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Spectacular Warfare

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In January 1991, Robert Smith faced a daunting task. As Tampa Bay Safety Director, Smith was responsible for maintaining security at Super Bowl XXV, the National Football League (NFL) championship game between the New York Giants and Buffalo Bills. This game presented unique security concerns because it was scheduled to take place at a time when the United States was at war against a nation that had vowed to make global terrorist attacks on U.S. citizens. Speculation that the Super Bowl might be an ideal target fueled suggestions that the game should be postponed.

Buoyed by encouragement from President George H.W. Bush, Smith decided to go ahead with the football festivities, taking extra precautions to secure Tampa Bay Stadium from terrorist attack. A six-foot high wire fence was erected around the stadium. Metal detectors were installed at entry gates. Bomb-sniffing dogs patrolled the premises along with over fifteen hundred police officers, double the usual contingent for Super Bowl detail.

On game day, January 27, 1991, millions of television viewers witnessed a remarkable spectacle that blended coverage of the New York Giants' 20-19 victory with news reports of fighting in the Persian Gulf. "During the Gulf War the commentary of military and football analysts – and the methods deployed to illustrate and explain sports and the war – became almost indistinguishable" (Castonguay 1997). According to Lewis Lapham (1992), editor of *Harper's* magazine, media coverage of the Gulf War borrowed many of the rhythms and conventions of play-by-play football commentary.

The Pentagon produced and directed the war . . . with a script that borrowed elements of "Monday Night Football." . . . The synchronization with prime-time entertainment was particularly striking on Super Bowl Sunday. ABC News intercut its coverage of the game in progress in Tampa with news of the bombing in progress in the Middle East, and the transitions seemed entirely in keeping with the spirit of both events. The newscasters were indistinguishable from the sportscasters, all of them drawing diagrams in chalk and talking in similar voices about the flight of a forward pass or the flare of a Patriot missile. The football players knelt to pray for a field goal, and the Disneyland halftime singers performed the rites of purification meant to sanctify the killing in the desert. (258-259)

This brand of spectacular warfare, where military conflict is packaged and sold as entertainment, is made possible by the advent of what James Der Derian (2001) calls "MIME-NET," the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network. MIME-NET represents an extension of the "Revolution in Military Affairs" (RMA), a trend in arms procurement and military doctrine favoring

development and deployment of sophisticated, high-tech weaponry. MIME-NET (the latter day incarnation of Eisenhower's Military Industrial Complex) maximizes the political efficacy of RMA technology by facilitating institutional scripting of public argument during wartime.

The RMA and Fickle Publics

Traditionally conceived, the purpose of military buildup is to generate firepower necessary to obliterate enemies in warfare. However, post-Cold War ascent of the U.S. to the status of "sole superpower" has introduced an important wrinkle to this axiom. The Pentagon possesses military capability to annihilate completely any adversary, yet domestic political support for such tactics erodes steadily as U.S. military engagements increasingly take on the character of police actions, where military intervention is undertaken more to enforce norms of behavior rather than to protect against direct threats to the American homeland.

With this shift, the World War II policy of "total war" in pursuit of "unconditional surrender" has been replaced by a tacit bargain struck between U.S. citizens and enemy civilians that they should both be spared the direct effects of military conflict. Thus, "[t]actical decisions were taken in the Gulf War planning rooms in order to avoid both friendly casualties and the appearance of killing innocents on the enemy side" (Demchak 2000, 179). More recently in Kosovo, NATO military planners demonstrated fealty to this tacit bargain by carrying out precision air strikes designed to limit danger to allied soldiers while simultaneously insulating Serbian civilians from direct attack.

Such strategies are made possible by military technology produced as part of the RMA, which prioritizes the speed and accuracy of so-called smart weaponry over the sheer destructiveness of conventional "dumb" arms (Freedman 1998; Krepinevich 1994; Laird and Mey 1999). RMA-inspired strategies recognize that today, public opinion, not enemy military strength, represents the most significant constraint on U.S. military action. As the lessons of Somalia demonstrate, if the tacit bargain unravels at either end (i.e. if U.S. soldiers suffer too many casualties or if foreign civilians suffer too much collateral damage), American domestic political support for military missions can evaporate almost instantly.

