



The Military-Media Relationship 2005

**How the armed forces, journalists and the
public view coverage of military conflict**

McCORMICK TRIBUNE FOUNDATION

The McCormick Tribune Conference Series is sponsored by the McCormick Tribune Foundation.

The conference series offers the opportunity for collaboration between the foundation and other organizations that are addressing issues consistent with the foundation's mission. Conferences are conducted on the grounds of Cantigny, the former estate of Col. Robert R. McCormick, located in Wheaton, Ill., approximately 35 miles west of Chicago. McCormick was the longtime editor and publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*.

The McCormick Tribune Foundation is one of the nation's largest charitable organizations, with combined assets of approximately \$1.4 billion. In 2004, the foundation approved the distribution of more than \$109 million to invest in our children, communities and country in an effort to strengthen our democratic society through innovative partnerships.

Cover Photo by Chris Hondros

McCormick Tribune Conference Series Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

In August 2005, the McCormick Tribune Foundation hosted the eighth Military-Media Conference at Cantigny. These conferences, which have taken place approximately every two years since 1992, bring together a select group of military leaders and journalists who cover national security issues.

Since the last conference in 2003, a profound shift had occurred among the American people. The majority that had supported the invasion of Iraq had turned into a minority, and it was clear that Americans were increasingly disaffected with the war.

What follows are brief highlights of the conference. The complete conference report is available through the McCormick Tribune Foundation at www.mccormicktribune.com.

Keynote Speech

Geoffrey Stone, the Harry Kalven, Jr., distinguished service professor of law at the University of Chicago, launched the conference by emphasizing the vital importance of the First Amendment and the difficulties in applying it during wartime.

He asked questions on navigating the “uncertain waters” of war time:

- How can we maintain a vibrant, robust freedom of expression in wartime while protecting the nation’s capacity to fight war effectively?
- How much should the media know and be able to communicate to the public about battlefield engagements and casualties?
- What kinds of images can the government legitimately prevent being shown out of fear that they might “demoralize” rather than inform American citizens?
- How are these boundaries drawn, and by whom?
- What are the proper roles of courts, presidents, generals and journalists?

David Grange, President and CEO of the McCormick Tribune Foundation, welcomed the group. He said:

The foundation convenes these meetings with lofty as well as practical goals:

- assess the current state of the relationship between the two institutions;
- increase mutual understanding at both personal and institutional levels; and
- help lead to practical solutions to problems.

The conferences play an important part in the foundation’s fulfilling Col. Robert R. McCormick’s legacy and commitment to both the military and the media.

Ralph Begleiter, distinguished journalist in residence in the University of Delaware’s communications department, moderated the conference.

Session I. The Military-Media Relationship in 2005:

Beyond Embedding

The first session provided an evaluation of its success, a comparison to unilateral reporting and the obstacles that must be overcome to maximize accurate reporting of military and national defense issues.

Panelists included:

- Bryan Whitman, principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for public affairs, US Department of Defense
- Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmitt, USA, deputy director of plans and policy (DJ5), U.S. Central Command
- Bradley Graham, pentagon correspondent, *Washington Post*
- Brig. Gen. Carter Ham, USA, deputy director of regional operations (J3), National Military Command Center (Joint Chiefs of Staff)
- Jane Arraf, senior Baghdad correspondent, CNN

In looking back over the last two years, the media had begun to question its coverage of the run-up to the war. There was mounting frustration at the difficulty in getting answers from the nation's civilian leadership. In addition:

- Military reported more pressure to talk to the press and awareness of need to provide access, facts and context for reporters.
- Military worry that reporters want only “bang-bang” stories of battles, when military feel focus should be on political, economic and diplomatic progress.
- Reporting from the field had become so dangerous and expensive that few reporters were able to venture outside of Baghdad.
- The more than 700 U.S. media embedded with American troops at the beginning of the Iraq war had shrunk to only 25

or so, leaving few reporters with access to the front lines.

- Reporters and military acknowledge preference for embedding, but it is expensive and time-consuming now that media staffs have been cut drastically in Iraq.
- As a result, military is doing more of its own video releases and other information directly to local TV and radio stations.
- Reporters say military needs to allow them to show everything and let public make own decisions about war.
- Military feel more needs to be done on both sides to improve relationship.
- Some reporters feel it is the fact that the war is going badly that is the problem, not the way the media is covering it.

Session II: The Military, Media and American Public:

Gallup Takes a Snapshot on Views

The Gallup Poll conducted in 2005 showed a comparison of public perceptions and the changes that have occurred in the military-media relationship since a similar poll was conducted in 1999.

