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## PRESS RESTRICTIONS DURING THE GULF WAR: "HAIL FREDONIA"\*

PATRICK J. SLOYAN\*\*

I want to open this presentation with "Hail Fredonia," those unforgettable historic words from *Duck Soup*. Groucho, Harpo, Zeppo, and Chico go to war. Who can forget George Kaufman's wonderful Hollywood set scene where a thousand people are singing at the top of their lungs, "We're going to war." If you could grab that energy and translate it into political gain—which is what politicians are always trying to do—you could be very successful. I refer you to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in her first term: going way down in the polls; voters were troubled with her conservative government; people in her own party didn't like her—she was so inflexible. And then she had this wonderful Argentinean general, the wonderfully desperate General Galtieri, who seized the *Islas Malvinas*, which in Britain of course are the Falkland Islands. Rather than seeking some "wishy-washy" diplomatic settlement to the dispute over these God-awful islands—8000 miles away, inhabited only by sheep and a few British plots—she launched the British navy, and the British army, and the British commandos, and the British Air Force on the Falkland Islands. It took unforgettable debate in the House of Commons, where the defense minister stood up and said, "It's going to take a long time to do this—it's 8000 miles away." And one of the labor opponents stood up and said, "I don't remember Nelson saying how far Trafalgar was." At the end of that war, Thatcher was a cinch for reelection. There were some casualties then. Since then, American politicians, and all politicians, look at transforming war fever into political success. It's very difficult to do, believe me. I think President Bush was confronted with this with the Gulf War.

You remember suddenly that Saddam Hussein had invaded Kuwait. But, for more than three weeks, Saddam had troops

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\* The following comments were transcribed from the presentation given by Mr. Sloyan at St. John's University School of Law on March 6, 1992.

\*\* Senior Correspondent, *Newsday*. Mr. Sloyan won the 1992 Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting.

poised on the border of Kuwait. And two days before the actual invasion, the Central Intelligence Agency told the President that in fact these troops would invade. So you all remember President Bush's announcement to Saddam Hussein that if he invaded Kuwait, the United States would invade Kuwait, would invade Iraq, and throw the Iraqis out by military force? You don't remember because he never made that statement. There are many people, even in the President's own Administration, who think that had Bush issued a warning prior to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, Saddam Hussein would not have invaded. But Bush never made that very tough, clear statement. Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, and the President was caught asleep at the switch. His diplomacy had failed. A former ally had threatened the world's reservoir of oil.

So what can you do? What's the way out of this? How can we make war, a military solution, acceptable? This ignores the merits of whether the sanctions would have worked in a year, or whether you would have needed the military. I personally think that Saddam Hussein was going to leave Kuwait only when this allied, armored force came in and threatened to destroy his army. I think the decision to go to war was inevitable. But how can you, in this day and age, justify the United States going to war? Well, you need a little "Hail Fredonia": we turn Saddam Hussein into Adolf Hitler; we appeal to the romance of going to war, the thrill of going to war, the danger of going to war. And it resulted in a national response that statistically came out to 89% approving the President's decision to crush Adolf Hitler, to cut off his army in Kuwait, as General Colin Powell said, to "kill it."

But the downside to war is also very well known. One of the best examples, of course, is the Vietnam impact on politicians. I think the Vietnam war was the principal reason President Johnson left office. And a key part of that widespread opposition to the Vietnam War was the television cameras and the eyewitness accounts of war. Because the downside of war is the death of human beings, it's tragic, whether they're Iraqis, or Americans, or Vietnamese. One death is one too many. And if that death can be seen, then people will revolt against killing people for diplomatic and political reasons. It's very difficult to win support to kill people.

So what you want, then, is to devise a war where no one dies; where no one is killed; where there are no bodies; where there is no blood. And that's what President Bush did during Desert Storm. He had to figure out a way to keep those cameras, those reporters,

those eyewitness accounts from presenting the tragedy of human death. If you sit back and think about it, this is a very sophisticated, skilled operation. How can you force the most powerful group of television and newspaper organizations in the world to submit to total censorship? To unconstitutional censorship? What kind of political power do you need to do this? Well you don't. All you have to do is outwit them. They're not that smart. First of all, con them; tell them, "You're going to get special treatment; we're going to put you in the pool; and the pool will be taken up to the front, and you'll be the only one with pictures; . . ." "Oh, I want to get into that pool!" So the press is divided against itself.

There was no organizational approval of the pool system. I was a leading and bitter opponent. I enlisted my colleagues at the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, the *Times-Herald* which owns *Newsday*. I said, "Where are our lawyers on this? This is more than an abridgement of the First Amendment." So the lawyers got together, and a colleague at the *Post* came back and said, "Listen, we have no case here because the First Amendment lawyers, defenders of the faith, are out there trying to make it a capital offense for breaking open newsstand boxes, or trying to figure out some outrageous way to increase cable rates." There was a total zero reaction from this high-powered legal establishment, and I hope that some of the professors pass that along to these lawyers. So there was no organized or common sense effort to prevent this.

By conning the establishment press into going along with this pool system—this total censorship—Bush succeeded in preventing publication of a single photograph, strip of video or eyewitness account of the brief but bloody ground war during Operation Desert Storm. News dispatches and film were delayed for days or, in most cases, simply lost by the U.S. military—I think deliberately. So what has resulted is a war which was acceptable because no one died. And future wars will be acceptable because they're bloodless through this presentation of government footage which the networks project as the war: the smart bombs; the bridges on which there's no one being destroyed by smart bombs; these sterile buildings which evaporate, and apparently with no one dying inside. Now, every once in a while, something went wrong, for example, the Amiriya shelter, where civilians were killed and photographed as they died.

