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# Constant crisis : a study of the U.S. military's crisis communication program

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CONSTANT CRISIS: A STUDY OF THE U.S. MILITARY'S  
CRISIS COMMUNICATION PROGRAM

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Journalism and Mass Communications

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

by

Alyson M. Teeter-Baker

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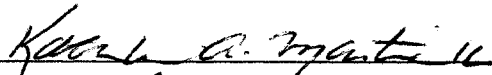
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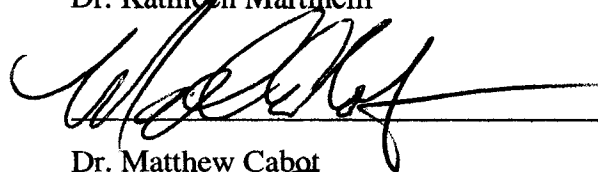
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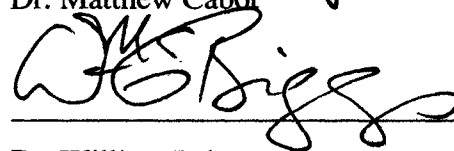
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## ABSTRACT

### CONSTANT CRISIS: A STUDY OF THE U.S. MILITARY'S CRISIS COMMUNICATION PROGRAM

by Alyson M. Teeter-Baker

This study analyzes the U.S. military's crisis communication program. Military documents were analyzed and current and former military public affairs personnel were interviewed to understand the military's crisis communication program and how it correlates to the Horsley and Baker's (2002) synthesis model. Historical wartime cases were examined to uncover patterns in its communication practices. This study confirms that the military's crisis communication program correlates closely with the synthesis model. But the military's communication efforts often failed in the aftermath of past crises due to its authoritarian culture and justice system. The authoritarian culture compelled the military to use unethical tactics, such as lying and censoring, yet these tactics became less common through time as communication technologies advanced.

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This thesis is dedicated to my sugar daddy, loving husband, and future president,

James E. Baker.

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## INTRODUCTION

A crisis can hit any organization at any time, and a failed crisis communication strategy could tarnish the image, credibility, and performance of an organization for many years. Crisis communication events in war have made headlines since Vietnam, and continue to generate public outrage and controversy. By virtue of its position in U.S. history and culture, the military receives an abundance of attention and scrutiny. According to Coombs (2007), events that could have gone under the public's radar decades ago are now highly visible because of technology and the creation of the 24-hour news networks. Crises are now global because of the technological advancements, especially during war.

April 2004 *The New Yorker's* Seymour Hersh and *CBS 60 Minutes II* broke news that almost instantly made headlines around the world. U.S. soldiers stationed at a military prison called Abu Ghraib in Iraq were photographed abusing Iraqi prisoners. In one photograph an Iraqi detainee is standing on a box wearing a black Ku Klux Klan-like robe with what appears to be electrodes attached to his body. This photograph and hundreds of others were taken in 2003. The Abu Ghraib abuse scandal was a preventable crisis and hampered the war effort. In response to this crisis, did the military's crisis communication tactics cause more harm than good?

The purpose of this study is to analyze the U.S. military's crisis communication program. The U.S. military and its crisis communication efforts have been heavily criticized during past events, but there is a void of academic study regarding the military's crisis communications program. For the purposes of this study, the "military

crisis communication program” refers to those characteristics common to the U.S. military’s training tools and regulations. The military term for public relations is “public affairs,” and has an equivalent definition in this study.

Military documents, training material, and interview transcripts were researched to assess the state of the military’s crisis communication program. Contemporary crisis communication literature was reviewed and compared with the content analysis and interview data. To help extrapolate the evolution of the crisis communication program, three wartime cases were analyzed. In each case, the U.S. military was accused of cover up and the incidents were portrayed in the media as scandals. Selecting crisis communication failures for study uncovered systemic quirks in the past implementations of the military’s crisis communication program. Starting with the 1968 My Lai massacre in Vietnam, to the 1994 friendly fire Black Hawk shootdown during Operation Provide Comfort, and ending with 2004 Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal during Operation Iraqi Freedom, these cases were analyzed to assess the military’s wartime crisis communication strategies. Technological advancements and military culture were integrated in the analysis.

The literature review begins with a review of contemporary crisis communication literature, which includes Horsley and Barker’s (2002) synthesis model of public sector crisis communication. In addition, Hallahan’s (1999) public relations view of framing theory, Gandy’s (1982) information subsidies theory, the ethical proactive public relations model by Baker and Martinson (2001), and Hill’s (1984) analysis of military authoritarianism round out the theoretical framework.

Based upon the communication theories highlighted in the literature review, a study was performed to research the military's crisis communications program and historical evolution of its crisis communication strategy. The researcher qualitatively analyzed training materials, regulations, historical documents, and interview transcripts to evaluate the military's current crisis communication program. Interviews with current and former military public affairs personnel provided context to the insights gained from researching training and regulation documentation. Ethics were also explored during the interviews and document analysis. Through performing interviews and document analysis, the researcher answered the following questions: 1) How does the military's crisis communication program compare with the synthesis model? 2) When the military experienced past crises, how did it communicate to the public and what were the effects? 3) Did the military ethically deliberate public communications during crises? and 4) How do military culture and environmental factors affect its crisis communications and media relations?

## CHAPTER 1

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The improved speed of communication increases the vulnerability of an organization to a crisis situation, and the modern media are able to bridge the distance between the crisis epicenter and millions of people all over the world (Koster & Politis-Norton, 2004). Crisis media coverage has become more aggressive, frequent, and widespread, which increases the imperative for organizations to implement crisis communication programs. Horsley and Barker's (2002) synthesis model is this study's foundation for researching the military's crisis communication program. Other communication theories that enrich the study of crisis communication are included in the literature review: framing by Entman (1993) and Hallahan (1999), information subsidies by Gandy (1982), and Baker and Martinson's (2001) five principles for ethical public relations. Hill's (1984) look at military culture adds context to the study of military crisis communications.

#### Crisis Communication

The public relations practitioner performs a service during crisis by educating and informing the public, according to Froehlich and Rudiger (2005). Their job is to communicate with various publics, which are specific audiences that are targeted by communication products and programs (Fearn-Banks, 1996). The public relations practitioner targets specific audiences to manage and sustain the reputation of the represented client. Fearn-Banks said public relations practitioners do not control the image of an organization—instead they communicate in an effort to improve or maintain

its image. All too often reputation management is out of the practitioner's hands because organizations do not consider using public relations until they are in crisis (Fearn-Banks).

### *Crisis Communication Defined*

Every organization must be prepared to face a crisis situation. A crisis is an unexpected major event that has the potential to end in a negative outcome for an organization and its employees, financial situation, and reputation (Koster & Politis-Norton, 2004). Communicating strategically and proactively to the global audience is vital to an organization's survival during a crisis situation. A crisis begins with a surprising trigger event that signals its onset, and the crisis state will continue unless there is some sort of resolution (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003).

According to Coombs (2007), a crisis affects the perceived reputation of an organization. The crisis violates stakeholders' expectations of the organization. "When the expectations are breached, stakeholders perceive the organization less positively: the reputation is harmed" (Coombs, p. 3). To help mitigate the harm done to an organization's reputation during a crisis, public relations practitioners employ crisis management principles. According to Fearn-Banks (1996), "Crisis management is a process of strategic planning for a crisis or negative turning point, a process that removes some of the risk and uncertainty from the negative occurrence and thereby allows the organization to be in greater control of its own destiny" (p. 2). Coombs said crisis management has four interrelated factors: prevention, preparation, response, and revision. Crisis management employs a set of strategic actions that requires the involvement of an entire organization, whereas crisis communications encompasses the stakeholder

communications before, during, and after a crisis (Fearn-Banks). According to Fearn-Banks, the communications are designed to uphold the positive image of the organization under crisis.

#### *Synthesis Model for Crisis Communication in the Public Sector*

According to Horsley and Barker (2002), very little literature was available about public sector crisis communication. In response to this lack of information, the researchers studied private industry crisis communication literature to extrapolate a model for public sector crisis communication. In the literature, Horsley and Barker found existing structures for the model, and their proposed model was a synthesis of these structures. The synthesis model of public sector crisis communication is “an arrangement linking processes and communication activities that organizations can use to prepare for and manage potential crisis communication events” (Horsley & Barker, p. 416). The model includes six stages: ongoing public relations efforts, identification of and preparation for potential crises, internal training and rehearsal, crisis event, evaluation and revision of public relations efforts, and interagency coordination and political analysis. These steps provide a useful framework that public agencies can use to develop a carefully organized and thought out plan for dealing with a crisis (Horsley & Barker).

*Step one: Ongoing public relations efforts.* The first step of executing ongoing public relations efforts includes proactive public outreach and practitioner-journalist relationship building (Horsley & Barker, 2002). It is beneficial for a public relations practitioner to develop relationships with the media to ensure that the media will accept the framed information offered by the practitioner during crisis. If the organization does

not pursue public relations opportunities and outreach during the good times, it can haunt the organization during crisis when the support of the media and public is most needed.

González-Herrero and Pratt (1995) noted that the best way to avoid negative media coverage during crisis is to engage in reputation enhancing, socially responsible activities. An organization that has the reputation for openness and honesty going into a crisis brings that reputation into its initial meetings with the media (Martinelli & Briggs, 1998). In Fortunato's (2000) study of the National Basketball Association's public relations program, he noted that the NBA constantly worked to build relationships with reporters because when a crisis hits, the reporters will work to get the organization's side of the story.

*Step two: Identification of and preparation for potential crises.* The second step of the synthesis model is the identification of and preparation for potential crises. According to Fearn-Banks (1996), determining probable crises could pinpoint problems that can be fixed before the crisis hits. The public relations practitioner must work with the entire organization to identify and prepare for potential crisis (Fearn-Banks). Every organization must accordingly plan for the swift and ethical handling of crisis situations (Martinelli & Briggs, 1998). It doesn't matter how large the organization – every organization benefits from a crisis communication plan. Fearn-Banks said a crisis communication plan should be included with the company-wide crisis management plan. If the company doesn't have a crisis management plan, a crisis communication plan is still needed.



*Step three: Internal training and rehearsal.* The third step of the synthesis model is internal training and rehearsal. Team members learn roles, train, and practice a crisis communication plan during this step (Horsley & Barker, 2002). Horsley and Barker noted that when formulating a crisis communication team and identifying potential threats, an organization must be certain that everyone involved has the same understanding of the procedures. Once the plan is developed and the teams are formed, crisis response procedures should be tested, often through simulated crisis drills or regular procedural reviews with management (Martinelli & Briggs, 1998).

Internal culture often dictates how well the organization will follow a crisis communication plan during crisis. Research has shown that organizations with crisis plans do not always manage crises well (Marra, 1998). If an organization does not have a communication philosophy that supports the attributes necessary for excellent crisis public relations, it is likely a crisis plan will not work (Marra).

According to Marra (1998), communication autonomy is the amount of power and responsibility an organization gave its public relations staff. Many practitioners work fervently to produce a crisis communication plan that is destined for failure because the strategies contradict the dominant and accepted organizational communication philosophies (Marra). Without communication autonomy, public relations practitioners are prevented from using communication techniques that reduce the negative effects of crisis. Horsley and Barker (2002) said that organizations whose workers have strong communication skills and understand their role in a crisis could win a public relations battle, especially if the battle is played out in an atmosphere of continuous proactive

communication. Agency leaders must support flexibility in public relations efforts and a philosophy of open communication (Horsley & Barker).

*Step four: The crisis event.* The fourth step, the crisis event, is the apex of the synthesis model. Through the use of the media, prompt and resolute communication can help quell rumors and speculation during a crisis, especially when the situation involves public fear and uncertainty (Horsley & Barker, 2002). Horsley and Barker said that the crisis must be resolved in an ethical and human manner. Drumheller and Benoit (2004) noted that in cases where the offending person could apologize and help set things straight, he or she should be encouraged to do so because it's ethical and image enhancing.

According to Horsley and Barker (2002), crisis action teams must be prepared to communicate with the public immediately after a crisis; offering no comment or waiting to address the media at a later time when more information is known could be detrimental to a company's image. In any type of crisis situation, an organization can benefit from a proactive strategy to work with the press rather than wait for the press to flood it with questions and speculation (Horsley & Barker). According to Kauffman (2005), an organization must be the controlling source of information during a crisis. If a company isn't proactive with its crisis communication strategy, an information vacuum is created and the media will obtain information elsewhere (Kauffman). "Often, the sources of information from which the media receives its information are not well informed, may have a negative opinion of the organization, may have an alternative perspective, or may speculate about the causes of the crisis" (Kauffman, p. 266). According to Kauffman,

when a crisis begins, the organization probably lacks reliable information, but it's important not to speculate. Speculation can cause legal problems for the organization by hampering crisis-related investigations.

*Step five: Evaluation and revision of public relations efforts.* After a crisis communication event has passed, lessons learned must be recorded to evaluate and revise future communication efforts (Horsley & Barker, 2002). Martin and Boynton (2005) compared NASA's crisis communication effectiveness of the 1986 Challenger and 2003 Columbia space shuttle disasters and analyzed media coverage of the communication efforts. Articles reflected that after the Columbia disaster, NASA used more proactive communication, made top-ranking executives more active with the media, had fewer anonymous sources speak to the media, and was more open, accessible, and prepared when compared to the Challenger disaster. The study highlighted the importance of learning from past crises, and making sure what is learned sticks (Martin & Boynton).

*Step six: Interagency coordination and political analysis.* In the final step of the synthesis model, public sector organizations must ensure that all parties communicate the correct message to intended audiences (Horsley & Barker, 2002). Horsley and Barker noted that the first five steps of the synthesis model were developed from private industry literature, but they formulated a government-tailored sixth step for interagency coordination and political analysis. Interagency coordination allows government agencies to use available resources from other state agencies or local governments because agencies may need to combine their crisis communication efforts with other agencies that share the same types of potential crises (Horsley & Barker). The

researchers also said that political analysis is an important part of the model because changes in political leadership affect the climate, budget, and priorities of government agencies.