Panel included:

- David Moore, senior editor, The Gallup Poll
- Brig. Gen. Vincent K. Brooks, USA, chief of public affairs, Department of the Army
- Tim McNulty, associate managing editor, foreign office, *Chicago Tribune*, discussed the poll results.

Since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the climate under which the military and the media operate has intensified. This change is reflected in both the public perception of the military and the media, and in both groups' perceptions of each other since 1999.

- The public survey was conducted using telephone interviews of a nationally representative sample of 1,016 adults, aged 18 and older, between May 31 and June 16, 2005. Margin for error was +/- 3 percent.
- The 279 military officers, all general or flag officers from the Army, Air Force, Marine Corps and Navy, were interviewed via the Internet. Names were provided by the Department of Defense to the Center for Media and Security, a consultant to the McCormick Tribune Foundation on this project.
- The Center for Media and Security selected 375 journalists that cover security issues; some 90 completed mail questionnaires.

Below is just a sampling of results. The complete Gallup poll results can be found at www.mccormicktribune.org

- In 1999, just 49 percent of the public said they “wanted to know” about “terrorist threats” to the U.S. homeland. In 2005, 77 percent of Americans say they are “very interested” in news coverage of terrorist threats against the United States.
- Only about a third of military and of media respondents say the public understands the role of the military very or fairly well, but 81 percent of each group says it is very important for the public to be informed.
- Only 16 percent of military respondents are satisfied with coverage of the war, compared with 48 percent of media respondents.

- Only 39 percent of Americans say they get enough information about military matters to make informed decisions; 60 percent say they do not. This is a major decline since 1999, when a majority of Americans said they did get enough information, by a 54 to 43 percent margin.
- Majorities of all three groups believe that embedding enhances the public’s understanding of the war, helps the morale of the troops, improves the public’s perception of the military and improves the credibility of the media coverage.
- Military officers are perceived as more willing to cooperate with journalists than they were in 1999.
- Journalists feel that military are constrained from speaking by their superiors. Military officers participating in the conference said individuals make the decision not to communicate, not their superior officers.
- An overwhelming number of Americans, 77 percent, believe that the military at least sometimes gives false or inaccurate information to the media.
- The public is evenly divided as to whether the military should ever give false information – 49 percent say the military should sometimes do it, while 48 percent say never.
- Large majorities of both the military respondents and the public believe that news stories about the military tend to be too negative, while a large majority of the media respondents say the news has the right balance of negative and positive stories.

Discussion and Breakout Sessions. Dueling Roles: Support Versus Skepticism

In contrast to earlier conferences, where participants could examine their relationship through the lens of “emotions recollected in tranquility,” discussions in 2005 reflected the intensity of current feeling in a conference conducted during a war. Discussion sessions reflected these heightened emotions and increased frustrations on both sides.

- Military feel aggrieved that their successes are not being given more coverage by the media.
- Military feel that reporting from Iraq is overwhelmingly negative.
- Some military officials feel the media should help win the war, others say the media are only “occasional useful teammates.”
- Journalists feel their job is to tell the truth and let the public decide on the war.
- Other reporters said role of media is to be watchdogs not to take sides. Both agreed insurgencies are difficult to cover.
- Both agreed that the rebuilding of Iraq is a slow and difficult process, not easy to show in sound bites.
- Military feel the complex issues in rebuilding Iraq are often oversimplified by the media.
- Media feels stymied by not being given the context they needed to tell a complete story.
- Both sides, to some extent, feel frustrated by the civilian leadership. And, despite the military’s attempts to be positive, it was clear that there was as yet no light at the end of the tunnel in Iraq.

Session IV: Strategic Communications: Transmitting and Shaping the News

With the advance of technology – satellite communications, the Internet, new broadcast technologies, new linkages – once a news story is “out there,” it is everywhere. Further, these technologies are available not only to us and our allies, but to individuals, organizations and governments of every kind – including our enemies.

Panelists in this session were:

- Kevin Sites, Shoot First Films
- Brig. Gen. Erwin F. Lessel III, director, plans and programs, Air Force Materiel Command
- Jamie McIntyre, senior pentagon correspondent, CNN
- RADM Stephen R. Pietropaoli (Ret’d), national executive director, Navy League of the United States.

As communication technologies are advancing, the United States government is seeking to redefine its use of strategic communication both within the U.S. and within the international community.

The military is engaged in its own efforts to communicate more strategically. Its members are frequently called on to serve as spokespeople for America’s military and national security policy, a position requiring sensitivity to the goals of current diplomacy.

