Communicating POLITICS

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Peter Golding
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Armageddon, the Pentagon and the Press

David L. Paletz and John Zaven Ayanian

For *three* minutes and twelve seconds on 3 June 1980 electronic monitoring devices at the Strategic Air Command (SAC) in Omaha, Nebraska, and the National Military Command Center (NMCC) at the Pentagon in Washington, DC, indicated that numerous Soviet sea-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) and inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) were headed towards the continental United States. Immediately, the SAC duty officer ordered SAC bomber crews to man their aircraft, start their engines and prepare for take off.

The North American Air Defense Command (NORAD) command post in Colorado Springs, Colorado, processes missiles warning information from radar stations and satellites for use by SAC and NMCC. However, these latter two commands also receive unprocessed information directly from the radar and satellite sensors. This double routing of information, known as 'redundancy' in systems terminology, serves as an internal check on the system. Thus, on 3 June, while the information from the NORAD command to SAC and NMCC apparently warned of a major missile attack, the sensors themselves registered no missile launches or flights. This anomaly suggested to officers at the SAC and NMCC posts that the information emanating from NORAD was erroneous. After the first warning of a missile attack, SAC personnel phoned the NORAD command and learned that officers there had no knowledge of any attack.

The NMCC duty officer convened by telephone a 'missile display conference' among the duty officers at NORAD, SAC, NMCC and the alternate NMCC. They compared warning information being received

or not by the various commands. This conference is a preliminary action for evaluating sensor data. During the first six months of 1980 there were 2,159 routine conferences, and 69 conferences to evaluate possible threats.

As the sensor data were being evaluated, the NMCC duty officer convened by telephone a 'threat assessment conference'. This involves more senior figures than the command post duty officers; its purposes are to evaluate the nature of the perceived threat and to direct actions that will enhance the survivability of American forces. There were four such conferences during 1979 and 1980.

The 'threat assessment conference' did not involve the President or any Cabinet-level official. Had the threat been confirmed, however, the President and his senior advisers would have determined America's response through a 'missile attack conference'. The convening of such a conference has never been publicly acknowledged by the American government.

As part of the 3 June threat assessment conference, the airborne command post of the Pacific Command went into the air from its base in Hawaii. The NMCC duty officer terminated the conference when the NORAD commander confirmed that there was no threat. The SAC alert was cancelled one minute later. SAC bomber crews took about 20 minutes to turn off their engines and return to a normal state of readiness.

The cause of the false warning was thought by military officials to be a malfunctioning NORAD computer. So NORAD personnel applied monitoring equipment to their computers and deliberately left the suspect on-line. The NORAD commanders hoped that the specific cause of the malfunction could be determined if it recurred. On 6 June it did. The 3 June sequence was largely reproduced with SAC bombers going on alert for three minutes. But no aircraft were launched and it appears there was no threat assessment conference.

Subsequently, the offending computer was taken off-line and a back-up computer system substituted. The malfunctions were attributed to a faulty 46-cent computer chip.

The Pentagon perspective

Pentagon officials are not likely to inform press or public voluntarily of nuclear alerts. Word of the 3 June alarm leaked, however, to a local reporter in Norfolk, Virginia, from the headquarters there of the Atlantic Command. After checking with military bases around the country and

receiving a chorus of no comments and refusals to confirm or deny, the reporter obtained official Defense Department confirmation. His paper, the *Virginia-Pilot*, a morning newspaper with a daily circulation of 126,165, published its scoop on 5 June under the headline 'Computer Goofs: Military Alerted'. This internationally important story appeared on page 3.

For the Pentagon spokesmen the problem now was not how to conceal the alert, but what to say about it. Their function, as they saw it, was to reassure press and thereby the public at home and abroad that nuclear war was far from imminent during the false alerts. Indeed, the events would be portrayed as a success because the safeguards in the American early-warning system had worked and prevented an accidental nuclear war. The severity of the alert would be downplayed.