### Framing

Framing the news could influence the public evaluation of an organization during a crisis; therefore, understanding the framing process is extremely beneficial for the public relations practitioner (Cho & Gower, 2006). Entman said, "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (1993, p. 52). Frames can define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies (Entman). Influencing the way a crisis is framed is important because the frame determines how people understand and remember a problem, as well as how they evaluate and choose to act upon it (Entman).

Hallahan (1999) noted that framing is essential to public relations practitioners, especially during crisis, because practitioners operate as frame strategists: they attempt to determine how situations, attributes, choices, actions, issues, and responsibilities should be presented to achieve favorable outcomes for clients. According to Hallahan, there are multiple types of frames a practitioner could use to achieve success in representing a client during crisis. One important framing method is news framing. "The crisis manager must be concerned with packaging information about the event and the organization's response to shape media coverage, based on knowledge of how media

cover events of this type and culturally resonating themes that will garner public favor” (Hallahan, p. 229). When formulating how to package or frame crisis information, the public relations practitioner must select key target audiences and accordingly tailor the information. If the key audiences aren’t identified, the framed information won’t have salience with the audience. Successfully framed content provides context to key target audiences, which allows them to evaluate crisis information, comprehend meanings, and if necessary, take action (Hallahan).

Hertog and McLeod (2001) said that organizations could make deliberate attempts to structure public discourse in ways that privilege their goals and means of attaining them. The researchers labeled this framing concept as “elite manipulation.” The public relations practitioner must understand the power of framing during crisis because the organization has the ability to define the debate without the audience realizing it (Tankard, 2001). “Media framing can be likened to the magician’s sleight of hand—attention is directed to one point so that people do not notice the manipulation that is going on at another point” (Tankard, p. 97). The public relations practitioner doesn’t have the ability to influence the frame solely based upon word choice. The practitioner must establish relationships with the media to increase the probability that the crisis will be framed from the organization’s point-of-view.

#### Information Subsidies

The interaction of the public relations practitioner with the news media is crucial in directing attention toward particular matters during a crisis (Esrock, Hart, D’Silva, & Werking, 2002). If a practitioner does not provide a journalist with information, the

journalist will find the information elsewhere. A reliable working relationship ensures the transfer of information between the practitioner and journalist, which is crucial for successful framing. Supplying the mass media with information gives the practitioner partial control of the news storyline, which is important as a means of swaying public opinion (Fortunato, 2005).

Gandy (1982) introduced the information subsidy concept. According to Gandy, the information subsidy is the act of controlling access to information to produce influence over the action of others. The information is a subsidy because the source gives the information to the reporter at a lower cost (Gandy). Essentially, the organizational constraints of the news business pressure the reporter to produce stories under strict deadlines. The public relations practitioner eases the pressure by supplying information via pitches, press releases, media events, or press conferences (Gandy). A reporter will disregard a public relations practitioner who writes substandard press releases or supplies useless information (Gandy). But the practitioner who continually supplies quality information that is newsworthy is assured a positive relationship with the reporter (Gandy). Gandy noted that practitioners who have proved their value are selected over those who are either unknown or have reduced their worth by providing false or unusable information.

The journalist doesn't automatically publish information supplied by the practitioner. Gandy said that journalists have the need to produce stories that will be published, so they utilize subsidized information that is of a type and form that will be published. Pan and Kosicki (2001) noted that in addition to lowering the cost of

information gathering for the journalist, the source must also generate cultural resonance of the frame with journalistic news values. Hallahan (1999) also said that journalism market models suggested that journalists purposefully framed stories in ways that resonated with what journalists perceived to be the largest segment of their audience. When framing a message, the public relations practitioner should be cognizant of cultural themes, market considerations, and the journalist's perception of audience needs.

The perceived power of the source also plays a role in the information subsidy transaction. Journalists have a tendency to frame news favorably toward the source regarded as powerful or popular (Entman, 2007). Journalists who attributed greater influences of public relations on the news valued public relations more for granting them greater access to information and executive spokespersons that they could not obtain on their own (Sallot & Johnson, 2006). In a study of the media coverage surrounding the Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal, Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston (2006) said that news frames, particularly in matters of high consequence, were seriously constrained by mainstream news organizations' acquiescence to political power. An example of elite framing during a crisis was the embedding of journalists with combat troops in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Embedded journalists were given full access to combat operations and the opportunity to experience the war like a member of the military (Haigh, et al., 2006). Researchers in the study found that newspaper coverage of embedded reporters was significantly more positive toward the military than those of nonembedded reporters. The military used its monopoly over access to its advantage, but also formed positive

relations with the reporters during the embedding process that consequently influenced the framing of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Shin and Cameron (2005) conducted a study of the public relations practitioner and reporter relationship. Misconceptions by journalists and public relations practitioners toward one another have caused conflict (Shin & Cameron). According to the researchers, studies corroborated the existence of discord, misunderstanding, and perceptual difference as sources of conflict. Based on the results of the study, the researchers concluded that both professions were apprehensively interdependent with their roles in the news-making process because of their perceived incompatible goals of advocacy and objectivity.

If a public relations practitioner provides false or useless information, tensions between the news and public relations profession become strained and the probability of an information subsidy transaction decreases (Gandy, 1982). A positive practitioner-reporter relationship can increase the probability of controlling the frame of a crisis situation, but the relationship is ruined if ethical norms are violated.

#### Ethically Proactive Public Relations

Pauly and Hutchison (2005) said that financial and legal considerations often trump the concern for moral reputation of an organization in crisis. However, according to Bowen (2005), the public relations practitioner should be well versed in ethics because the practitioner is the ethical conscience of the organization. Because of the inevitable role of ethical deliberation in public relations, and above all, crisis communications, Baker and Martinson (2001) constructed a framework of ethical principles to assist public



relations practitioners in practical moral reasoning. Baker and Martinson's ethically proactive public relations model is referred to as TARES, which is an acronym for five action-guiding principles: "truthfulness" of the message, "authenticity" of the persuader, "respect" for the persuadee, "equity" of the persuasive appeal, and "social responsibility" for the common good. Baker and Martinson said that the principles together contain an ethical objective that allows practitioners to establish moral boundaries for specific persuasive public relations efforts.

### *Truthfulness*

First and foremost, for any public relations communication to be ethical, it must be truthful (Baker & Martinson, 2001). A highly visible case of deceptive crisis communication was the Firestone tire scandal. Firestone attempted to conceal and deceive the public regarding the company's role in selling defective tires. The Firestone crisis communication actions demonstrated that denial was a deceptive response to a wrongful action, and if corrective action had been implemented immediately, deaths and injuries could have been avoided (Blaney, Benoit, & Brazeal, 2002). Truthfulness is essential to ethical framing because institutions and individuals will lose respect and confidence when they deceive, misinform, or confuse (Public Relations Society of America, 2005).

### *Authenticity*

Practitioners must imbue authenticity, which is the second principle of TARES. Baker and Martinson (2001) grouped related issues to help define authenticity: integrity, personal virtue, sincerity, genuineness, loyalty, and independence. To test authenticity,

practitioners must ask themselves whether they believe others will benefit if they accept the persuasive message (Baker & Martinson). The crucial litmus test for authenticity is whether the practitioner is willing to publicly and personally be identified as the persuader in a particular situation (Baker & Martinson).

### *Respect*

The third principle is respect, a central component of the TARES test (Baker & Martinson, 2001). “The Principle of Respect for the Persuadee is at the heart of the TARES Test, and is the underlying foundation and motivation for all of its other principles” (Baker & Martinson, p. 163). The practitioner must consider those recipients of the communication messages as persons of dignity who are owed respect by the very fact that they are human beings (Baker & Martinson). Practitioners should therefore augment the audience member’s knowledge so the member can make an informed decision, according to Baker and Martinson.

### *Equity*

The fourth principle is equity, another term for fairness, according to Baker and Martinson (2001). All audiences must be treated fairly, and practitioners must avoid creating persuasive messages that play upon the vulnerabilities of particular audiences (Baker & Martinson). The researchers said that practitioners should consider whether there is uniformity between themselves and the persuaders in terms of information, understanding, insight, capacity, and experience.

### *Social Responsibility*

The last principle in the TARES test is social responsibility. According to Baker and Martinson (2001), ethically proactive practitioners find ways to make positive contributions to the common good. Public relations practitioners have the ultimate opportunity to frame issues in a mutually beneficial manner for their organizations and stakeholders (Lundy, 2006). Striking a balance between legal and social responsibilities is difficult for public relations practitioners because lawyers' crisis response strategies and those of public relations practitioners often differ (Arpan & Pompper, 2003). According to Martinelli and Briggs (1998), communicating openly during crisis not only has the potential to affect public opinion favorably and build the organization's credibility with the media, but it also creates more difficulty for lawyers trying to defend an organization during a lawsuit.

According to Baker and Martinson (2001), there is a danger that public relations practitioners will often play a dysfunctional role in society. Ethically deficient public relations practices ultimately generate public outrage, so it is imperative that ethics are considered when developing crisis communication strategies and responses. But it isn't only the responsibility of the public relations practitioner to adhere to ethically proactive public relations. According to Baker and Martinson, "It is the broader working place culture of the persuasive professions that is the major problem, and not so much the individual acts – however reprehensible they may be – of particular practitioners" (p. 156). The military often faces ethical dilemmas during crisis because openness can negatively effect operational security or disclose classified information. The military has

been accused of covering up embarrassing crisis situations because of its propensity to classify information.

### Wartime Crisis Communication

During war, the military has always viewed the media with skepticism because of professional and cultural differences. Going back to the Revolutionary War, the military has also used the media to communicate with the public. George Washington was the first military combat correspondent (Defense Information School, 2005f). From the battlefield, he wrote truthful articles – both negative and positive – to the colonists to retain their support (Defense Information School). During World War II, General Dwight D. Eisenhower said, “I believe the old saying ‘public opinion wins wars’ is true. Our countries fight best when our people are best informed” (Defense Information School, p. 26).

Because war is inherently chaotic on a massive scale, unintended crisis events often occur. The three cases selected for review in this study were wartime crises that harmed the image of the U.S. military because they were avoidable. The first scandal outlined is the 1968 My Lai massacre in Vietnam, the second is the 1994 Black Hawk friendly fire shootdown during Operation Provide Comfort, and the last event is the 2004 Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

#### *Vietnam War*

The relationship between the media and the military during the Vietnam War was decisively strained. The military did not censor the media, but instead excessively classified information to cover up the negative progress of the war (Defense Information

School, 2005f). This tactic had serious limitations because reporters were on the battlefield witnessing the truth. The military briefings were called the “Five O’Clock Follies” because the reporters were aware of the stark disconnect between the truth and what the government was saying (Defense Information School). The My Lai massacre was first reported as an Army success by the government, but the truth was eventually uncovered.

In 1967 Charlie Company arrived in Vietnam as one of the three Army companies belonging to Task Force Barker. Captain Ernest Medina led Charlie Company, and its mission was to pressure enemy forces in the Quang Ngai region (Linder, 1999). One of the platoon leaders was 24-year-old Lieutenant William Calley. At 8:00 a.m. March 16, 1968, the men embarked on a mission to the My Lai 4 hamlet with the “usual search-and-destroy task of pulling people from homes, interrogating them, and searching for Viet Cong” (Linder). Soon after the operation commenced, the American soldiers executed a group of older women who were kneeling and praying near the village temple. Calley was also at a drainage ditch on the eastern edge of the village. Approximately 80 men, women, and children were held there, and Calley ordered his platoon members to push the people into the ditch (Linder). Calley then ordered his men to shoot into the ditch. Some soldiers refused to follow his orders, and others obeyed.

An Army photographer, Sergeant Ronald Haeberle, arrived on scene to document a significant encounter with the Viet Cong, but instead witnessed approximately 30 different soldiers kill about 100 civilians (Linder, 1999). An Army helicopter flown by Chief Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson arrived in the My Lai vicinity at approximately

9:00 a.m. (Linder). He landed his helicopter and told Calley to hold his men there as he evacuated the civilians. Thompson told his helicopter crew chief to shoot the Americans if they fired at the civilians, and then reported the civilian killings to brigade headquarters (Linder).

Twenty months after the massacre, Army investigators discovered three mass graves containing the bodies of about 500 villagers (Linder, 1999). Immediately following the My Lai massacre, official Army reports of the operation proclaimed a triumphant victory (Linder). Thompson filed a complaint that alleged numerous war crimes committed by Charlie Company soldiers. Consequently, a quick and informal investigation was completed that concluded Americans had unintentionally killed only 20 civilians (Linder). A reconnaissance soldier who was stationed in Duc Pho, Ronald Ridenhour, heard five eyewitness accounts of the My Lai massacre, and he began his own informal investigation. After Ridenhour was discharged from the military in 1969, he composed a letter detailing what he heard about the My Lai massacre. Letters were mailed to President Richard Nixon, the Pentagon, the State Department, and numerous members of Congress (Linder). The letter caught the attention of two officials – Democratic Representatives Morris Udall from Arizona and L. Mendel Rivers from South Carolina (Hersh, 1970). Both men pressured the military to investigate the allegations, and the Army Inspector General was soon assigned to the case (Hersh). The Army Inspector General started investigating the case in April 1969, and on September 5, formal charges were filed against Calley (Linder). November 1969 the American public learned more details of what allegedly happened at My Lai 4. The massacre was the

cover story in both *Time* and *Newsweek*; CBS ran a Mike Wallace interview with one of the My Lai soldiers; Seymour Hersh published in-depth articles; and *Life* magazine published Haerberle's graphic photographs (Linder).