- The development of strategic communications in transmitting and shaping the news has affected the military-media relationship.
- New technologies used by the military, such as DVIDS (digital video imaging and distribution system using a small portable satellite transmitter), allow broadcasting from virtually any combat unit in Iraq.

- DVIDS have revolutionized coverage from the ground, allowing military and media to broadcast from the battlefield in real time.
- Currently, there are no editorial gatekeepers on DVIDS, allowing military and reporters to transmit directly to the public. Military expressed concern about this, and reporters expressed concern that military may use the technology to manipulate the news.
- The Pentagon's own internal channel is increasingly broadcasting directly to local cable outlets and producing show, leading one reporter to say "it has morphed into essentially the first Government News channel."
- Cameras, cell phones and Web logs, or blogs, are being used increasingly by the troops themselves to communicate from Iraq, and no one is sure of the future ramifications of this.
- Military are increasingly becoming more sophisticated about strategic communications, which some media worry may lead to them manipulating the news and misleading reporters.
- One issue was the encroachment of IO and PSYOPS into mainstream public affairs. While some military offered a strong argument for bringing the three together, a veteran public affairs officer gave a ringing rebuttal.
- When the media, frustrated with lack of answers from the civilian leadership, asks the military for information, they say they are likely to hear only boilerplate.
- Although some members of the military may disagree with government policy, the officers at the conference made clear that their job is to carry out policy, not to challenge it.
- Both groups appear to understand the dilemma, but neither has a solution for it.

As Don Cooke, the foundation's senior vice president for philanthropy, said at the close of the conference, "There is tremendous good will in this room, but the relationship seems strained. The advances discussed in 2003 seem vulnerable, and the near euphoria around embedding already runs the risk of becoming, as one participant said, a blip in our past. At the same time we're struggling with issues of access, of what constitutes good contextual coverage, it turns out that the American public really cares – you saw this in the Gallup poll – perhaps even more than we suspected. This relationship happens to have a huge audience, of course: the American public and beyond.

"Above all," he concluded, "the general agreement here is that it's the public who's the client. Both military and media are here to serve them, albeit in very different ways."

Conference Participants

Jane Arraf
Senior Baghdad
Correspondent CNN

John Barry
National Security
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Austin Bay
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Ralph Begleiter
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**BG Vincent K. Brooks,
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Department of the Army

Robert Burns
Military Writer
Associated Press

Tony Capaccio
Pentagon Correspondent
Bloomberg News

John Carman
Deputy Director for
Strategic Communication
U.S. Joint Forces
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Rebecca Christie
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Dow Jones Newswires

Sally Donnelly
Washington Bureau
Correspondent
Time Magazine

LTC David Farlow, USA
Deputy Director
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U.S. Central Command

Bradley Graham
Pentagon Correspondent
Washington Post

BG Carter Ham, USA
Deputy Director, Regional
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National Military
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RADM Harry Harris, USN
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Wall Street Journal

James Janega
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Pentagon & Military
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Los Angeles Times

Jamie McIntyre
Senior Pentagon
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USA Today

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The Gallup Organization

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Mary Walsh
Producer, CBS News

Bryan G. Whitman
Deputy Assistant
Secretary of Defense
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(Media Operations)

**BG Richard C. Zilmer,
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Commanding General
Marine Air Ground Task
Force Training Command

VADM James Zortman
Commander,
Naval Air Forces
Naval Air Force Pacific

McCormick Tribune Foundation Military-Media Reports

The Military-Media Relationship 2005: How the armed forces, journalists and the public view coverage of military conflict (2005)

Narrowing the Gap: Military, Media and the Iraq War (2004)

**The Military, the Media and the Administration:
An Irregular Triangle (2002)**

Terrorism: Informing the Public (2002)

The Military and the Media: Facing the Future (1998)

Reporting the War When There is No War (1996)

The Military and the Media: The Continuing Dialogue (1993)

Reporting the Next War (1992)

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Since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the climate under which the military and the media operate has intensified. This change is reflected in both the public perception of the military and the media, and in both groups' perceptions of each other.

An elite group of experts met at a McCormick Tribune Foundation Conference in August of 2005 to address important issues in the continuing improvement of military-media relations, such as:

- The practice of embedding reporters: an evaluation of its success, a comparison to unilateral reporting and the obstacles that must be overcome to maximize accurate reporting of military and national defense issues;
- A Gallup poll comparing public perceptions and the changes that have occurred in the military-media relationship since a similar poll was conducted in 1999;
- The role of the media in covering military and national defense issues, specifically the nature of coverage and the tone – supportive versus skeptical;
- The development of strategic communications in transmitting and shaping the news, and the appropriate and strategic implementation of new technologies that influence the military-media relationship.