The Pentagon argument consisted, therefore, of three main parts. First, a computerized early-warning system to detect missiles is necessary for the national defence because of the short flight time of missiles from launch. Secondly, when a missile threat is perceived, America must place its nuclear forces on alert to enhance their chances of survival. Thirdly and most importantly from the Pentagon point of view, computers could not launch America's nuclear weapons; only humans have the power to make that decision.

This is a plausible framework in which to place the nuclear alerts, and Pentagon officials did their best to ensure that the press would accept and propagate it. Their tactics included such oft-used weapons as secrecy, obfuscation and invoking technical expertise. But the Pentagon's most immediate technique was to funnel its favourable version of events to a preferred, because sympathetic, reporter.

So at approximately 10.00 a.m. on 5 June public affairs officials released a calm, reassuring and superficially detailed statement to the Associated Press (AP) Pentagon correspondent Fred Hoffman.

> Early Tuesday morning, June 3, 1980, a technical problem in a computer at the North American Air Defense Command caused erroneous data to be transmitted. Some displays at the National Military Command Center and Strategic Air Command Headquarters indicated multiple missile launches against the United States; however, other systems available directly from the warning sensor system continued to confirm that no missiles had been launched. As a precaution and in accordance with standard procedures, certain Strategic Air Command aircraft were brought to a higher state of readiness. These aircraft were manned and engines started. One Command and Control aircraft in the Pacific took off. There was no change in overall US defense posture and, after an evaluation, all systems were returned to normal. The computer technical problems are now being assessed to determine corrective action.

At 11.18 a.m. on 5 June Hoffman's story on the false alert was flashed across the country over the AP wire.

Eleven minutes later the Pentagon press corps gathered in the Pentagon briefing room. Assistant Secretary of Defense Thomas Ross opened the conference with the inquiry, 'Any questions?' Hilary Brown of the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) asked: 'Could you describe the circumstances that led to this false alarm early Tuesday morning?'

Ross responded to the question with a brief prepared statement which was a verbatim repetition of the statement that had been released to Fred Hoffman at 10.00 a.m. Ross's statement was followed by 52 questions on the false alert. Most of the Pentagon correspondents first learned of the alert at this briefing. Their impromptu questions dealt with such aspects as the specific actions taken, the time involved, the cause of the false information, the Soviet response and the nature of the early-warning system. When a reporter finally stated, 'I have a question on another subject', Ross replied, with a mixture of levity and relief, 'Thank God'.

The second alert, that of 6 June, was announced on Saturday, 7 June. Unable to prevent a leak after the first alert, Pentagon officials hoped to curtail public speculation by quietly announcing the second. No briefing was held; Thomas Ross simply prepared a brief statement that was telephoned to the major news organizations during the afternoon of 7 June.

> Friday afternoon, June 6, 1980, the same computer which gave the false indications June 3rd again gave erroneous signals. The computer had been deliberately left on-line with special equipment applied to it in an effort to determine the cause of the June 3rd malfunction. When the second malfunction occurred Friday we believe we detected the cause. The computer has now been taken off the line to absolutely pin-point the cause and correct it. Within three minutes, on Friday, it was positively determined that the cause was again a computer malfunction and that there was no threat to the U.S. As a precautionary measure the engines of some SAC Alert force planes were started but no planes *of any kind* took off. There was no change in the overall defense posture of the United States. The computer involved has been taken off the line until the problem can be determined.

The coverage

As Philip Elliott and Peter Golding observed: 'News is not simply a collection of raw facts about the world, reflecting events with debatable but empirically determinable accuracy. Rather is it an important part of the cultural system of modern society, particularly concerned with providing, in a preliminary fashion, frameworks for handling new and

recurring problems for society.' And they noted that one way the news media do the handling is 'by elaborating continuing perspectives and images on particular topics so that each new event is incorporated into an on-going plot' (Elliott and Golding 1974: 230).