Spectator Sport Warfare

Heightened reliance on "smart" weaponry enables the Pentagon to adapt to the new constraints on military action produced by fickle publics reluctant to spill American blood or kill innocent noncombatants. It also transforms the experience of warfare in significant ways, sanitizing the horrors of war for those who deliver and observe remote-control violence. In Kosovo, NATO bombardiers wielded hand-held "wizzos," Nintendo-like devices that help pilots guide precision weaponry to their targets from 40,000 feet. For U.N. coalition soldiers, the battlefield experience of the Gulf War recalled childhood visits to the video arcade. In the first thirty-eight days of the conflict, coalition fighter pilots made bombing runs in the dead of night, using infrared vision and computerized navigation aids to make their way through the desert and to their

targets – “not real locations but map coordinates displayed on a VDU” (Woolley 1992, 193). Alienated from the direct reality of the battlefield, there was little to distinguish the coalition pilots’ experience from training runs made in simulation machines: “Shells burst in silence; explosions have no source. . . . A fighter-bomber will attack a distant target, bathe the terrain in fire and twist away in the sky without the slightest sound” (Fisk 1991, 19).

While coalition soldiers were remote spectators to the damage wrought by their high-tech weapons, the surreal nature of Gulf War placed the world audience in a perceptual position even further removed from the direct action. Because the media relied heavily on military-furnished remote video for their reports, the hyperreal experience of the battlefield was transferred to civilian television viewers. “[J]ust as the military found itself located in video hyperspace for the conduct of the war, the media found itself a coproducer of this virtual reality” (Campbell 1993, 16). Images recorded from the nose cone of smart bombs as they homed in on ground targets were replayed again and again on television. “These images literally took the TV viewers into a new high-tech cyberspace,” what Douglas Kellner (1992) describes as “a realm of experience with which many viewers were already familiar through video and computer games” (157). “The Gulf war was ‘total television,’ an entertainment form that merged media and military planning. The pentagon and its corporate suppliers became the producers and sponsors of the sounds and images, while the ‘news’ became a form of military advertising. Seen on network TV, the video-game images were crucial in recruiting support for the U.S.-led attack” (Robins and Levidow 1995, 29).

This MIME-NET frame for interpreting events constructs military conflict as what Colin McInnes (2000) calls “spectator sport warfare” (143-45; see also Mann 1988). The sense of direct risk to allied citizens is elided by virtue of their positioning as spectators, while the violence of conflict is sportified and thus emptied of brutal content: “These conditions transform war into something like a spectator sport. As with sports, nothing ultimate is at stake: neither national survival, nor the fate of the economy. War affords the pleasures of a spectacle, with the added thrill that it is real for someone, but not, happily, for the spectator” (Ignatieff 2000, 191).

As Guy Debord notes, modern capitalist institutions are adept at utilizing spectacular diversions to manufacture mass loyalty and fortify legitimacy. Spectacles, such as “the succession of paltry contests – from competitive sports to elections” function simultaneously as capitalist rallying points and tools of concealment: “By means of the spectacle the ruling order discourses endlessly upon itself in an uninterrupted monologue of self praise. . . . The fetishistic appearance of pure objectivity in spectacular relationships conceals their true character. . . .” (Debord 1992 [1967], 19). In the case of spectator sport warfare, the spectacle of “Nintendo war” (McBride 1995) cultivates viewer passivity and masks the gruesome details that differentiate institutionalized killing from organized sport.

Debord’s explication of the spectacle’s propaganda power sheds light on former President Bush’s enthusiasm for keeping Super Bowl XXV on schedule during the Gulf War. Tapping into the patriotic sentiment that was stoked by Whitney Houston’s halftime rendition of the national anthem, President Bush joined First Lady Barbara in delivering a military pep talk during

a break in the action. “Indeed, the Super Bowl and its viewers became important – even essential – participants in the war effort” (Castonguay 1997).