Most of the men who committed the crimes no longer served in the military, so they were immune from prosecution by military court-martial (Linder, 1999). The top officer charged, Major General Samuel Koster, had the charges against him dropped and received only a letter of censure and reduction in rank. November 12, 1970, Calley's court martial began (Linder). The defense argued that the stress of combat greatly impaired Calley's thinking, and that he was following orders from his company commander, Captain Medina. After thirteen days of deliberation, the jury found Calley guilty of premeditated murder on all counts, and was sentenced to life imprisonment (Linder). November 9, 1974, the Secretary of the Army announced that Calley was to be paroled. Linder (1999) said that the negative media reaction to the My Lai massacre shifted support away from the Vietnam War. "Two weeks after the Calley verdict was announced, the Harris Poll reported for the first time that a majority of Americans opposed the war in Viet Nam" (Linder, p. 10).

#### *Operation Provide Comfort*

In the 1990s, the military was still recovering from the harm done to its image in the Vietnam War. "The lack of confidence Americans held for the military took over a quarter-century to dissolve and the military's victory in the Persian Gulf War finally put to rest that lack of confidence" (English, 2005, p. 11). The military also had to adapt to advances in media technology. *CNN* was a force to be reckoned with during the Gulf

War – the network provided 24-hour news coverage (Defense Information School, 2005f, p. 46). After the Gulf War, *CNN* continued to influence the military’s communication tactics.

April 14, 1994, two U.S. Army Black Hawk helicopters and their crews assigned to Operation Provide Comfort were transporting American, United Kingdom, French, and Turkish military officers; Kurdish representatives; and a U.S. political advisor in northern Iraq (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 1997). According to Piper (2000), they took off in the morning from Pirinçlik, near Diyarbakır, Turkey, and were headed for the Operation Provide Comfort military coordination center located in Zakhu, Iraq.

Operation Provide Comfort was a U.S. coalition operation that provided protection and humanitarian aid to Kurdish refugees in Northern Iraq (Piper).

Before departing southern Turkey, the two helicopter pilots activated the “friend-or-foe system,” that was designed to identify them to other U.S. aircraft (Thompson, 1995). The pilots set it to a frequency that was listed in the secret air-tasking order they received from the U.S. Air Force each day. While the Black Hawks were departing, an Air Force Airborne Warning and Control Systems (AWACS) aircraft was flying over Turkey to provide airborne threat warning and control for Operation Provide Comfort aircraft, including the Black Hawk helicopters (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 1997). Almost an hour after taking off, the Black Hawks reported their entry into the no-fly zone to the AWACS en-route controller, Lieutenant Joseph Halcli, and landed six minutes later at their destination in Iraq (Piper, 2000).



Halcli and Captain Jim Wang, the AWACS crew's senior director, added friendly helicopter symbology to their radars, but then suspended the symbology after the Black Hawks landed at the control center (Piper). The helicopters took off shortly thereafter and reported their departure, flight route, and destination to Halcli. Halcli again placed symbology on his radar screen to show the two Black Hawks. He notified Wang of the helicopters' movement, and the friendly helicopter symbology was visible on the radar screens of Wang and two other AWACS officers (Piper). Twenty minutes after their departure, the Black Hawks entered mountainous terrain and their radar returns disappeared from the AWACS radars. Captain Dierdre Bell, an air surveillance officer on the AWACS, noticed that the radar returns had disappeared and sent an electronic warning to Wang's scope, but he took no action and the warning disappeared from his screen after one minute (Piper).

Two U.S. F-15 fighter jets piloted by Captain Eric Wickson and Lieutenant Colonel Randy May took off from another Turkish base the same day, bound for the no-fly zone where the Black Hawks were flying (Piper, 2000). Their mission was to perform a sweep of the no-fly zone to clear the area of any hostile aircraft. They also had an air-tasking order, but were told to set their friend-or-foe system to a frequency different from the Black Hawks (Thompson, 1995). Wickson, the lead pilot, radioed Lieutenant Ricky Wilson in the AWACS, who was responsible for the air traffic inside the no-fly zone, and asked if there was any information to pass to them (Piper). Wilson said there was no information. Wilson thought that the Black Hawks had landed again, and asked Wang if

he could drop the friendly helicopter symbology from their scopes. The request was approved (Piper).

When the fighters saw two helicopters on their radar screens, their electronic systems failed to identify the helicopters (Thompson, 1995). Wickson reported the presence of the unidentified helicopters to the AWACS. Wilson acknowledged his report but responded that he had no radar contacts in that area. Both F-15 pilots electronically pinged the radar target with their on-board identification friend or foe system, and it came back negative (Piper, 2000). The two F-15s then initiated a visual identification pass of the unidentified aircraft, and Wickson reported to Wilson in the AWACS that the two aircraft were Iraqi helicopters. Wilson asked Wang if he heard the reports and he answered yes, but did not offer any guidance or additional information (Piper). The two F-15s circled around the helicopters once more, and notified the AWACS that they were ready to fire. The AWACS told them to go ahead and fire.

Wickson fired a missile at the trail helicopter – the missile hit and destroyed the helicopter seconds later (Piper, 2000). The lead helicopter immediately turned and dove in an attempt to evade the attack. May then fired another missile at the lead helicopter, and successfully shot it down (Piper). All 26 personnel on board the two helicopters were killed. According to Piper, after flying over the wreckage of the helicopters, May radioed Wickson, "Stick a fork in them, they're done" (p. 34). Kurdish civilians notified the Operation Provide Comfort mission control center about the shootdown, and *CNN* thus broadcast the news that a friendly fire incident had occurred in Northern Iraq (Piper). President Bill Clinton expressed his condolences to the coalition countries that had

personnel killed in the fratricide, and said, "We will get the facts, and we will make them available to the American people and to the people of Britain, France, and Turkey, our partners in Operation Provide Comfort" (Piper, p. 56).

The Air Force immediately convened an accident investigation board, which was composed of a board president; 11 board members from the U.S. military; three associate members from France, Turkey, and the United Kingdom; four legal advisors; and 13 technical advisors (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 1997). After interviewing more than 100 witnesses and conducting numerous tests, the investigation results were publicly released July 13, 1994. Anonymous defense officials had leaked some of the investigation findings to the media two weeks earlier. The investigation concluded that the F-15 pilots misidentified the Black Hawks, the AWACS crew failed to intervene, the Black Hawks and their operations were not integrated into the Task Force, and the friend-or-foe systems failed (Piper, 2000).

Wang was the only officer charged in the case, and his court-martial began in May 1995 at Tinker Air Force Base, OK (Piper, 2000). June 20, 1995, the Air Force announced a nullification verdict (refusal to convict on the stated charges) that acquitted Wang of the charges. According to Thompson, Wang's acquittal meant that no Air Force officer faced anything but a mild administrative penalty (1995). The families of the personnel killed in this fratricide event were livid that the Air Force personnel involved with the shutdown did not receive stiffer punishments (Piper). The family members publicly accused the military of covering up to protect themselves.

### *Operation Iraqi Freedom*

Operation Iraqi Freedom was controversial from its inception, but the U.S. military went on the public affairs offensive to win the “hearts and minds” of the global audience. Reporters embedded with ground units to publicize the tactical view of battle. “The press had access, the media got the military story to the public, and those members of the media that violated the ground rules were not allowed to report the story” (Sieber, 2007, p. 51). According to English (2005), retired general officers contracted with the news networks actively liaised with the military. The positive results gained from the proactive public outreach were futile when photographs of the Abu Ghraib prison abuses were made public.

*CBS* and *The New Yorker* broke the story in April 2004: American soldiers were caught on film abusing Iraqi prisoners at the Abu Ghraib military prison in Iraq. The case made international headlines, and according to Hersh, in one photograph, “Private England, a cigarette dangling from her mouth, is giving a jaunty thumbs-up sign and pointing at the genitals of a young Iraqi, who is naked except for a sandbag over his head, as he masturbates” (2004, para.8).

The world found out about the abuses because of Specialist Joseph Darby. He had received a compact disc from Corporal Charles Graner, which had hundreds of pictures of naked detainees (Hersh, 2004). Initially he submitted an anonymous letter to the Army’s Criminal Investigation Division, but later came forward and gave a sworn statement. In the fall of 2003, the senior commander in Iraq, Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, ordered the Army’s chief law-enforcement officer, Major General Marshal

Donal Ryder, to review the prison system in Iraq and recommend ways to improve it (Hersh). Ryder's report concluded that there was a need for the establishment of interrogation procedures to define the role of military police soldiers, but the situation at Abu Ghraib was not yet a crisis (Hersh).

January 2004 Brigadier General Janis Karpinski, commander of the 800th Military Police Brigade and in charge of Iraqi military prisons, was formally admonished and quietly suspended from command (Hersh, 2004). At the same time, a major investigation of the Army's prison system, authorized by Sanchez, was under way. An internal report written by Major General Antonio Taguba was completed in February 2004 (Hersh). Taguba found that between October and December 2003 there were numerous instances of "sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses" at Abu Ghraib (Hersh, para. 4).

Taguba revealed that Karpinski signed reports calling for changes to procedures, but did nothing to ensure the orders were carried out (Hersh, 2004). Taguba also found that the soldiers were poorly prepared and trained. The accused soldiers claimed they weren't given any training guidelines for handling the detainees (Hersh). Soldiers repeatedly noted that the military intelligence teams were directing operations inside Abu Ghraib. The military police soldiers continued what they were doing without warning the chain-of-command because it appeared that military intelligence personnel approved of the abuse (Hersh). According to Hersh, Taguba recommended that Karpinski and seven brigade military police officers and enlisted men be relieved of command and formally reprimanded. According to Hersh, no criminal proceedings were suggested for Karpinski

because “apparently, the loss of promotion and the indignity of a public rebuke were seen as enough punishment” (para. 31). The U.S. Department of Defense removed seventeen soldiers and officers from duty, and seven soldiers were charged with dereliction of duty, maltreatment, aggravated assault, and battery (Mestrovic, 2007).

### Military Culture

The U.S. military carries on various traditions that run counter to the customs of civilian life. According to Hill (1984), people tend to forget the basic differences that make comparisons between the military and civilian life, moot. The military is the only organization that has the responsibility to carry out the U.S. martial mission. This mission demands an authoritarian leadership style (Hill). According to Hill, the authoritarian nature of the military produced the following practices: chain-of-command, rapid decision-making, and uncritical acceptance of orders. Consequently, the military’s authoritarianism conflicts with the America’s democratic culture. Hill said, “Although many philosophical arguments could be addressed to this contract, people must conclude that the safety of American democracy depends on the effectiveness of our military” (p. 49).

To retain this effectiveness, the military leadership must employ the authoritarian leadership style. This is especially vital during war. The authoritarian leadership style also introduces the concept of command responsibility. The commanding officer has the responsibility of dispensing lawful orders to subordinates. With the power to order others comes accountability for the orders being given. The leader is consequently responsible for the actions of the subordinates. During Calley’s court martial, he defended himself by

arguing that his leadership had command responsibility for his actions – he was following orders.

### Overview

The literature review provided a summary of the theoretical and analytical research as it related to effective crisis communication practices. Horsley and Barker's (2002) guide for public sector crisis communication was reviewed as a model for effective government crisis communication. The synthesis model consists of six steps for public sector crisis communication: ongoing public relations, identification of and preparation for potential crises, internal training and rehearsal, the crisis event, evaluation and revision of public relations efforts, and interagency coordination and political analysis (Horsley and Barker). Within the internal training and rehearsal step, Marra's (1998) research on communication autonomy was integrated. According to Marra, public relations staffs must be granted the power and responsibility to effectively communicate an organization's message during crisis.

The communication theories of framing, information subsidies, and ethically proactive public relations provided additional guidance for researching crisis communication practices. Framing research explicated why it's vital for public relations practitioners to use the media as an outlet for disseminating crisis communication messages. Depending on how the crisis message is publicized by the media, the frame will influence how people remember a problem (Entman, 1993). The public relations practitioner is the frame strategist, especially for an organization in crisis, so it's crucial

that public sector communicators understand the power of crafting and framing the news during crisis (Hallahan, 1999).

The information subsidy enhances the ability for the public relations practitioner to frame the crisis message. Gandy (1982) noted that the pressure on a reporter to produce a story under strict deadline has allowed the public relations practitioner to make the reporter's job easier through the practitioner's ability to supply information. It's a give and take relationship that benefits both professions, and during crisis, the relationships and past subsidies are critical to how the message is framed. A public relations practitioner who has demonstrated value is selected over those who are either unknown or have reduced their value by providing worthless information (Gandy).

Disregarding ethics during crisis not only hurts the ability for the practitioner to provide an information subsidy to the reporter, but it also impacts the organization's credibility. Baker and Martinson (2001) created the TARES test for ethically proactive public relations. The researchers said that TARES was an important model for a practitioner in weighing the moral implications and consequences of persuasive framing from the perspective of their client, society, and the practitioner's own integrity.

Three highly publicized and criticized wartime crisis communication cases were outlined in the literature review: the 1968 My Lai massacre in Vietnam, the 1994 Black Hawk friendly fire shootdown in Operation Provide Comfort, and the 2004 Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal in Operation Iraqi Freedom. The literature review concluded with a broad overview of U.S. military culture. According to Hill (1984), military leadership employs the authoritarian leadership style because it is necessary for the military to



remain effective during peace and war. The concepts of chain-of-command, rapid decision-making, and command responsibility were created from the authoritarian leadership style.

### Theoretical Framework for Study

The research outlined in this literature review provided a theoretical framework for a study of the U.S. military's crisis communication program. Horsley and Barker's (2002) synthesis model for crisis communication bridges the gap between civilian and government crisis communication techniques. Horsley and Barker noted the differences between civilian and government crisis communication practices and created a model to reflect these perceived differences. The model was used as a baseline for analyzing the military's crisis communication program.