The nuclear attack alerts thus provide us with a fascinating opportunity empirically to pursue some of the important issues that concerned – that rightly obsessed – Philip Elliott. What types of news did reporters produce out of the events? Operating in the Pentagon, were they (unduly) subject to institutional and political constraints? Were they affected by the knowledge that their coverage could make the United States government and its nuclear strategy appear sane and restrained or rash and bellicose not just to Americans but, perhaps more significantly, to allies, neutrals and adversaries abroad. Above all, did reporters employ similar frameworks for handling the alerts? If not, how can we explain the differences?

In fact, American media coverage was not all of a piece. Indeed, it varied widely: from no stories at all in some publications, to docile acceptance of the Pentagon's perspective, through fragmentation, to consideration of the alerts' implications (what we call 'implicational' coverage); and, ultimately, to various forms of sensationalism.

Three sets of factors help to explain this spectrum of media coverage. Naturally, the time and competition constraints the reporters faced are important. So are the reporters' beliefs about the (different) missions of their organizations and, relatedly, the interests of their audiences. But above all are the reporters themselves, especially in their experiences, ambition and energy (or lack thereof), understanding of the technical issues involved in the alerts and their standing and relations both at the Pentagon and with the editors and media executives above them.

We shall briefly illustrate each type of coverage and suggest some of the reasons behind it.

None

Donald Sider has been the national security correspondent for *Time* since September 1978. He described his beat as 'geopolitics beyond diplomacy', incorporating issues from the Pentagon, CIA, White House, State Department and Congress. On the average, he visits the Pentagon three times a week (personal interview, 10 December 1980).

The mechanism for assigning stories at *Time* usually begins with a reporter submitting a brief sketch of a potential article to his editors. If the editors believe it will make a worthwhile story, they will assign it to the reporter. After Sider learned of the false alerts, he 'suggested a story

or essay on the whole premise of accidental war', but his editors did not assign the story.

Conduit

The Associated Press essentially served as conduit for the Pentagon perspective. Its correspondent Fred Hoffman had a close relationship with Pentagon Public Affairs officials. Through five presidential administrations, as political appointees and military officers and members of the press corps came and went, he remained, a Pentagon fixture. An official described him as one of the chosen few reporters who have gained the respect of Public Affairs officials for their responsible (as defined by the official) coverage of Pentagon stories. Such respect made Hoffman a likely reporter to receive tips from officials, and simultaneously jeopardized his ability to question the accuracy, assumptions and implications of that information. No wonder Hoffman was the first Pentagon correspondent to be told about and report the false alerts. Moreover, when he received the official statement, Hoffman was under considerable time pressure to file his story before the news briefing and thus ahead of every other news organization. He had no time to approach different sources or much ponder the implications of the alerts.

Even though the time pressures subsequently diminished, Hoffman's coverage remained a conduit for the Pentagon. He accepted the Pentagon's explanation. As he said of the alert: 'It was the opposite of being on the brink of war. It proved the system works.' Moreover, he did not delve into the technical issues of the implications of the alerts because, as he put it, 'they say they are taking care of it, and if they explained it to me I probably wouldn't understand and my readers wouldn't read it' (all quotes from a personal interview, 21 August 1980). Complacent confidence in Pentagon officials, lack of the requisite understanding to tackle complex issues and prejudgement of readers' interest and intelligence – all combined with Hoffman's self-professed lack of vigour to ensure conduit reporting.

Fragmentation

The AP did not rely solely on its Pentagon correspondent; stories from other of its reporters contained passing mention of British Labour Party and Soviet comments on the alerts. But it was the AP's rival wire service, United Press International (UPI), that produced the more diverse range of coverage. These disparate reports were united, however, mainly by their common lack of analysis.

The one story from UPI's Pentagon correspondent was essentially a conduit in part because the time pressures prevented the reporter from contacting outside sources. But it and the reporter's failure to follow up were part of a more general philosophy about the purpose and function of the wire services. As the reporter said: 'We just reflect everything that happens, and when it's over, we just go on to the next day' (personal interview with Nicholas Daniloff, 19 August 1980).