Imprints of this theme were evident later in the war effort, when a Marine sergeant anticipated commencement of the ground war by saying “tomorrow we cross [the border] . . . we feel like a football team prior to the big game” (qtd. in Engelhart and Foran 1992). Gen. Norman Schwartzkopf (1991) called the decisive allied flank maneuver in the ground war a “Hail Mary pass.” Topps, Inc., manufacturer of NFL trading cards, produced a series of Desert Storm Collector’s Cards, featuring items such as: “F117A Stealth,” “Moving in,” “Carpet Bombing,” and “Ready in the Cockpit.” (McBride 1995, 60-61). After the war, the football metaphor continued to permeate military discourse. Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Ronald R. Fogelman (1995) explained the significance of RMA-style breakthroughs by way of the football metaphor.

What we’re doing today with information warfare [IW] is a little bit like that football game. IW gives us the ability to plan faster with better information, so that we can call the optimum play. It may allow us to know what defensive stunt the other team is going to use. It may allow us to give our opponent false information on what play we’re about to use. And, most importantly, it may allow us to call an audible and adjust to a fluid situation. But . . . when America sends her military forces into action, we don’t want a close, exciting game and we don’t want an inexperienced quarterback. This nation has come to expect in our military operations nothing but blow-outs – 100 to nothing is a good score. And I believe that exploiting this new and emerging information technology is going to be the key to making this happen.

The subject of RMA’s impact on military strategy and deployments has received significant scholarly attention (see e.g. Adams 1998; Kaldor 1999; Scales 1999). Less frequently discussed is the role of MIME-NET in structuring public deliberation during warfare. Analysis of how the spectator sport framework shapes the spatio-temporal dimensions for public deliberation can shed light on this phenomenon.

Spectacular Time

A chief warrant officer for the 82nd Airborne announced the onset of hostilities in Operation Desert Shield with the remark “[i]t’s time to quit the pre-game show” (quoted in Gugliotta and Murphy 1991). A pilot returning from one of the first bombing runs over Baghdad exclaimed, “[w]e’ve scored a touchdown and no one was home!” (qtd. in Points 1991, 19). Another pilot warned against early optimism, cautioning, “[w]e had one good morning. You sting ‘em quick, you’re winning 7-0, but it’s not over” (qtd. in Shenon 1991).

These comments script the meaning of war events by inviting audiences to interpret such events through the temporal horizon of a football game, with the first shot fired comparable to kickoff. Football may be a game of inches, but it is also game of seconds, with the advantage going to the team that can “control the clock.” With time for play strictly regimented into four 15-minute quarters, quarterbacks use every tool at their disposal (e.g. sideline patterns, time-outs, incomplete passes) to pack the most plays possible into the finite temporal boundaries defined by the play clock.

President Bush's repeated promises to keep the Gulf War "on schedule" reflected a similar temporal orientation. In contemporary wars, Pentagon military planners know that they have to work against the clock. The importance placed on "exit strategies" underscores the fact that the American public will increase its scrutiny of any war that "drags on." The memory of Vietnam ensures that, returning to Fogelman's metaphor, citizens prefer 100-to-nothing blowouts and will not tolerate overtime. Gen. Wesley Clark, NATO commander during Kosovo, corroborates this, explaining that "... air campaigns have a sort of radioactive half-life. They decay" (qtd. in Der Derian 2001, 197).

The challenge for military planners is to execute necessary missions before public support decays. Once again, this imperative creates a need for quick deployments and speedy weapons that can keep spectators on the sidelines. These approaches create two interlocking trends in public argument and political opinion measurement. The emphasis on speed and clock management enables military leaders to skirt formal consent mechanisms such as the War Powers Act, which mandates congressional review of any war stretching beyond ninety days. In place of formal consent procedures, Pentagon planners rely on public opinion polling and focus groups to gauge how much public support they have left (Ignatieff 2000, 177; see also Hallet 1998). However, as Susan Herbst (1998) and Jurgen Habermas (1996) point out, such sampling mechanisms reinforce the citizen spectator effect by presenting the aggregate of atomized individual preferences as finished public opinion. The result is that formal consent mechanisms dependent on citizen participation for activation become even less viable as constraints on military missions.

Spectacular Space

Football, according to former University of Michigan quarterback Bob Timberlake is "good, clean violence" (qtd. in Maikovich 1994, 76). Gene Klein, former owner of San Diego chargers, echoed this sentiment in somewhat more patrician fashion, observing that football is "refined violence" (quoted in McBride 1995, 89). Presidential aide Richard Haas tapped into this popular understanding of football by spelling out the American decision to call off the Gulf War after Iraq's retreat from Kuwait with the following explanation: "We didn't want to be accused of piling on once the whistle had blown" (qtd. in Freedman and Karsh 1993, 405).

