

Late-Breaking Foreign Policy

LATE-BREAKING FOREIGN POLICY

The News Media's Influence
on Peace Operations

Warren P. Strobel



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Cover photograph: News cameras confront U.S. troops who have just hit the tarmac at Port-au-Prince's airport on September 19, 1994, to begin Operation Uphold Democracy in Haiti. Photo by Alex Webb; used by permission of Magnum Photos, Inc.

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Foreword

When Ted Turner launched the Cable News Network (CNN) in 1980, he foresaw the potential of a worldwide audience with an interest in round-the-clock news from practically every corner of the globe. He may not have envisioned his new venture as a media phenomenon that would come to have a significant impact on foreign-policy making. Since its first mention during the Persian Gulf War, however, the “CNN effect” has been the subject of considerable media commentary and scholarly analysis, linking it to everything from governments’ loss of control over foreign policy decisions to a very public “back channel” for heads of state who seek alternatives to communicate their intentions to current and potential adversaries.

In Warren Strobel’s important work, a media professional examines the CNN effect through the perspective of the numerous post–Cold War crises around the world that have led to U.S. intervention. Unlike previous studies of the media and U.S. foreign policy, which typically addressed the way American public opinion influenced a president’s decision to go to war, this analysis explores the media’s influence on the decision to deploy U.S. troops as part of peace operations. Foreign policy officials make the decision to deploy troops on such peace missions (or “operations other than war,” in military parlance) under public pressure generated by televised images of human suffering, but often without a clear, vital national interest at stake—usually to restore order in failed states and to protect vulnerable populations. When the missions go badly, resulting in casualties or deaths of U.S. peacekeepers, the same officials often feel even more

pressure to withdraw the troops quickly. Does the CNN effect—the notion of the news media as a force that drives foreign policy decisions—threaten to remove statecraft from the domain of experienced diplomats and policymakers?

Specifically, how much of an influence can be attributed to the CNN effect in the decisions to deploy—or withdraw—U.S. troops on peace operations to Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and northern Iraq? This is the main question Strobel attempts to answer in this study. Were these interventions the result of deliberate policy decisions by the president and his advisers, or hapless responses to the public's demands that something be done about the emotive images as they played on millions of television screens? Despite the appeal of the CNN effect's putative power, Strobel demonstrates that there are some crucial conditions that must obtain for the CNN effect to influence foreign-policy decision making.

In the course of this study, Strobel also reveals the impact of tremendous advances in communications technology not only on specific foreign policies but on the *process* of policymaking as well. The pressures of accelerating deadlines and rapid communications have made thoughtful analysis a relatively scarce commodity in the high-speed information marketplace. If real-time television has diminished the broadcast journalist's already precious few moments to sift through the blur of details and conflicting accounts of a foreign crisis, the same pressures have serious consequences for foreign-policy officials, who often must respond to the pressures of the crisis with little time for considered judgment. The real-time televised images of starvation and clan warfare in Somalia, ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, brutal political repression in Haiti, and waves of refugees fleeing mass slaughter in Rwanda have suddenly made foreign policy a very public process, as citizens demand some sort of instant response from their government. These images have also made foreign-policy decision making much more reactive and intuitive: crises in a remote corner of the world are no longer hidden from view, and foreign policy officials have less time to assess intelligence and analysis before having to decide whether or not to intervene. While diplomats are certainly not "relics of the days of sailing ships," something can be said of the power of the CNN effect when the occupants of the State Department's top floors stare intently at the

images of a crisis on their office televisions while awaiting the arrival of an embassy's cables that analyze the visual impressions.

Strobel's vantage point is that of a working print journalist who has relied on his official contacts during his years covering the State Department and the White House to give his newspaper's readers a daily look at how decisions are made at the highest levels of government. During his yearlong stint at the United States Institute of Peace as a Jennings Randolph fellow, he visited his government contacts again—not as a reporter on deadline, but as an analyst—and he has synthesized their recollections in a reporter's conversant style. He also knows the television side of news gathering and describes in a reporter's detail not only what drives the broadcast journalists who “parachute” into the midst of crises around the globe (and their producers at the network headquarters who dispatch them to such situations) but also the imperatives of technology that drive the increasing rush to “go live” with the story. Strobel also explores the impact of the communications technology revolution on his own special medium—print journalism. The author's observation that television's ubiquitous “headline news” roundups have created a more analytical niche for the next morning's newspapers testifies to both his acute sense of how the media industry is going through a significant shift in its division of news-gathering labor, and his reflective approach to this complex subject.

The technological revolution in communications has indeed transformed the foreign policy machinery as well, and this book serves as one important effort of the Institute of Peace to address the major changes now transforming the practice of statecraft. This year, the Institute devoted its biannual conference to the impact of information technology and the telecommunications revolution on conflict management—an event entitled “Virtual Diplomacy.” The conference built on a related gathering in 1996 on the theme of “Managing Communications,” which examined the issues surrounding the coordination of information among the myriad governmental and private-sector organizations involved in humanitarian-relief missions.

Journalists, it is often said, provide the “instant history” of problems that academics will grapple with for generations to come. Indeed, reporters have a heavy burden: they observe, investigate, interview—and then must

compose an accurate story that includes not only the salient facts of *what* has happened, but *why* and what its implications will be. Warren Strobel has brought the best of both worlds to this groundbreaking work on contemporary foreign-policy making in an era of vast change driven by the revolution in communications technology.

Richard H. Solomon
President
United States Institute of Peace

Acknowledgments

Writing a book, especially one on the elusive and occasionally mind-numbing topic of the media-policy relationship, can be a lonely experience. I was fortunate beyond words to have friends, family, and colleagues who helped ease the loneliness and ensure this project came to a successful conclusion.

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