The other UPI stories were reports of statements to the press: by the Pentagon, Union of Concerned Scientists, Senator John Tower (R-Texas), the Soviet news agency TASS and the Senate Armed Services Committee. Apparently UPI sought none of these statements, simply reporting what it was given without much probing. The result was fragmentation, a smorgasbord of reactions. Not provided was perspective, the kind of information that would explain the alerts and their implications.

Cursory

During the month of June 1980 the *Washington Post* published over 40 news stories related to the American military. So defense issues were clearly of interest to the *Post*'s editors. The newspaper's Pentagon correspondent, George Wilson, moreover, spoke of his role as one would expect of a reporter from an elite newspaper: 'I'm not here to try and duplicate the wires, I try and develop the stories. . . . What I'm here for is to get behind the façade and get them to open the kimono' (personal interview, 19 August 1980). Yet only one story on the alerts appeared by Wilson in the *Post*. Entitled 'Computer Errs, Warns of Soviet Attack on U.S.' (*Washington Post*, 6 June 1980), it was mainly a conduit for the official Pentagon statement of 5 June, and was relegated to page 5.

Three factors help to explain the *Post*'s cursory coverage. First, its Pentagon correspondent did not consider the false alarms particularly significant: as he said, 'the fact that it was nipped in the bud made it less of a story' (personal interview, 19 August 1980). Secondly, he apparently received no major pressure from his editors to pursue the story. Thirdly, since some rival media outlets were treating the issue as a major issue, Wilson and the *Post* would, in our opinion, have been confessing news judgement errors had they belatedly tried to catch up.

Implicational

The *New York Times* carried eight stories on the alerts. While these relied almost exclusively on US governmental sources, and none of them

appeared on the paper's front page, several of the sources used expressed anxiety and concern over the false alarms. The stories maintained questioning attitudes towards the Pentagon perspective and behaviour. And the two reporters who wrote the bulk of the stories took pains to probe the alerts' implications.

One reason for this implicational coverage was Richard Halloran. He began on the Pentagon beat for the *Times* in September 1979 and his limited experience there seemed to spur him to approach each new story as a learning experience. He thus sought more information than Pentagon officials were willing to reveal and raised questions in his coverage they preferred not to deal with publicly.

The *Times*'s coverage of the alerts was bolstered by stories from Richard Burt. Not bound by a specific institutional beat, Burt had the subject-oriented responsibilities of military-diplomatic and strategic military issues. In preparing his report, Burt found anonymous sources at the Pentagon and White House who diverged from the official line. Consequently, he wrote the most thorough discussion of the launch-on-warning strategy found in any mass media report. His special interest in nuclear strategy gave him the background to relate the false alerts to strategic questions, and the definition of his role at the *Times* encouraged him to do so.

So the combination of two reporters, one knowledgeable and operating at large, the other not bound to the shibboleths of the past; with neither beholden to Pentagon sources; and with both assuming that their newspaper's readers would be concerned and want to learn more about the alerts' causes and implications – this produced implicational coverage in the *Times*.

None the less, the *Times* never gave the alert articles page 1 prominence, printing them on the first national news page after page 1. According to Halloran, the editors believed these were 'good solid stories' but did not consider them weighty enough for the front page (personal interview, 5 January 1981). On 6 June, when Halloran's first story broke, the *Times* had two military stories on the front page dealing with the rescue mission to Iran and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance's call for an arms limitation treaty with the Soviet Union. The need for balance in front page subjects kept Halloran's piece off the front page. After 6 June the alerts were no longer breaking news. As evolving news, the false alert stories were relegated to the middle of the paper.

Confused–sensational

Hilary Brown became NBC's Pentagon correspondent in December 1979 with an admittedly limited knowledge of defence issues and oper-

ations. Commenting on her approach to the Pentagon, she said: 'It's your duty not to take what they tell you at face value. . . . Basically it's an adversary relationship' (personal interview, 6 August 1980).