Entman (1993) and Hallahan (1999) explained framing and why public relations practitioners must understand how media frames can affect the crisis outcome. The researcher analyzed the resulting media frames in each military crisis communications case study. Analyzing media frames facilitated the researcher's assessment of the military's past crisis communication efforts.

The public relations practitioner should cultivate positive relationships with the media before a crisis hits through providing an information subsidy (Gandy, 1982). The researcher interviewed military public affairs personnel to gather first-hand observations of military-media relations. Baker and Martinson's (2001) TARES test for ethically proactive public relations was used to investigate the presence of ethical reasoning during

the three case studies. Hill's (1984) research on military culture gave additional context to the researcher's study of the military's crisis communication program.

### Research Questions

Specifically, the following research questions were applied in this study:

#### *Research Question 1*

How does the military's crisis communication program compare with the synthesis model?

#### *Research Question 2*

When the military experienced past crises, how did it communicate with the public and what were the effects?

#### *Research Question 3*

Did the military ethically deliberate its communication strategy during the crises?

#### *Research Question 4*

How do military culture and environmental factors affect its crisis communications and media relations?

## CHAPTER 2

### METHOD

According to Fearn-Banks (1996), the qualitative case study is an insightful method for analyzing an organization's crisis communication program and communication practices during specific crisis events. The researcher utilized the qualitative case study and document research methodology for exploring the U.S. military's crisis communication program. The primary research sources were unclassified documents, news coverage, and interview transcripts. According to Koster and Politis-Norton (2004), a crisis is an unexpected major event that has the potential to end in a negative outcome for an organization and its employees, financial situation, and reputation. The U.S. military has experienced many crises during its history. The researcher focused on how the military plans for unexpected crisis events during wartime – the crisis within a larger crisis. How the military is trained to communicate with the public before, during, and after crisis were studied to better understand the military crisis communication program.

#### Military Crisis Communication Program

To help build the foundation for this study, the U.S. military's crisis communication program was thoroughly investigated through the analysis of unclassified military documents and interview transcripts.

#### *Document Analysis*

Through the textual analysis of military public affairs training documents, guides, and doctrine, the researcher gained an understanding of how military personnel are

trained and expected to respond to crisis events. The Defense Information School located at Fort Meade, MD, is the training school for all U.S. military public affairs personnel. On the school's Web site, publicly accessible training modules are posted. The researcher analyzed the training modules to know how military public affairs personnel are trained to handle crisis situations. *Joint Publication 3-61* is the overarching guidance doctrine document for military public affairs. The researcher analyzed this document for crisis communication program data. Each military service has communication guides publicly available that were incorporated into the analysis.

### *Interviews*

Depth interviews with current and former military public affairs personnel were performed to add context and personal observation to the data collected from the qualitative textual analysis. The researcher conducted structured interviewing because it directed the flow of the interview and facilitated interviewing via e-mail. The interviews addressed the following topics: interviewee military background, public affairs training, media relations experience, crisis communication experience, opinion of the military crisis communication program, technology, culture, and military ethics training.

The researcher interviewed current and former military public affairs personnel who worked at various organizational levels. Interview participants were solicited through the researcher's established professional network. The researcher is a former Air Force public affairs officer and serves as a public affairs officer in the California Air National Guard. The researcher had access to former and current military public affairs personnel who fit the criteria outlined in the interview methodology. In addition, the

researcher's contacts had access to other military public affairs personnel who also participated in this study. The researcher interviewed military public affairs personnel who did not require higher headquarters permission to participate in this study.

Eight public affairs personnel from the Army and Air Force who have served or currently serve in a headquarters position were interviewed to collect observations regarding the strategic view of military crisis communications, ethics, media relations, and the effect of technology on public communications during crisis. Coincidentally, the personnel all had deployment experience as well, which provided insight into the tactical perspective of military crisis communications. Questions concerning the effects of communication technology on media relations were addressed with all participants.

#### *Synthesis Model Comparison*

Horsley and Barker (2002) developed a crisis communication framework that government agencies, like the military, can use to successfully confront a crisis. Known as the synthesis model, it incorporates six stages: ongoing public relations efforts, identification of and preparation for potential crises, internal training and rehearsal, crisis event, evaluation and revision of public relations efforts, and interagency coordination and political analysis. The researcher compared the military's crisis communication training and regulations with the synthesis model to reveal whether the military's sanctioned practices emulate an established crisis communication model.

#### Crisis Communication Case Studies

The fact that U.S. taxpayers finance the military inherently increases the amount of public scrutiny the military faces during a crisis. The researcher analyzed three

military wartime crisis communication events to closely examine the military's past crisis communication responses. These cases include the 1968 My Lai massacre in Vietnam, the 1994 friendly fire Black Hawk shutdown in Operation Provide Comfort, and the 2004 Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal in Operation Iraqi Freedom. These cases were chosen for study because they were crises; the cases span over four decades; and a plethora of publicly accessible documentation exists. The researcher also uncovered the cultural and technological evolution of military crisis communication. The evolution of the military's communication practices exposed positive and negative patterns that were interconnected with technological advances and military culture.

#### *Document Analysis*

The facts and events relating to each case were researched via historical documentation; studies; *The New York Times* articles, editorials, and opinion columns; unclassified government investigations; and U.S. military press conferences and news articles. The document analysis allowed the researcher to assess the military crisis communication responses to the three crisis events. The researcher used the framing literature (Entman, 1993; Hallahan, 1999) as a guide for analyzing the coverage resulting from the military's crisis communication efforts. Baker and Martinson's (2001) test for ethically proactive public relations provided a guide for assessing the ethical compunction of the military communicators during each crisis. The historical evolution of the military-media relationship was investigated via document analysis. The effects of technology on the military's crisis communication responses were integrated into the analysis.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESULTS

#### Military Crisis Communication Program

The U.S. military's crisis communication program refers to those characteristics common to the military's handling of various crises, training tools, and regulations. The researcher examined the military's basic public affairs training course and military regulations to investigate how the military's crisis communication program compares with the synthesis model.

All U.S. military public affairs personnel receive crisis communication training, participate in practical exercises, and follow military regulations. Public affairs personnel are required to attend Defense Information School. The school is open to all military branches and provides instruction to officers and enlisted personnel. The mission of the school is to "grow and sustain a corps of professional organizational communicators who fulfill the communication needs of the military and government leaders and audiences" (Defense Information School, 2008).

The Defense Information School basic officer's course, Public Affairs Qualification Course (PAQC), examines the philosophy of public relations, growth of technology and its effect on news delivery, and interviewing and reporting techniques. The course is divided into eight blocks of instruction that include introductory theories, practical exercises, case studies, and a field training exercise. The course is presented in a "progressive format, exposing students to essential foundational knowledge through a series of case studies, assigned readings, guided discussions, and practical applications"

(Defense Information School, 2003, p. 3). Within these blocks of instruction, crisis communication skills and ethics are also taught. “Each functional area stresses the requirement for defense public affairs leaders to maintain a high standard of integrity” (Defense Information School, p. 3).

The PAQC curriculum originates from the military’s overarching public affairs regulation, *Joint Publication 3-61*. The instruction provides guidance to military public affairs personnel (Department of Defense, 2005). It also informs commanders on how to communicate with domestic and global audiences. This regulation and service-level regulations are examined to research how the military crisis communication program compares to the synthesis model. The service-level regulations derive from *Joint Publication 3-61*, but are tailored for the differing missions of the military branches.

For the purposes of organization, the analysis of the first research question is divided into six parts – each step of the synthesis model. These steps provide a useful framework that government agencies can use to develop a carefully organized and thought out plan for dealing with a crisis (Horsley & Barker, 2002). Within each step, the military regulations and PAQC instruction are examined to reveal whether each step of the synthesis model is addressed in the researched content. All materials researched were unclassified and downloaded from government Web sites.

#### *Step One: Ongoing Public Relations Efforts*

The first step of executing ongoing public relations efforts includes proactive public outreach and practitioner-journalist relationship building (Horsley & Barker, 2002). The Department of Defense said that credibility with the media is built over time,



during good times and bad (2005). “At least once annually, major Navy and Marine Corps shore activities shall inform local news media representatives, civil defense, and law enforcement officials about standard plans to handle accidents and other emergencies and contingencies” (U.S. Navy, 2005, p. 97). This proactive outreach builds ties between the military, media, and local stakeholders, which will prove valuable once crisis hits.

The authors of the military training curriculum noted the importance of cultivating positive relations between the military and media. “Successful relationships between the military and the media are primarily based upon credibility and trust. Such relationships are normally built over time, not during a crisis or combat situation” (Defense Information School, 2005g, p. 3). The instructors noted three central reasons why the public has a right to be informed about military activities: Americans pay taxes, which funds the military; informing the public is democratic; and the military relies on the media to tell the military story during war and peace (Defense Information School, 2005c).

#### *Step Two: Identification of and Preparation for Potential Crises*

The second step of the synthesis model is the identification of and preparation for potential crises. The public relations practitioner must work with the entire organization to identify and prepare for potential crisis (Fearn-Banks, 1996). For every operation or crisis, the military develops public affairs guidance, which includes recommended themes, messages, and questions and answers (Department of Defense, 2005). “Coordination of overall themes and messages, as well as a plan to support media coverage, and all applicable public affairs guidance, should be approved prior to

hostilities in order to effectively shape the information environment” (Department of Defense, p. 39). According to the Army, public affairs guidance directs commanders and public affairs leaders in the application of public affairs doctrine and standard operating procedures on the battlefield (U.S. Army, 1997). In battle, public affairs personnel inherently face many challenges, such as expeditiously releasing truthful information. Combat operations “often place the PA leader in a difficult situation – one in which an overwhelming number of news media on the scene will seek answers to legitimate questions about unfolding events” (U.S. Army, p. 46). Planning for contingencies and the resulting media response is imperative for the military because it always receives international attention during military operations.

The PAQC instructors taught students to cultivate relationships and plan for crisis with various base personnel, such as the safety officer, command post, and hospital commander. “Get to know the people who will play a role in most accidents or incident, and don't wait until you are in the midst of a situation to figure out who they are” (Defense Information School, 2005b, p. 5).

### *Step Three: Internal Training and Rehearsal*

The third step of the synthesis model is internal training and rehearsal. Team members learn roles, train, and practice a crisis communication plan during this step (Horsley & Barker, 2002). The joint public affairs regulation is explicit about how vital it is to have public affairs participation in exercise planning, execution, and training. “Failure to include the PA staff and infrastructure in all aspects of an exercise could result in serious deficiencies in PA support during an actual operation” (Department of

Defense, 2005, p. 40). The scenarios should be more complex than outlining simple administrative procedures for hosting journalists (Department of Defense). A representative from the public affairs staff should be present during the exercise planning meetings so scenarios are realistic and not based from outside assumptions about public affairs tasks and procedures (Department of Defense). A mock exercise is the capstone of PAQC. Students are placed in a wartime scenario where they must use their training to respond to crisis events, such as plane crashes, suicides, fratricides, and collateral damage reports. Throughout the PAQC instruction, case studies are analyzed to assess the quality of the real world response.

Media training is a vital tenet of crisis communication training and rehearsal because it helps prepare spokespersons to be ready for the media (Defense Information School, 2003). Students are media trained during PAQC, which included role-playing scenarios such as on camera stand-ups, talk shows, and press conferences. The students are also taught how to media train others. Periodic general media training for troops and subject matter experts must be performed because the people responsible for accomplishing the mission should be prepared to interact with the media (Defense Information School, 2005a). Training can be done anytime, and it's especially ideal during deployment training exercises.

Hardball media role-playing is essential during mock interviews. "The tougher you are with them the more prepared they will be for the real thing. It will help everyone develop plans for responding to certain issues and validate their effectiveness" (Defense Information School, 2005a, p. 14). The PAQC instructors taught students how to media

train other personnel by putting the students through the training themselves. Mock stand-up interviews, press conferences, morning talk shows, and one-on-one interviews are all used as training tools. Students were videotaped so they could see how they performed.

*Step Four: The Crisis Event*

The fourth step, the crisis event, is the apex of the synthesis model. The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs' "Principles of Information" guides the military's crisis communication efforts (see Appendix A). According to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, it is Department of Defense policy to make accurate information timely to various publics; requests for information will be answered promptly; the Freedom of Information Act will be supported; publicized information will not be censored or include propaganda; information will not be overly classified to protect the government; and information will be withheld only when national security is at stake (Department of Defense, 2005). The Principles of Information apply during peace and war.

The successful execution of wartime operations and crisis events depends on the credibility of information released by the military because deception undermines the support of the Armed Forces (Department of Defense, 2005). Honest, balanced, and timely information released during a crisis boosts the public's confidence and enhances the legitimacy of the military's actions. When news is negative or when a crisis hits, "attempting to deny unfavorable information or failing to acknowledge its existence leads

to media speculation, the perception of cover-up, and lost public trust” (Department of Defense, p. 18).

The Air Force, Army, and Navy have regulations that provide guidance to public affairs personnel and commanders on how to communicate with the public when a crisis hits. The service guidance stems from *Joint Publication 3-61*, but is tailored to the service’s mission. According to the Air Force, “Experience proves candor is best. It may be big news for a day or two, but concealing bad news will keep it in the headlines longer. Public suspicion will linger indefinitely and future communication will be strained” (2006, p. 130). Air Force public affairs personnel are required to release bad news with minimum delay. The Air Force also noted that public affairs personnel must provide leaders with rapid counsel during crisis because ultimately the commanders decide what information is released (see Appendix B for list of Air Force crisis procedures).