The United States government has been doing this since Ronald Reagan sent troops into Grenada. I had two colleagues who

took a boat to where the fighting was underway. They were promptly arrested by military police, put in a prison aboard a major warship (I think it was the command ship for the American fleet down there), and held incommunicado for two days. All the news that came out of Grenada came from official, government footage. This was a total black-out of the press.

The trial run for Desert Storm happened in Just Cause in Panama. The pool system which was supposed to be representing me and the rest of the press arrived in Panama after the war was over—very deliberately. When the GIs went down, we were supposed to have access to watch the troops in combat and report back what happened. But the pool reporters ended up coming in ten hours late, and then their only source of information was a television set which showed the Pentagon briefing from Washington. (Notice that the Pentagon briefings from Washington and the CentCom briefings from Riyadh dominated the flow of information.) The reporters themselves were controlled and blocked, and their dispatches censored and delayed. As a result, you end up today with a war that has no real dimensions, where the death toll is still in doubt, where the successes are still in doubt. I think the provocative point of discussion here is not what the press is going to do about this, but what institutions like St. John's and the law are going to do. What are the realities here? Are we going to have manufactured, manipulated wars as part of the American way of life?

I think there's a lot of misconception among the public that this hostility exists between the press and the military. It does not. Every time I have gone to either a private or a colonel or a general who's involved in the battlefield, they are warm, they are receptive, they are hospitable, they are candid. They all too often tell the truth. So that was never a problem in Vietnam, it certainly was not a problem here in the Gulf. If you could get away from this lock-step censorship program they imposed on you or if you went out by yourself as an individual, you found that out very quickly. It's a truism that a lot of soldiers are proud of what they are doing and want to talk about it. All the accomplishments—and there were some significant ones during the Gulf War—were hidden by this pool system censorship. Particularly during the ground war, there were a number of heroic acts: people who risked their lives; people who died during the war exceeding the limits of their expected duty; all those moments disappeared—went unrecorded and

unknown.

What's going to happen in the future? I would like to say I don't think there's going to be another war. Then again, the next one will probably be in the same area, another war over oil. And as that finite resource declines, goes up in value, there'll be more wars there. Hopefully, smaller ones or ones that will be snuffed by diplomacy.

But one of the reasons I won the Polk award is because after the war had ended, I was so convinced that they had covered up so much, and hidden so much through this censorship pool system, that I spent May 1991 until February 1992 just reporting what you didn't know about Desert Storm. My *Newsday* readers here are familiar with a lot of them, but one of the reasons my other colleagues did not is that they went off and wrote books. They've just about finished their books. But I hope their books aren't as uninformed as some people in the Army are today, some people in the Marines, some people in the military, who, in strangling efforts by journalists in getting if not the truth, then the facts, have blinded themselves. When I found out about the 1st Mechanized Infantry Division's two-day effort to bury Iraqi troops during the initial assault into Iraq, that was news to Colin Powell. He did not know about that. It was a rehearsed, elaborate assault, but it never made its way up the Chain of Command. When twenty-four Americans were killed by friendly fire during the ground war, Norman Schwartzkopf didn't find out about that until about May, when families and what they call the buddy network started getting feedback from their friends and buddies in the army that this wasn't Iraqi fire, that this was allied fire, "friendly fire."

The institutions as a result have blinded themselves. The lessons learned out of Desert Storm are going to be very, very vague. It's hard to criticize what went on because the dimensions of this war are still unknown. Far fewer people died; I don't think there were 100,000 Iraqis killed during this war. An Air Force general, Charles Horuera, conducted an almost secret body count. I didn't find out about this until months later. This convinced him that at the maximum 25,000 Iraqis died—more bodies just weren't there, they couldn't find them. He had 2,100 Forward Air Observers with the ground forces, and they reported back to him, "We don't see any bodies." There was a much smaller Iraqi deployment in the battlefield than the Administration led you to believe. Half to 70% defected after the air war started, left the theatre. You ended up

with an Iraqi army of 200,000 by the time the ground war began. We know we can account for 87,000 of those because that's how many surrendered. General Horner, who conducted the air campaign, then said to me, "If 87,000 came to us, how many do you think ran the other way?" Maybe more. If you started off with 200,000, you're down to just a handful of troops left on the battlefield. His forward air observers just did not see the number of casualties involved. I think that there were a lot that were buried instantly during operations. I think I know an area where most of the Iraqis did die. But, what are the dimensions of this war? I can't tell you yet. My colleagues who raced home to write books that are on the verge of printing—what are those books going to tell you?

I think they manipulated the journalistic establishment in a dramatic, sophisticated, and skillful way in preventing us from doing our job. Now, I think the same sophisticated, manipulative skill is going on with people who are going to write books. That's not to say that the authors of these books are not men and women of integrity and honesty and are searching out the best information. But they're going to people who don't know the true story of Desert Storm. They only know bits and pieces. There's been no public amassing of basic facts. So I think there's going to be a lot of bad scholarship. I can think of my colleague Bob Woodward (who was instrumental in breaking Watergate and the downfall of Richard Nixon), who knows very little about military affairs. But by Secretary Cheney giving him entre into the secret negotiations and debates and comments before the war began, Mr Woodward produced a book in which he described Mr. Cheney as "the military mind behind this left-swing invasion of Iraq," which of course was designed, invented, pursued, and implemented by Norman Schwartzkopf and his staff. But that a distinguished reporter would say that it was Dick Cheney who came up with this idea is a direct result of Cheney telling him that he—Cheney—came up with the idea. But my view of Mr. Cheney is that his military expertise came from one of the four universities he attended while obtaining draft deferments during the Vietnam War; he must have majored in military science. I don't even think he was in the Boy Scouts, much less devising strategic left-hooks into the flank of the Iraqi enemy.