Pentagon officials generally prefer a collegial to an adversarial relationship with reporters. To this end, they can be of great assistance to correspondents by suggesting sources and providing background information. The reporter need not be sycophantic, but only cordial personally and 'objective' professionally. Brown's somewhat strident attitude made her unlikely to receive the special support that would have rectified her unfamiliarity with the Pentagon. Compounding the situation, Brown's producers at NBC news were apparently uninterested in defence stories: she appeared just seven times on the evening news during the six or so months she worked at the Pentagon prior to the alerts.

Brown had wanted to do a report on the alerts but her producers were not interested. Then, two weeks later, they learned that ABC News was planning a two-part 'Special Assignment' series and promoting it in advance. They decided on 23 June to air their own investigative story beating ABC by one day. Brown had two days to compile her report. Consequently, time pressures generated by producer indecision, and misplaced perceptions caused by reporter inexperience, culminated in a confused and misleading and sensational news story.

Many of the visuals used in the story were taken from an air force film of a strategic military exercise. They were graphically edited to reinforce the frightening aspects of the story – this demonstrating that Defense Department file film can sometimes be used by the media to the detriment of the military.

Implicational–sensational

The American Broadcasting Company (ABC) in its evening news devoted the most air time of the three television networks to covering the false alerts. The first of its three stories primarily reported the official Pentagon announcement; but its second and third reports (a two-part series) used diverse sources of information and were extensive and complex. In part they were sensational: with exciting visuals (crews running to planes, small red flashing light, a missile launching as the camera looked down into the silo), quick editing, split screen and the constant reappearance of correspondent John McWethy as he guided us to and at the various locations. ABC even showed its audience an aerial view of the Washington Monument, ominously reminiscent of a missile. But the ABC stories also raised, even if they did not fully

explore, such implications of the alerts as poor management, inadequate maintenance, the use of obsolescent computers and the isolation of decision-makers because of their dependence on computers.

ABC Pentagon correspondent John McWethy began working for the network in December 1979 having previously served as the science and technology and then White House correspondent for *U.S. News and World Report*. Before that, he had worked for *Congressional Quarterly*, where he had written a book on congressional oversight of the Defense Department.

McWethy's prestige at ABC News, combined with his producers' interest in the false alert issue, resulted in a decision to prepare a two-part investigative series which McWethy was given two weeks to prepare. Of all the Pentagon correspondents, he was therefore able to utilize the widest range and greatest number of sources: three political and three technical, three in government and three out of it, four Americans and two foreigners (including Soviet commentator Vladimir Pozner). ABC, moreover, was the only news organization to employ co-ordinated teamwork. The *New York Times* and the wire services all had more than one correspondent writing articles, but no one reporter for these organizations co-ordinated the coverage as McWethy did for ABC.

McWethy raised several of the important implications of the alerts in his two-part series. None the less, he did not detail them fully. Among the reasons were lack of time to delve into complexity, and concern that the evening news audience would be bored by technical language. But the most important explanation stems from the dovetailing of ABC's interest in an action-packed, exciting news story and McWethy's determination 'to convey the scariness of the incident' (personal interview, 4 August 1980). Thus the numerous freeze frames, editing of film into very brief cuts and emphasis on active images, all designed to create a mood of tension, tended to sensationalize the alerts.

What the news media missed

The debate in the United States about nuclear weapons has been traditionally quite limited. It is confined to a small community of military, strategic and technological experts who share many assumptions about the functions and purposes of nuclear weapons. The American public is minimally involved in the debate, partly out of ignorance, and also because nuclear war is a frightening topic. In reporting complex, secret military events such as the false alerts, the news media have the

opportunity to ventilate issues which would otherwise receive little sustained public attention.

Certainly there were dramatic differences in the media's coverage of the false alerts. None the less, even the best coverage was incomplete and short-lived. Significant deficiencies occurred in stories of the 6 June alert, in the international, strategic, procedural and procurement implications of both alerts, and in the corrective measures subsequently taken in the early-warning system.