The Army takes a no-nonsense approach to crisis communications. “Army policies, decisions and actions will be criticized and praised. PAOs cannot control media coverage or guarantee positive media products” (1997, p. 18). The Army said spokespersons must avoid speculation; address successes, strengths, failures, and weaknesses; and explain corrective actions and preventative measures. If the Army refuses to comment on a crisis or withholds negative information, it creates speculation and allegations of cover up (U.S. Army). The Army also noted the counterpropaganda value of releasing timely and truthful information, “When intentional misinformation or disinformation efforts are being made by adversaries, providing open access and

independent media coverage is the most effective defense. It is a key tool for countering the impact of enemy information operations” (p. 18).

A significant block of PAQC instruction is devoted to crisis media relations (See Appendix C for curriculum crisis response guidelines). Every student is required to participate in a mock news conference. The course emphasizes mastering the news conference for the following reasons: it focuses media attention, saves time, presents a uniform message, provides simultaneous release of information, and explains complex issues (Defense Information School, 2005d). Besides news conferences, various other crisis communication scenarios are practiced during the training. The training also addresses logistics and operational support to the media during war or crisis. The Defense Information School instructors said any media query or incident should be routed through various channels, which include the commander, staff judge advocate, security, personnel, other units, and higher headquarters (Defense Information School, 2005b).

The PAQC instruction integrates ethics training. public affairs personnel must define and apply ethical standards; and understand the ethical views of the country, unit, commander, and community (Defense Information School, 2005e, p. 10). The instruction covered six ethical foundations: professional ethics, the imperative of trust, professional privilege, social responsibility, positive aspects of socially responsible public relations, and negative aspects of socially responsible public relations (Defense Information School, p. 12).

### *Step Five: Evaluation and Revision of Public Relations Efforts*

After a crisis communication event has passed, lessons learned should be recorded to evaluate and revise future communication efforts (Horsley & Barker, 2002). In the military, lessons learned are often documented after crisis and war. Public affairs staff should record daily lessons learned and be prepared to report the observations in an after-action report (Department of Defense, 2005). The U.S. Army Combined Arms Center operates the Center for Army Lessons Learned, which is dedicated to collecting and researching operational and training event data to produce lessons learned for military personnel (2007). Historical military papers, theses, and monographs that document crisis communication responses are stored in its online public archives. The Center for Army Lessons Learned Web site also linked to 28 additional military lessons learned Web sites (U.S. Army Combined Arms Center).

### *Step Six: Interagency Coordination and Political Analysis*

In the final step of the synthesis model, government organizations must ensure that all parties communicate the correct message and that the message is reaching its intended audiences (Horsley & Barker, 2002). The stated need for consistent messaging was present in all of the military regulations examined in this study. “Commanders should ensure that DOD PA operations put forth a consistent message through its many voices. Information should be appropriately coordinated and in compliance with official DOD and supported command guidance before it is released to the public” (Department of Defense, 2005, p. 18). Coordinating with various government agencies is essential during crisis operations because the media is saturated with assorted messages from

different sources that are true and untrue (Department of Defense). The goal is for the U.S. military to be proactive rather than reactive in communicating with the media and the public. The Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs is the key coordinator for interagency coordination (Department of Defense). Public affairs guidance is developed and disseminated through all public affairs channels in the Department of Defense. The public affairs guidance is staffed through various entities such as the State Department and its embassies, civil affairs, country assessment teams, host governments, allied force public affairs teams, the four US military services, and their subordinate commands (U.S. Army, 1997).

### Military Crisis Communication Case Studies

#### *My Lai Massacre*

American military personnel performing a mission in the Vietnamese hamlet of My Lai 4 killed more than 500 innocent civilians in 1968. News of the crisis slowly percolated out to the masses because of the dogged pursuit of justice by an ex-Army soldier and an intrepid young reporter. The Army used various unethical communications tactics at different stages of the crisis. These tactics included lying, stonewalling, and censoring. The crisis and resulting media coverage stretched out for many years because of the criminal prosecution of the lone officer charged in the case – Lieutenant William Calley.

*Crisis communication response.* November 14, 1974, more than six years after the My Lai massacre and four years after the report's completion, the government released the *Peers Report*. Lieutenant General William Peers investigated the alleged



events that took place in the My Lai hamlet March 16, 1968. The findings were comprehensive and startling – the efforts to conceal what occurred at My Lai were widespread in the Army.

Two soldiers who witnessed the massacre were particularly culpable. “On 16 March, a two-man team from the 31st Public Information Detachment, accompanied C/1-20 Inf on the combat assault. These men, SGT (now Mr.) Ronald Haeberle, photographer, and SP5 (now Mr.) Jay Roberts, journalist, witnessed numerous war crimes committed by members of C/1-20 Inf in My Lai (4)” (Peers, 1970, p. 5). Using his personal and government-owned cameras, Haeberle took numerous photos – he used color film for the atrocities and black and white film for the other activities (Peers). According to Peers, Haeberle and Roberts discussed what they had seen after leaving the operations area. Haeberle said he wondered how the press could use the photos he had taken at My Lai (Peers).

Hours after the massacre, Roberts wrote a story about the incident that made no mention of the atrocities he witnessed. Instead, he praised the efforts of the task force. “Roberts wrote the story based on the official statistics and gave it to his superior officer. ‘I just figured it’d look real bad, and it wasn’t my problem’” (Hersh, 1970, p. 78). The article cited false details, such as the amount of enemy forces killed and that artillery had been called in before the ground assault (Hersh). His article was coordinated up to the brigade press officer, Lieutenant Arthur Dunn, who thought the veracity of the article details were suspect, but he had seen misleading articles before and it wasn’t out of the ordinary (Hersh). Dunn dictated the article by telephone the night of the massacre to the

Americal Division press office. The Americal Division copied it verbatim and sent one copy to Saigon for release to the press, and another for its internal daily newsletter (Hersh). The articles reported nothing close to reality and made no mention of civilian casualties (Hersh). Details from the report were printed in a *The New York Times* article, "G.I.'s, in Pincer Move, Kill 128 in a Daylong Battle" (1968).

Peers noted that neither Haeberle nor Roberts reported the atrocities they witnessed at My Lai (1970). These two men were only present to historically document the operation and were not part of the task force. Instead they "both actively contributed to the suppression of information concerning the incident" (Peers, p. 6). Peers condemned Haeberle and Roberts because they were in better position to report the atrocities than the enlisted men in the task force. Haeberle and Roberts did not face the same retaliation the task force enlisted men feared.

*The scandal unfolds.* *The New York Times* first published an article about the operation at My Lai March 17, 1968. The reporter cited an American spokesman in the article, and essentially reprinted the false accounts released by the Americal Division press office ("G.I.'s, in Pincer Move, Kill 128 in a Daylong Battle," 1968). As rumors and first hand accounts of the massacre swirled in Vietnam, the news did not reach the American press until the Army charged Calley for murdering My Lai civilians in 1969. According to Hersh (1970), news stories of the massacre were first published in May 1968 in the French-language publications *Sud Vietnam en Lutte* and *Bulletin du Vietnam*, published by the North Vietnamese delegation to the Paris peace talks. The massacre was also included in a report at the July 1968 World Conference of Jurists for

Vietnam in Grenoble, France. A year after the massacre occurred, a discharged soldier from Arizona, Ronald Ridenhour, mailed letters to President Nixon, senators, congressmen, and various Pentagon and State Department officials (Hersh). The letter caught the attention of two officials – Democratic Representatives Morris Udall from Arizona and L. Mendel Rivers from South Carolina. Both men pressured the military to investigate the allegations, and the Army Inspector General was soon assigned to the case (Hersh).

According to Hersh, the “first public hint of the My Lai 4 massacre was a blandly worded news release issued to the Georgia press on Friday afternoon, September 5, by the public information office at Fort Benning” (1970, p. 128). The release announced the charges filed against Calley, but did not include any details about the charges (Hersh). Hersh said there were no military regulations preventing the release of more detailed information, but the Army said the specific charges could jeopardize the rights of the accused. *The New York Times* reprinted an *Associated Press* story on page 38 that repeated the facts stated in the release (Hersh). There were no additional details printed in the press about Calley. According to Hersh, “a few Pentagon officers actually thought Calley could be court-martialed without attracting any significant public attention” (p. 132).

Hersh broke the My Lai massacre story November 12, 1969 (Hersh, 1970). His article was offered by the *Dispatch News Service*, and more than thirty newspapers subsequently picked up the story (Hersh). *The New York Times* Southeast Asian correspondent, Henry Kamm, later pursued the story in Vietnam. According to Hersh,

the Army flew Kamm and a representative from *Newsweek* magazine to the relocation hamlet where some My Lai 4 survivors lived. The Army gave the reporters only an hour to conduct interviews, and the public information officer taped all interviews. When Kamm requested an interview with the military commander for Vietnam, he said the public information officer in Saigon “treated me very coolly. He apparently felt that I had ratted on our side” (Hersh, p. 136). *The New York Times* competitors treated Kamm’s dispatch with skepticism, and there were only a few editorial comments written about the massacre (Hersh). The Army formally announced Calley’s court-martial November 25, 1969, but the newspapers continued to treat the brewing scandal with caution and abstained from commenting editorially (Hersh).

*The Army goes public.* When Calley’s trial started in November 1969, the Army was in a tough position. According to Hersh, an anonymous source said, “If they don’t prosecute somebody for this, the Army’s going to get clobbered. And if the story ever breaks without the Army taking action, it would be even worse” (1970, p. 123). The Army could not suppress the story and struggled to institute proper crisis communication practices during the trial. Throughout the trial, the primary themes communicated by the military were minimum disclosure, media censorship, and morality. These themes were present in military press releases, and official and anonymous comments published in media reports. The military’s lack of candidness led to an increase of scapegoating frames. There were many parties communicating with the media – from eyewitnesses to anonymous military sources. Consequently, the military’s crisis communication response appeared muddled.

*No comment.* *The New York Times* coverage was constantly peppered with “no comment” quotes from Army public affairs personnel. Multiple headlines hinted at the Army’s unwillingness to fully disclose information or comment about the investigations and trials. The headlines read, “Men at Pentagon Decline To Comment on Verdict” (1971), “Officials at Fort Benning Silent On New Calley Move by Nixon” (Wooten, 1971), and “Pentagon Is Silent On Mylai Charges” (1972). In the article, “Men at Pentagon Decline To Comment on Verdict,” Major General Winant Sidle, Army chief of public information, said his office expected requests for comment about the Calley verdict in March 1971. After receiving the requests, Sidle said the Army had no reaction because there was no fitting reaction. *The New York Times* added descriptive wording to further detail the uncooperative nature of the Army’s stonewalling, ““There will be no formal response,”” an information officer said flatly, countering announcements that official reaction was forthcoming” (Wooten, p. 57). One spokesman noted that legal officers prevented him from commenting on the case because it was still pending review (“Pentagon Is Silent On Mylai Charges”). One account of the Army’s lack of communication was even sarcastic. “And the Army called a news conference to announce that nothing would be announced” (Shuster, 1970, p. 11). The no comment frame was present through the duration of Calley’s legal proceedings.

*Government calls for media self-censorship.* *The New York Times* did not begin to thoroughly report on the My Lai massacre until Calley’s trial started in November 1969. Initial reports focused on eyewitness accounts and military censorship. Immediately after Calley’s trial began, the military judge, prosecution, and defense

complained that the media reported too much information about the My Lai massacre, which put Calley at an unfair disadvantage. The military judge, Colonel Kennedy, suggested in an article that the media should censor its own coverage (“News Media Given Clearance,” 1969). The media continued to publish interviews with My Lai witnesses who had already separated from the military. An article reported the headline, “Calley Lawyers and Judge Meet: Violations of Publicity Ban Disturb Col. Kennedy” (1969). In the article Kennedy was asked what authority he had to restrict the media or witnesses from talking, and he responded with, “I have no comment” (p. 15). The defense and prosecution also argued for an injunction to restrict media coverage of the trial (Kenworthy, 1969).

The military’s quotes about the press interfering with the judicial process gave great fodder to the press to report on military attempts to censor the media. Kennedy often commented on the importance of giving Calley a fair trial, and media cooperation was a critical component of a free trial. “This is not to be a trial by the press,” Kennedy said (“Calley Judge Calls for Inquiry,” 1969, p. 16). There was a lack of editorial comment about the military’s efforts to quiet the press, “These legal maneuverings over publicity were reported without comment...although it was still extremely unclear whether the basic goal of the Kennedy court was to protect the Army from further adverse publicity or to protect Lieutenant Calley’s rights” (Hersh, 1970, p. 163). According to Hersh, members of Calley’s Charlie Company ignored the ban on talking to the media, and these interviews dominated the news coverage until December 1969.

When the ex-soldiers were subpoenaed to speak in court, some refused to testify to prevent from incriminating themselves (Bigart, 1970).

*Following orders defense.* As the censorship frames subsided, Calley's defense argument became the primary news frame. Calley admitted to killing the Vietnamese civilians at My Lai 4, but allegedly only did so under orders from his commander, Captain Ernest Medina. "The defense team...is seeking to prove that the actions of Lieutenant Calley – and the orders of Captain Medina – were legitimate, lawful acts of war" (Hammer, 1970, p. 140). Calley's lawyer, George W. Latimer, asserted that Calley assumed his orders from Medina were "the way higher officers conducted the war" (Hammer, p.140). *The New York Times* editorial staff and the public hotly debated the nature of warfare and following orders. The following orders defense did not hold up in the military court, and Calley was convicted March 29, 1971.