Occasionally, football players are maimed gravely on the field – Jack "The Assassin" Tatum's paralyzing hit on Darryl Stingley comes to mind as one infamous example. However, football fans tend to accept these incidents as aberrations, writing them off as unfortunate departures from the otherwise "clean" violence mandated by NFL rules. "Smart" weaponry, filtered through MIME-NET reportage, enables Pentagon officials to shape popular understanding of military missions to fit a similar frame.

As media critic Philip Taylor (1992) observes, allied forces proved during Operation Desert Storm that it was possible to fight wars "in the television age without allowing too much of war's 'visible brutality' to appear in the front rooms of their publics" (276). Similarly, Dana Cloud (1994) notes that the perceptual distance from military operations created by video news coverage shifted public war discussion to an interpersonal frame that focused attention on

“yellow ribbon therapeutic” news at the expense of “harder” news about battle developments, casualties, and prisoners.

From the vantage point of CNN viewers, the Gulf War appeared to be a sterile and precise military campaign. However, behind the Pentagon’s decisive view charts and Hollywood-style video clips, there was massive carnage. During the war, military officials shot video footage that featured gruesome images of war violence. For example, “turkey shoots” of retreating Iraqi soldiers were documented on video clips shot by cameras mounted on the front of Apache helicopters. Unsure about whether to release such video evidence to the media press pool, Pentagon officials showed segments to selected reporters in a screen test. As one reporter recounted, the screen test “showed frightened, disoriented Iraqi infantrymen being shot to pieces in the dark by U.S. attack helicopters. One by one they were cut down in the middle of the night by an enemy they could not see” (qtd. in Clark 1992, 140). Censors eventually ruled the video “too brutal for general audiences,” and the public never witnessed the events (see Clark 1992, 140).

The spectacular virtual space of video warfare creates fertile ground for Pentagon officials to draw upon the tradition of “clean violence” enshrined in American football to portray military operations as sanitary “surgical strikes.” This maneuver is leveraged by the fact that as Debord explains, the glitter of modern capitalist spectacles disguises a “banalizing trend” that cultivates “smug acceptance of what exists” (1992 [1967], 38). This may explain why in the context of the Gulf War, “Just as it never would occur to Frank Gifford to question the procedures of the National Football League, so also it never occurred to Tom Brokaw to question the ground rules of the war” (Lapham 1992, 259). While this “banalizing trend” has enabled military leaders to manufacture short-term loyalty for recent wars, it has also ushered in what is becoming a disturbing routine, whereby post-war investigations expose wartime claims of precise bombing accuracy as convenient fictions. In addition to the bevy of disclosures documenting widespread collateral damage during the Gulf War, now comes “Collateral Damage: The Balkans After NATO’s Air War,” a 53-minute documentary by Gary Dempsey and Aaron Lukas that shows ground damage resulting in some 1,000 deaths due to NATO bombs (see Murdock 2000).

Conclusion

Historian O.K. Werckmeister (1991) calls Western society a “citadel culture,” where “the democratic institutions that allow us to empower, change and control our governments have made sure that this entire operational system of weaponry is withdrawn from our political initiatives” (5). In part, political insulation of the military sector is secured through application of police force – witness the recent arrests of demonstrators protesting at Air Force bases housing the U.S. Ballistic Missile Defense program. However, more subtle techniques of media control are utilized during wartime, when tacit consent for military intervention is manufactured through sportification of public discourse. The same Revolution in Military Affairs that enables Pentagon strategists to utilize remote control violence also creates spectacular spatio-temporal frameworks for public understanding of events. The media and entertainment industry fill these vessels of virtual time and space with themes that associate warfare with cultural

habits and traditions such as football. This produces patterns of public argument that freely mix sport and war, with war correspondents producing the equivalent of play-by-play commentary and football fans becoming active agents of war mobilization. National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice was asked recently to name her “dream job.” Perhaps all of this helps explain why her answer was “NFL commissioner” (see McFeatters 2001).

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