We briefly illustrate here with the international implications. For the consequences of a nuclear war would not be limited to any one country. An American attack on the Soviet Union could spur retaliation against America's allies. Radioactive fall-out would spread all over the globe. For these reasons, the false alerts cannot be a strictly American concern.

Most of the US news organizations gave only cursory consideration to the consequences of the alerts for the Soviet Union and for America's European allies. Although many of the news organizations presented the sensational Soviet condemnations of the Pentagon, only the *New York Times* discussed the possible military reasons for Soviet fear of American alerts. Some news organizations mentioned attacks on the Pentagon by British Labour Party members. ABC noted that many European leaders 'complained that the U.S. did not even tell them a major alert was underway in America' (*World News*, 26 June 1980). Only one report, by an AP correspondent in London, discussed why Europeans were concerned: plans to base cruise missiles in Western Europe could make these countries likely targets for Soviet missiles.

Why did most Pentagon correspondents neglect the international aspects of the false alerts? Reporters could have contacted foreign embassies in Washington, but embassies are not regular sources for military writers. Obtaining overseas information would have required time-consuming co-ordination with other correspondents. Most news organizations covered the false alerts for less than two weeks. Above all, the stories were written by Americans for Americans: ethnocentrism triumphed.

Conclusion

As discrete events with large implications, the false nuclear alerts of June 1980 afford a special opportunity to evaluate news coverage of the Pentagon. The alerts were typical of much Pentagon news: globally significant, potentially detrimental to the public image of the Pentagon and difficult to dissect because of their secrecy and technology.

News from the Pentagon passes through two filters, the government's and the media's. Traditional critiques of this newsmaking process, such as *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* by J. W. Fulbright (1970) and *Minimum Disclosure* by Juergen Arthur Heise (1979), have focused on the Pentagon's power to impress its perspective on the media and the public. These books have depicted the array of tools used by the Defense Department to dominate the presentation of military news. We agree that the Pentagon withholds information, plays favourites with reporters and attempts to place a positive interpretation on disconcerting military events. But we go beyond the traditional view to demonstrate ways in which the media mould (and manipulate) military news. Definitions of newsworthiness, reporter inadequacies and organizational constraints within the media profoundly influence news from the Pentagon.

We saw in the news media a range of false alert coverage. The Pentagon presented its interpretation of the events, but could not uniformly enforce it on the press. Some reporters were unperturbed by the alerts, while others were very distressed; both conduit *and* sensational reports were evident. The primary press question became: 'How close were we to accidental nuclear war?' Obviously this was a necessary question to ask, but by dominating reporters' concerns, this inquiry concealed some very important, but less exciting, issues.

This distinction between exciting and important is essential to understanding the Pentagon press corps. Extraordinary events and dramatic policy changes will almost always be reported by Pentagon correspondents (if they are aware of them), but the opportunity to use these topics as newspegs for implicational discussions is rarely employed. Most Pentagon reporters pursue breaking news because these stories are most likely to be published or broadcast. Few incentives exist for reporters to follow issues over time.

Pentagon correspondents are understandably harried by the incessant demands of their beat. The quality of Pentagon news coverage would be likely to improve if news organizations also employed issue-oriented reporters less restricted by the beat. In addition, military news reports could contain more varied viewpoints if news organizations made a greater effort to co-ordinate their Pentagon correspondents with their other reporters. Although organizational influences weigh heavily on reporters, most newsmen perceive themselves as very individualistic and are not naturally inclined to seek assistance from their colleagues in other locales.

The relationship between the military and the media is complex. As

was demonstrated after the false alerts, the traditional view of the Pentagon as the preponderant controller of military news is only partly true. Many problems in the false alert coverage resulted more from the inadequacies of the news media than from the overwhelming power of the Pentagon. Solutions to these problems require from news reporters and managers more questioning of the Pentagon, more initiative in developing stories and more reflection on the assumptions which guide their work than we found.