*Army takes the moral high road.* Another news frame presented by the media was the morality frame. The Army received negative publicity from the public for prosecuting Calley. "The Army, defending itself against public outcry against the trial and conviction of First Lieut. William L. Calley Jr., said today that it had 'a moral and legal obligation' to prosecute him" (Naughton, 1971, p. 1). The trial prosecutor was especially adamant about the military's obligation to prosecute the perpetrator of the My Lai massacre, even after President Nixon had come to Calley's defense:

Captain Daniel wrote that he was 'shocked and dismayed' by the public criticism of the court-martial verdict and could attribute it only to emotional reaction by those who were unaware of the evidence in the case...He said that it was 'shocking' to see many Americans fail to grasp what he saw as the moral issue involved in the Calley case. ("Calley Prosecutor Asserts Nixon Undermines Justice," 1971, p.1)

This communication theme provoked *The New York Times* to defend the Army and Daniel. “Captain Daniel’s letter...ought to be read in every schoolroom of America as a courageous statement of what this country is really all about: respect for human freedom, for individual rights and for impartial justice under law” (“The Calley Issues,” 1971, p. 40).

*Whitewash accusations.* Throughout the entire judicial process, *The New York Times* articles raised the accountability question: Was Calley the Army’s My Lai scapegoat? One by one, as Calley’s commanding officers in the chain-of-command were acquitted of punishment, “whitewash,” “scapegoating,” and “cover up” were characterizations included in coverage and editorial pieces. “The Army and the nation so far have backed away from demanding the full accounting that justice and conscience require” (“Judgment at Fort Benning,” 1971, p. 3). The Army was accused of trying to avoid additional embarrassment by refusing to prosecute higher-ranking officers, “The dismissal of the charges against General Koster – after he had been punished administratively – is a strong hint that the Pentagon has no stomach for broadening of the Mylai question” (Graham, 1971, p. 18). The stories of cover up and lack of accountability continued until 1974.

*Public opinions.* During Calley’s trial, he received support from politicians and the public. In January 1970 55% of the American public believed Calley was made a scapegoat by the government (“Most Back Calley in a Poll for Time,” 1970). Citizens circulated petitions protesting the fact that one officer was blamed for the My Lai massacre (Charlton, 1971a). Politicians, such as Governor George Wallace, blamed the



media as well. “The former Governor, who did most of the talking, criticized the news media for their handling of the alleged massacre at Songmy in 1968” (“Calley Meets With Wallace,” 1970, p. 1). One politician said the massacre was a hoax and accused the media of acting “as a weapon of psychological warfare” (Hersh, 1970, p. 156). Military officers were also disturbed. “Many of the officers believe that the Calley case has been a catalyst for those elements of public opinion, left and right, that abuse and disparage the Army” (Middleton, 1971, p. 1). The furor surrounding the case caused Nixon to intervene and order Calley’s release from jail after his conviction (Charlton, 1971b).

Table 1 displays the overall themes found in the military’s communications with the media, the resulting *The New York Times* news frames, and the apparent effect of the coverage.

Table 1  
*My Lai Massacre Themes, Frames, and Effects*

Military Themes	<i>The New York Times</i> Frames	Effects
No Comment	Censorship	Division of war opinion
Censorship	Whitewash	
Morality	Following orders	

*TARES test.* The military decisively failed the TARES test standard during the My Lai massacre crisis communication response. Truthfulness, an essential cornerstone of the TARES test, was not critical to the military’s communication with the public. The public affairs personnel intentionally lied in their accounts of the actions at My Lai to deceive the public into retaining support for the Vietnam War. During the Calley trial, the military continually evaded questions and appeared to be concealing information. This contradicts the truthfulness and authenticity portions of the TARES test. The

spokespeople were not willing to be identified as persuaders, and answered media queries with “no comment” or anonymously.

The military showed no respect for the American public when lying about the massacre. Respect is at the heart of the TARES test. The American public initially didn't have a chance to make an informed decision about the war efforts at My Lai. Equity is the fourth part of the TARES test, which was also neglected by military personnel. When the news was made public, the military noted the propaganda advantage that was given to the enemy as a reason why the news should be censored. This tactic preyed upon Americans' emotions. Lastly, the military was not socially responsible with its communication efforts. The military's image took priority over the taxpayer's right to be informed about the actions of the military.

Overall, the Army failed when applying the TARES test to the My Lai massacre case. The military did not consider the ethical ramifications of its communication strategy, which ultimately affected its credibility with American and international stakeholders. It could also be argued that the lack of candidness contributed to the declining support for the war effort in Vietnam. The military did not ethically deliberate the ramifications of its crisis communication tactics – instead it communicated according to what it thought was best for the overall war effort and Army image. The military learned that the presence of television and other technological innovations negated its ability to cover up the truth of military operations and crisis situations. Ethics and openness with the media must be considered in operations to retain the support of the American public.

### *Black Hawk Shootdown*

After the Gulf War ended in 1991, the U.S. military kicked-off Operation Provide Comfort, which was a U.S. coalition operation that provided protection and humanitarian aid to Kurdish refugees in Northern Iraq (Piper, 2000). The Air Force also patrolled the No-Fly Zone in Northern Iraq as part of Operation Provide Comfort. The humanitarian operation was turned into a crisis when two Air Force F-15 fighter jets shot down two U.S. Army Black Hawk helicopters. Twenty-six coalition personnel were killed in the friendly fire incident. The Air Force immediately flooded the media with crisis communication messaging such as remorse and accountability. The crisis dragged on because no personnel were held criminally accountable, and the families of the deceased personnel voiced their frustrations to the media and politicians.

*Crisis communication response.* The day of the shootdown, the government officials were in front of the cameras apologizing and calling for accountability to find what went wrong before the two Black Hawks were shot down over Iraq. *CNN* reported the shootdown shortly after the incident; officials had to respond immediately because the news was all over the globe. General John Shalikashvili, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Dr. William Perry, Secretary of Defense, held a televised news conference April 14, 1994. They promised a full investigation and to hold the responsible persons accountable (Piper, 2000). The officials made these promises to the families and victims.

At the government-sponsored memorial service, Perry said, "Operation Provide Comfort was a very complex operation and no system will ever be one hundred percent perfect....When something does go wrong, I plead to you that we will have a full

accountability of what happened” (Piper, 2000, p. 100). Shalikashvili noted in the service:

This loss cuts deeper, for this tragedy touches the very fabric of our institution. An institution whose code, whose passion it is to take care of each other and to protect each other from any danger. And when that goes wrong, as it did eleven days ago, our hearts are doubly heavy, and our grief especially deep.... We can't alter the events of April 14, we can only mourn and we can strengthen our resolve to learn the truth. (Piper, pp. 100-101)

The families were barraged with questions from the media, yet functioned outside the control of military public affairs officers. The mother of one of the victims said she “would rather give an interview and have reporters use our words than have them make up something on their own” (Piper, 2000, p. 83). Initially, the parents were supportive of the military and were willing to be patient with the investigative and judicial processes. The officials' initial calls for accountability reassured the families and the public that personnel would be held responsible for the act that killed 26 people.

*Series of errors.* July 13, 1994, Perry and Shalikashvili held a news conference to announce the investigation findings of the Black Hawk shootdown. They started off by explaining the scope of the investigation:

It is a full and complete documentation and disclosure of what occurred. It involved thirty-one people who began the investigation the day after the accident occurred. They spent more than twenty thousand hours and interviewed one hundred thirty-seven witnesses. Additionally several thousand hours were spent testing and inspecting the equipment involved in the accident and they conducted more than one hundred separate airborne flying tests with F-15s and Black Hawk helicopters. It's a tragedy that never should have happened. (Piper, 2000, p. 129-130)

Shalikashvili said, “There were a shocking number of instances where people failed to do their job properly” (Piper, p. 130). This statement set the stage for the military's primary

crisis communication theme: the Black Hawk shootdown occurred because of a series of human errors.

*Questions of accountability.* September 8, 1994, the Air Force announced the charges against the military personnel involved with the Black Hawk shootdown. Five AWACS crewmembers and one of the pilots were charged (Gordon, 1994). When the charges were announced, the military's primary crisis communication theme was accountability, but added a caveat – the military justice system should be trusted. Perry said, “If individuals are found culpable, we will discipline them...we will not rush to judgment” (Gordon, p. 1). The accountability frame initially correlated with the military justice frame, yet as the personnel were dismissed, the frames appeared to conflict. Air Force officials claimed that justice would be served, but more than one year after the incident none of the officers involved had been criminally convicted. The Air Force officials had to explain why no one was criminally convicted of killing 26 innocent people.

A Department of Defense spokesman stood firm in a June 1995 press conference, and said Perry “wasn't going to second-guess the military justice system. It is a system set up to review these incidents, and it has completed its work” (Bacon, 1995, p. 7). During this press conference, the media appeared to have a difficult time understanding why the officers didn't face stiffer punishments. A reporter said, “Your exhaustive study said that there was a failure up and down the chain of command in dozens of areas. Why aren't the actions taken against people involved stronger than letters of reprimand” (Bacon, p. 3).

The spokesman explained that a letter of reprimand is a harsh punishment and proper steps were taken to appropriately punish the responsible individuals.

*The New York Times* reported on the incredulity expressed by the media and the family members. Perry was asked about the family members complaining that no one had been held accountable, and he responded, “No one has been sent to jail, that is true...But many officers’ careers were very adversely affected by this” (Verhovek, 1995, p. A1). Another official commented, “An incident like this does not necessarily mean that the conduct of all those involved rises to the level of criminal culpability” (Verhovek, p. A1).

*Whitewash accusations.* The Air Force’s inability to clearly explain the judicial process created negative news frames in *The New York Times*. It was reported in November 1994 that Lieutenant Colonel May, one of the pilots, avoided charges. Family members and anonymous Air Force officers voiced their displeasure with the Air Force’s decision. ““This was a very cleverly crafted legal strategy to get everyone off,’ Joan Piper said. ‘If General Shalikashvili can say this was truly shocking, and yet we can find no one accountable, then you judge for yourself”” (Schmitt, 1994c, p. A14). The scapegoat term was used in June 1995 as a label for the court-martial of Captain Wang, one of the surveillance aircraft personnel. “Captain Wang said during the noon break today that he was being made a scapegoat for a military service that needed a conviction but would not prosecute its stars, the fighter pilots” (Peterson, 1995, p. 6). When Wang was acquitted June 1995, relatives of the deceased helicopter crews asserted that the entire military justice process was a legal strategy to nowhere (Verhovek, 1995).

*Military leaks.* Joan Piper wrote a book chronicling her experience after her daughter was killed in the Black Hawk shootdown (2000). She wrote about her experiences dealing with the media, the military, and other family members. Her husband was an Air Force veteran, so they were inclined to support the military and exercise patience with the investigative process. Soon after the investigative process began, Piper noticed that the military had a tendency to leak information before it was officially released to the families and the public. Piper read in July 1994 a quote from a senior officer who noted that eight officers were charged in the shootdown case. The families hadn't yet been briefed on the findings, and subsequently Piper and the other family members said that Air Force personnel were officially leaking the information to shape the media coverage in the Air Force's favor (Piper). The multiple human errors frame was leaked prior to report release as well. This leak was published in *The New York Times*, "Multiple human error was responsible for this horrible tragedy,' said one senior Defense Department official" (Schmitt, 1994a, p. A1). The military's lack of communication and propensity to leak information angered the families and caused them to protest against the military's actions.

*Family outrage.* August 27, 1994, Perry announced that families of the 11 foreign nationals killed in Black Hawk shootdown were to receive ex gratia payments. Each foreign family was paid \$100,000, and additionally, the families of the Kurdish workers who were employed by the U.S. government received death benefits from the Department of Labor (Piper, 2000). "The Pentagon statement noted that the United States was not obligated by the United States or international law to make any payments, and said that

they were a ‘humanitarian gesture’ made at Mr. Perry’s discretion” (Schmitt, 1994b, p. 9). The U.S. military families did not receive payments because it was assumed that the military members carried life insurance. It turned out that not all family members received monetary compensation; Lieutenant Laura Piper was not insured. The military’s refusal to compensate the U.S. military families triggered the family members to start a letter-writing campaign to congressional representatives. According to Piper, “The other critical avenue to success is the press. Lawmakers are heavily influenced by the press” (p. 174). *The New York Times* reported the families were fighting for principle (Schmitt, 1995). The military stood its ground and said it had been equitable to the U.S. families in comparison to the foreign families because all members of the armed forces had life insurance (Schmitt). In 2000, the family members finally received monetary compensation (Piper).

Table 2 displays the overall themes found in the military’s communications with the media, the resulting *The New York Times* news frames, and the apparent effect of the coverage.

Table 2  
*Black Hawk Shootdown Themes, Frames, and Effects*

Military Themes	<i>The New York Times</i> Frames	Effects
Remorse	Series of errors	Family anger
Accountability	Whitewash/scapegoat	Additional investigations
Series of errors		
Leaks		

*TARES test.* Overall, the ethical validity of the military’s communication efforts in response to the Black Hawk shootdown improved when compared to the My Lai



massacre. The military was forthright and honest in its communication with the public. Authenticity was not always exercised though – the constant leaking of information showed that officials weren't willing to go on the record. This damaged the military's credibility with the families, which ultimately damaged the military's image in the news frames. Respect was also lacking in the military's response. Again, the families' concerns were publicly neglected, which displayed the military's lack of respect in communicating ethically. The military was more concerned with shaping the message and its image with the public. Military considerations, such as bureaucratic processes and military justice proceedings, also contributed to the neglect of the families' concerns.

The military did not appear to take advantage of the audience's vulnerabilities in its communications with the media, so it passed the equity portion of the test. Lastly, the military appeared to exercise social responsibility. Even though the military sometimes failed to effectively communicate the investigation process and military justice system, nonetheless, they attempted to be responsible in communicating the processes to the media. In the Black Hawk shutdown case the military wasn't ethically infallible with its crisis communication practices, but it vastly improved from the Vietnam era two decades earlier.

#### *Abu Ghraib Prison Abuse*

Operation Iraqi Freedom stirred global controversy because of its preemptive nature. The graphic photos of U.S. military personnel abusing Iraqi prisoners added fuel to the already blazing fire of negative public opinion of the war in Iraq. Nevertheless, the U.S. government went into proactive crisis communications mode in response to the Abu

Ghraib abuse photos. High-level government officials were remorseful and apologetic. But the proactive messaging was ineffective by a lack of high-ranking accountability, which ultimately prompted cover up allegations.

