military, leaders, at the strategic level, owe the soldier on the battlefield the strategy, the policies, and the resources to win once they're committed to war. America has not been fully committed to win this war, and they have not provided those policies and the adequate resources to win.

Our nation has not focused on the greatest challenge of our lifetimes. America must demand this unified strategy that goes well beyond partisan politics and places the common good above all else. Too often our politicians have been distracted and they have chosen loyalty to their political parties above loyalty to the Constitution because of their lust for power. Our politicians must remember their oath of office and recommit themselves to serving our nation -- just like our soldiers. And they must not serve in their own self-interests or in -- or in the interests of their political Party. The security of America is at stake and we can accept nothing less. Anything short of this is unquestionably, in my opinion, "dereliction of duty."

Now these are fairly harsh assessments of the Military and Press relationship and the status of our war effort. But I remain optimistic and committed to the willing to -- correction -- to the enabling of media operations under the toughest of conditions in order to keep the world and the American people informed. I have never wavered from that position, in spite of the challenges that I have faced.

I think you for your time. May God bless you and may God bless America.

And, "Praise be to the Lord my Rock, who trains my fingers for battle and my hands for war."²

Thank you very much.

[Q&A Follows]

¹Carl von Clausewitz: "War is a continuation of politics by other means."

²Psalm 144:1