*Crisis communication response.* Army investigators became aware of Abu Ghraib prison abuse allegations January 14, 2004, and the military publicly issued a five-sentence English-language statement two days later (Jehl & Schmitt, 2004). The statement acknowledged the abuse allegations and stated that the allegations were under investigation (Jehl & Schmitt). In an interview with *The Washington Post*, General Karpinski said she volunteered to address the Iraqi people a week after investigators started investigating the Abu Ghraib prison abuse allegations. General Sanchez purportedly denied her request (Jehl & Schmitt).

No further information was publicly released until March 21, 2004 when Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt, deputy director of operations for the joint task force, announced the prison abuse charges in a Baghdad press conference. *The New York Times* published Kimmitt's primary theme: "The coalition takes all reports of detainee abuse seriously, and all allegations of mistreatment are investigated. We are committed to treating all persons under coalition control with dignity, respect and humanity" (Shanker, 2004, p. 14). No specifics were released during the briefing because

Defense Department officials acknowledged that the command in Baghdad was reluctant to say too much at the outset because of the continuing criminal investigation and, to some extent, because of the reaction in Iraq and throughout the Arab world to sketchy reports of serious abuses at Army-run prisons that had been photographed. (Jehl & Schmitt, p. 10)

April 28, 2004, Kimmitt again briefed the media at a press conference in Baghdad – but the timing of this conference was tied to the scheduled airing of the Abu Ghraib abuse photos. Kimmitt expanded on the allegations and charges against six military personnel. A reporter from the *Chicago Tribune* noted during the press conference, “It sounds as if you're only offering this information because it's going to go out on TV tonight” (Kimmitt, 2004, p. 4). Kimmitt vehemently defended the military’s communication with the press about Abu Ghraib, and listed the proactive actions the military had taken to inform the press about the investigation. The photographs were made public later that day on *CBS’s 60 Minutes II*. Two weeks before, *CBS* notified the Pentagon of its plans to broadcast the photos. General Richard B. Myers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, attempted to delay *CBS* from broadcasting the photos to avoid inciting violence and hostility in an already dangerous environment (Risen, 2004). The general was only delaying the inevitable – the photos sparked global outrage after being released April 28, 2004.

Kimmitt said that the Army would do everything in its power to properly train, resource, and discipline personnel so these types of abuses never happened again (Williams, 2004). Kimmitt voiced the collective embarrassment and shame the Army felt over the actions that happened at Abu Ghraib (Williams). Secretary Rumsfeld apologized and publicly held him accountable for what happened at Abu Ghraib, “as secretary of defense I am accountable for them, and I take full responsibility” (Garamone, 2004b, para. 2).

*Lesson on democracy.* The graphic images of Iraqis being degraded, humiliated, and beaten, flooded newscasts around the globe. U.S. government officials went immediately on the defensive, and attempted to dampen the hostile emotions evoked from domestic and international audiences. On *NBC's Today Show*, May 5, 2004, host Matt Lauer interviewed Rumsfeld:

Lauer: You've talked about the war of ideas. How do these photos, how do these incidents, impact that war of ideas?

Rumsfeld: Harmful.

Lauer: Just one word?

Rumsfeld: Well, I've responded. I don't know what else one can say. There's no question that when any citizen, soldier or civilian, breaks the law, abuses people in a manner that's inconsistent with the way people are trained and taught and with the way decent human beings behave, then that's harmful to the United States. (Lauer, 2004, p. 4)

Rumsfeld also claimed that enemies were sure to exploit the abuses to further publicize their negative opinions of the U.S., and the claims could be rebroadcast via regional media (Miles, 2004). The secretary also used the events surrounding the scandal to publicize the strength of the American democracy:

In the past two weeks, the United States has offered the world a seminar on what happens when things go wrong in a democracy. The world has seen those shameful pictures, but the same world has watched the United States government take responsibility and apologize to those individuals who were wronged. It's watched senior civilian and military leadership come to Congress to testify under oath about what was known and what has been done. It's watched a free media publish stories of all types, from the accurate to the grossly distorted. Iraq and the watching world have seen that in our country, no one is above the law, that we are a nation governed by laws. (Rumsfeld, 2004, p. 5)

President George W. Bush went on the defensive. May 7, 2004, President Bush apologized to the Middle East via the satellite channel *Al Arabiya*, and stated that the

abuses "represent the actions of a few people...it's important for people to understand that in a democracy that there will be a full investigation" (Hauser, 2004, p. 6). Secretary of State Colin Powell apologized and defended American servicemembers and values:

He praised the bulk of American soldiers in Iraq as 'wonderful young men and women.' But, in his closest approach to an outright apology, he said: 'Our heads bow. Our hearts ache over what a small number of them did at that prison. There's no excuse for that.' (Cowell, 2004, p. 18)

*Officials commend investigation efforts.* Department of Defense press releases and news articles quoted senior military officials praising the military for its swift and thorough response to the abuse allegations. "Rumsfeld praised Army Spc. Joseph Darby for stepping forward with his concerns. He also praised the military chain of command for its quick and effective actions once the allegations were known" (Garamone, 2004b, para. 8). Rumsfeld lauded the military's proactive outreach when the allegations were initially made. "'The military, not the media, discovered these abuses,' the secretary said. 'The military reported the abuses, not the media'" (Miles, 2004, para. 5). The military consistently reassured the public that the Army was investigating the allegations with dogged determination, and the soldiers would be held accountable.

*A few bad apples.* The calls for accountability were soon directed toward a small group of military policemen who sat at the bottom of the military chain-of-command. A Department of Defense news article invoked the term, "a few bad apples" to describe the ragtag outfit of military policemen (Gilmore, 2004, para. 1). The non-military independent panel charged with investigating Abu Ghraib described the situation as an "'Animal House' on the night shift" (Garamone, 2004a, para. 13). According to the

government, the carousing bad apples were an aberration and not indicative of systemic problems.

*Following orders.* The accused soldiers defended themselves and claimed they were ordered to take the actions documented in the photos. The defendants also claimed that there was “no support, no training whatsoever” (Barringer, 2004, p. 12). Specialist Charles Graner argued he “was acting under legal orders – a viable defense under military law, even if the orders were in fact illegal” (Zernike, 2005, p. 18). The defendants had civilian lawyers who also functioned as their spokespersons. “Sergeant Cardona's civilian defense lawyer, Harvey J. Volzer, said his client had done what his training and senior officers demanded: protect fellow soldiers and scare inmates” (“Dog Handler Convicted in Abu Ghraib Abuse,” 2005, p. 18). The defense that the soldiers were following orders did not gain traction, and were eventually found guilty of abusing prisoners at Abu Ghraib.

*Whitewash accusations.* One-by-one, as the low ranking soldiers were convicted of abuse, *The New York Times* quoted civilian lawyers and the accused asserting that the Abu Ghraib investigation was a whitewash and the soldiers were scapegoats. “I feel that all seven M.P.'s are being made scapegoats,” Guy Womack, the civilian lawyer for Specialist Graner, told reporters after his client's hearing. “No one can suggest with a straight face that these M.P.'s were acting alone” (Wong, 2004, p. 1). Politicians also voiced their concerns, and nearly accused one of the investigation heads of whitewash (Schmitt, 2004). *The New York Times* editorial page accused the military of whitewashing the Abu Ghraib investigation (“Abu Ghraib, Whitewashed,” 2004, “No

Accountability on Abu Ghraib,” 2004, “Patterns of Abuse,” 2005). One lawyer of the accused noted that if one soldier is convicted, than their superiors should be convicted, which turns into a domino effect up the chain of command (Bernstein, 2004). The highest-ranking officer punished was Karpinski, and she repeatedly claimed that the military made her a scapegoat for her superiors (Schmitt, 2005).

*Public opinion.* International and domestic audiences projected disgust and dismay in reaction to the Abu Ghraib abuse photos. *The New York Times* devoted coverage to American opinions, and found that the publication of the photos repulsed Americans, but they still felt protective for the troops in Iraq. The public believed that the few responsible soldiers should be held accountable, but not Rumsfeld. ““Why blame Rumsfeld when he wasn't even involved?” asked Dorothy Whittemore, 83, a retired librarian from New Orleans. ‘At a time of war, you have to stay the course and you certainly shouldn't change leaders’” (Jacobs, 2004, p. 11). Others acknowledged that during war, bad events are bound to occur:

‘This is war. It's not right, but war's not right,’ Mr. Neil said. ‘Given the circumstances, I don't see how they would not do something – after seeing their buddies dragged through the streets. They're over there to give the Iraqis freedom, and they're getting killed every day.’ (Jacobs, p. 11)

Another effect of the photos, which was addressed by government officials in length, was the damage done to the America's image abroad. ““The Arabs already hate us, and now we're giving them even more reason to hate us and get revenge,’ said Rosalind Gittings, 60, a teacher from Baltimore” (Jacobs, p. 11). Rich said 80% of Americans disapprove of the prison abuses (2005). The few bad apples frame went unchallenged by the public

at-large, but the paper accused the media of trivializing the story to the American public (Rich).

Table 3 displays the overall themes found in the military's communications with the media, the resulting *The New York Times* news frames, and the apparent effect of the coverage.

Table 3  
*Abu Ghraib Prison Abuse Scandal Themes, Frames, and Effects*

Military Themes	<i>The New York Times</i> Frames	Effects
Proactive response	Following orders	Lower public opinion
Actions un-American	Whitewash	
Few bad apples	Cover up	

*TARES test.* Although the military's image was negatively affected by the Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal, the military appeared to ethically communicate with the public. The military initially announced the Abu Ghraib charges to the media. The pictures were not released because Taguba felt that the photos could cause violent uprisings in the Middle East (Hersh, 2004). Based upon military and media accounts, the photos were not deceptively concealed before they were leaked to the public. The facts about who initiated the abuses were veiled in secrecy because of classification concerns, so the military was prevented from being totally open and truthful.

The equity portion of the TARES test is called into question when applied to Abu Ghraib. The U.S. officials' fear appeals were persuasive preyed upon the vulnerabilities of the public. The military claimed that the photos would cause violent uprisings abroad and an increase in terrorist attacks. This fear appeal may have influenced some Americans to demand the photos be censored. Before the scandal, the U.S. military and



politicians were attempting to win the “hearts and minds” of Middle Eastern and Iraqi citizens. The U.S. government upheld the social responsibility and respect portions of the test in communicating honestly and remorsefully to its target audiences in the Middle East. Operation Iraqi Freedom was not a popular war from the start, so although the military officials crisis communication practices appeared ethical, their actions seemed pointless because the American government lacked credibility before the scandal was made public.

### Impact of Culture and Technology

#### *Effect of Military Culture on Media Relations*

During the Civil War, General William Tecumseh Sherman said, “I hate Newspapermen. They come into camp and pick up their camp rumors and print them as facts. I regard them as spies, which, in truth they are. If I killed them all there would be news from Hell before breakfast” (Defense Information School, 2005f, p. 12). The military attempts to protect and control information as a means for defending the nation and protecting national security. On the other hand, the media endeavor to communicate openly with the public because it is an attribute of a healthy, functioning democracy. Because the military and media have differing communication philosophies, the two institutions experience strain during war. Widening the gap between military and media cultures is the social and economic differences of the two professions. According to English (2005), “The military draws largely from the mass of citizens that tend to have a nationalistic mindset while journalists largely come from the cosmopolitan elite” (p. 24).

*Case study findings.* The clash of these two iconic cultures were apparent in the crisis communication case study analysis of the 1967 My Lai massacre, 1994 Black Hawk friendly fire shootdown, and 2005 Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal. But the dynamics changed in each crisis. In the aftermath of the My Lai massacre, the military lied and suppressed information from the media fearing that the enemy could use the information as a propaganda weapon. After news of the massacre was made public and the resulting trial ensued, public affairs officers were often quoted not commenting to the media. This evasive treatment of the media symbolized that the military was in reputation protection mode. The military also attempted to censor the media from airing interviews with My Lai witnesses, but the military did not have the power to censor the media. During the crisis communication response to the Black Hawk shootdown, the military often leaked information to the press instead of going on-the-record. This gave the media information, but undercut the military's reputation during a contentious investigation and trial. The information subsidy pendulum swung in the opposition direction from My Lai when the military worked with the media during the Abu Ghraib scandal. The government proactively communicated to the media, but with a hint of resentment. Addressing the conservative Heritage Foundation May 17, 2004, Rumsfeld told the audience that the U.S. was a model of democracy, leaders had apologized and taken responsibility, and the free media published accurate and "grossly distorted" news about Abu Ghraib (Rumsfeld, 2004).

Before the Abu Ghraib photos originally aired, the military attempted to prevent *CBS* from publicizing the photographs, but the media resisted and aired the photos.

Myers said, "The story about the abuse was already public, but we were concerned that broadcasting the actual pictures could further inflame the tense situation that existed then in Iraq and further endanger the lives of coalition soldiers and hostages" (Garamone, 2004b, para. 13). The threat of propaganda and violence did not impede journalists from reporting stories, especially with increased online competition.

*Interview findings.* The improvement of relations between the military and media was evident in interviews conducted with current and former military public affairs personnel. All of the public affairs personnel had worked in public affairs at different organizational levels in the military – base, headquarters, and deployed locations. Overall, the military personnel held positive to neutral opinions toward the media. A former Air Force officer noted:

Working with the media is a fine art, balancing developing and maintaining good relationships with the journalists and working with Air Force officials to prepare and refine the message so they feel comfortable talking to the media. If done properly, it can be very beneficial, even when the news is negative. (A. Carpenter, personal communication, January 31, 2008)

Cultivating positive relationships with the media was a top priority for the military public affairs personnel interviewed for this study. Positive relations ensure that an information subsidy is exchanged – the military can publicize its preferred theme or frame through the media, and the media can get the information necessary for a compelling story.

Nonetheless, friction exists because the military does not meet media deadlines or news-gathering expectations (R. Johnson, personal communication, January 21, 2008). Operational security often functions as the source of the friction, "sometimes media don't understand the need for operational security; sometimes commanders hide behind

operational security to deny access” (Johnson). The military commander’s inability to comprehend the role of the press, and vice versa, still causes strife between the two professions. “The natural military reaction is to circle the wagons and deny the media, the public, and internal audiences their right to know” (T. Somerville, personal communication, January 28, 2008). Military commanders have improved their outlook after realizing what a good crisis communication plan can do for getting out the military’s message (T. Somerville). But many military members still have closed attitudes toward the media. The military’s misconceptions of the media even impinge on the military’s perception of public affairs. “Due to the lack of understanding of the PA mission at all levels, military PA reps sometimes tend to be viewed as external media even by their own service members” (L. Polarek, personal communication, February 6, 2008).

Internal tensions within the military also arise because of its bureaucratic culture. “The hardest part of any communication process is getting information coordinated internally before it is released to the public. The chain of command hinders this” (M. Nachshen, personal communication, February 10, 2008). Media interview requests and queries are often coordinated through multiple layers of organizational bureaucracy, which hinders the response time between the military and the media. Reporters can bust deadlines because of the bureaucratic coordinating, which does not help the military effectively tell its side of the story. The coordination is especially trying overseas. “It was very challenging to coordinate messages with the AF and DoD PA folks back in the states” (A. Carpenter, personal communication, January 31, 2008). The different time zones, lack of timely communication, and message coordination prompted the media to

publish conflicting information (Carpenter). Conflicting information released to the media has the capability to become a secondary narrative in an overarching storyline (Carpenter). The bureaucratic frustrations voiced by the interviewees can be attributed to the authoritarian culture of the military. According to Hill (1984), the authoritarian nature of the military created the chain-of-command concept, a potential for rapid decision-making, and uncritical acceptance of orders. The authoritarian style is necessary during wartime operations, but conflicts with the media and America's democratic culture.

### *The Military Justice System*

The military justice system mostly mirrors the civilian system, but the military's differing components have created dissension between the military and media during high-profile military trials.

*Case study findings.* In every case analyzed in this study, the common denominator was the reporter's inability to understand the military justice system. "Reprimands and other administrative punishments can certainly wreck a military career – a punishment that has no real equivalent in the civilian world – but it's not the same as serving time" (Myers, 2004, p. 3). In each case, high-ranking officers often faced administrative punishment instead of criminal prosecution. Only a lieutenant was criminally prosecuted for the My Lai massacre.

When the military decided to administratively punish the personnel responsible for the Black Hawk shootdown, it created press confusion. In a press conference that addressed the administrative punishments, a reporter questioned the severity of a letter of

reprimand (Bacon, 1995). The spokesman attempted to explain why this was a significant disciplinary action, and why the commanders decided to pursue this punishment instead of one that was harsher. The reporter responded, “I’m asking why wasn’t there, given the fact that so many people died in this, and that there were so many instances of failure to carry out rules that are pretty clear, why that’s not a stronger action” (Bacon, p. 3). The volleys continued and nothing the spokesman said quelled the reporter’s confusion. This misunderstanding about the military justice system was present in the news frames of every case analyzed in this study. The alleged scapegoating, coupled with the military’s lack of on-the-record interviews during investigations and trials, brought negative attention on the military in all three cases.

*Interview results.* Somerville echoed the sentiment that the military justice system prevents effective communication with the media:

The military lawyer usually wants the Air Force to keep silent on any details affecting matters still to be heard in court. Lawyers defending accused military members have no such reluctance; they want the defendants' cries of ‘innocent!’ to be heard and they don't mind telling a story in whatever way will best support their clients. (personal communication, January 28, 2008)

Even if the public affairs officer gives the commander a compelling reason for communicating during an investigation, the argument is pointless when pitted against a military lawyer who has laws and regulations to back his or her reasoning (B. Hoey, personal communication, February 19, 2008).

### *Evolution of Technology*

Technological innovations have been a double-edged sword for the military. This was even apparent in the Civil War. The telegraph allowed the war news to be

transmitted across the country in a few hours, as opposed to many days (Defense Information School, 2005f). Photographs were taken for the first time during a war, thus allowing citizens to see the reality of war. Bloody images coupled with the widespread news of defeat threatened President Lincoln's reelection chances in 1864 (Defense Information School). Fortunately for the Union, the rapid dissemination of victorious news caused an upswing in public opinion (Defense Information School). For the next 140 years, innovative technologies further increased the speed of communication and quality of photography, but the military struggled to harness these technologies to its strategic advantage.

*Case study findings.* In the Vietnam War, the military faced various challenges with technology. Reporters carried small tape recorders and television cameras. Emotions and body language were more easily captured via these communication technologies (Snow, 2006). "Since reporters recorded the actual words of PA spokesmen, denial of previous announcements became more problematic" (Snow, p. 16). The military could not deny Haerberle's photographs that documented the atrocities at My Lai. The photographs were reprinted in various magazines and broadcast on national television news (Hersh, 1970). During the trial, the national broadcast of witness interviews captured the nation's attention. The eyewitness accounts and graphic images could not be censored by the military.

In the aftermath of the Gulf War, the concept of the "CNN effect" took hold. The almost immediate global broadcast of news on CNN drove military and diplomatic decision-making and put the military on the defensive. The Black Hawk shootdown was

first broadcast on *CNN*, and some family members knew their loved ones were killed in the shutdown before the military gave them official notification (Piper, 2000). During the ordeal, families of the deceased military members stayed glued to their television sets:

During these past few days of waiting for word of when Laura's remains should be returned to us, we kept track of the progress via *CNN*. It is a surreal and sobering experience to watch your daughter's casket being loaded on a large Air Force cargo plan in Germany for transatlantic flight from the privacy of your living room. (Piper, p. 88)

News was broadcast in real time, so *CNN* was their information source and not the military. The military was slow to catch on, but realized that *CNN* could "distribute an interesting and moderately informative product to a wide audience. The military need not compete with, or resent, the media. Rather, the media can liberate us from the delays and slants our own bureaucracy imparts" (Zinni, Ellertson, & Allardice, 1992, p. 2).

Similar to the Pipers family's experience, Lynndie England's parents learned of the news about their daughter on television:

The couple had just returned from a turkey-hunting trip last week when they received a message...that Lynndie's picture had been on "60 Minutes II" on CBS-TV. The next morning, Mrs. England brewed herself a pot of coffee, snapped on *CNN* and there, playing over and over and over again, were Private England and the Iraqi prisoners. Mrs. England put a hand to her mouth, steadied herself and said aloud, 'Oh my god.' (Dao, 2004, p. 1)

Abu Ghraib captured the public's attention partly because of new communication technologies. Disturbing images of the abhorrent prison abuse were captured on digital cameras and e-mailed to family, friends, and co-workers of the accused. Besides the images broadcast on television, more graphic images were posted on various Internet Web sites.



*Interview findings.* All interview participants in this study agreed that there are positive aspects in new media technologies. In response to a crisis, the military can now release information and have it broadcast immediately, “No more hours on the telephone or at the fax machine to release an update; just hit ‘send’” (T. Somerville, personal communication, January 28, 2008). But the technologies often have a negative impact on the military:

Video and picture taking cell phones become undeniable eyewitnesses and the first person to the keyboard wins, regardless of their status or caliber of journalistic credentials. The military leadership as a whole does not have a concept of the life of a news story and what makes headlines. This puts the military and PA practitioners at a serious disadvantage when it comes to timely dissemination of accurate information. (A. Carpenter, personal communication, January 31, 2008)

The requirement for chain-of-command coordination denotes a lack of communication autonomy for public affairs personnel. This combination of no autonomy and new media technologies amplifies the bureaucratic culture clash between the military and the media. “All of the technological advances such as Web blogs or podcasts are useless if you’re not able to get factual information out quickly” (R. Johnson, personal communication, January 21, 2008).

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

This study confirmed that the military's crisis communication training and regulations match closely with Horsley and Barker's (2002) synthesis model. The Defense Information School provides in-depth crisis communication training to military public affairs personnel. Proactive public outreach and media relations' processes are emphasized in the instruction, which are vital components for being prepared for crisis. The instruction is based upon the military regulation, *Joint Publication 3-61* (Department of Defense, 2005). This regulation is rich with information and guidance for public affairs personnel who are stationed at home or abroad. The interviews of military public affairs personnel validated the effectiveness of the training and its close comparison with the synthesis model.

The My Lai, Black Hawk, and Abu Ghraib crises all had similar problems that can be attributed to military cultural deficiencies. The authoritarian culture spawned the "following orders" defense in the My Lai and Abu Ghraib cases. Also, the terms whitewash and scapegoat were present in the media frames of every case. It was difficult to pin blame on the upper echelons of leadership in all three cases. The reasons for this were not found in this study, but the researcher recommends this topic be researched in a future study.

Throughout the three case studies, the military steadily improved its ethical deliberation. In the case of My Lai, the military did not adhere to any ethical standards found in the TARES test. The military learned that ethical deficiencies negatively

affected the image and war support in the age of television and instant communications. In the Black Hawk case, and even more so during Abu Ghraib, the military knew that their messages could be transmitted globally in a matter of minutes. Similarly, lies and truth hiding can also be uncovered instantaneously. If this occurs, the original crisis is no longer in the limelight. Once uncovered, the cover up is the top story and the military is held to account. Even though the military has been accused of lacking ethical fortitude, the researcher discovered that the military receives an entire block of ethics instruction during public affairs training. Ethics are also emphasized in other military training schools. One interviewee who works for a major corporation noted that ethical deliberation was utilized in the military more often than in his civilian public relations job (R. Fitzgerald, personal communication, February 6, 2008).

The military's tendency to classify information for operational security reasons prevented the proactive disclosure of information and full implementation of the TARES test during the Abu Ghraib case. Operational security is a military cultural phenomenon that has always been present during war. This runs counter to the openness of a democratic free press. The researcher discovered that the military instructs public affairs personnel to be open and proactive with the media, and to understand why the media functions the way it does. Mutual understanding can overcome the cultural clash, which is an observation the interview participants noted. The information subsidy is omnipresent during interactions between the media and military public affairs officers. The bureaucratic culture of the military slows down the subsidy transaction, but forthrightness to the reporter often mitigates resentment.

The military justice system was a sore point for the interview participants. Military judge advocates have a tendency to prevent public affairs personnel from communicating openly with the public. The judge advocate usually wins the argument because he or she has laws, regulations, and superior deliberating skills to sway the commander. In all three cases, the military justice system caused confusion for the media. Reporters did not understand why personnel involved with the crisis situations didn't face harsher punishments. The military attempted to persuade the media into understanding that nonjudicial punishments, such as a reprimand, were harsh and hurt the military member's career. Reporters failed to understand the argument and consequently publicized the whitewash frame. In each case, the public overwhelmingly supported the few military personnel who faced criminal prosecution.

In all three case studies, technological innovations caused negative ramifications for the military's crisis communication tactics. During the Vietnam War, television sets were prevalent in a majority of the American households. Americans heard the military and politicians spouting positive messages as the reporters on the ground were reporting the opposite. This contradiction was readily apparent on television, and the military consequently lost its credibility. The *CNN* effect took hold in the aftermath of the Gulf War. After the accidental shootdown of two Black Hawk helicopters in 1994, the military was immediately on television apologizing and making calls for accountability. The same was true in the Abu Ghraib case. Technology also made front-page headlines in the My Lai and Abu Ghraib cases. Photographs documented the graphic events that

took place. The military and personnel on the ground could not deny the truth because the reality of the situation was recorded for all to see.

Limitations in this study included the lack of varied interview participants. The researcher could not connect with a Defense Information School instructor. An instructor could have explained the reasoning behind the instruction and additional perspective to the training materials. In focusing on the military-media culture clash, a reporter who had experience working with the military should have been interviewed.

This study demonstrated that the military has a robust crisis communication program, but military cultural considerations prevent public affairs personnel from being fully effective in its crisis communication tactics. The authoritarian culture slows down response times to media queries, which presents an increasing liability as communication technologies evolve and consumer generated media becomes a popular source for information. The researcher recommends that all military personnel, particularly commanders, receive media literacy and in-depth ethics training. Reporters should also be educated about the military and the constraints it faces during wartime. The researcher found that the military received negative media coverage because it viewed the media as the enemy – not as a conduit for communicating its message. The military must find an ethical means for harnessing new media technologies to its advantage. Otherwise, its crisis communication program is doomed to fail when put into practice.

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## APPENDIX A

### DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE PRINCIPLES OF INFORMATION JP 3-61

It is the responsibility of the Department of Defense to make available timely and accurate information so that the public, Congress, and the news media may assess and understand facts about national security and defense strategy.

Requests for information from organizations and private citizens shall be answered quickly. In carrying out that Department of Defense (DOD) policy, the following Principles of Information shall apply:

Information shall be made fully and readily available, consistent with statutory requirements, unless its release is precluded by national security constraints or valid statutory mandates or exceptions.

A free flow of general and military information shall be made available, without censorship or propaganda, to the men and women of the Armed Forces of the United States and their dependents.

Information will not be classified or otherwise withheld to protect the government from criticism or embarrassment.

Information shall be withheld only when disclosure would adversely affect national security or threaten the safety or privacy of the men and women of the Armed Forces.

DOD's obligation to provide the public with information on DOD major programs may require detailed public affairs planning and coordination in the DOD and with the other government agencies.



## APPENDIX B

### AIR FORCE CRISIS PROCEDURES AFI 35-101

#### Section 7B—Crisis Procedures and Release of Information

7.5. Procedures. In significant weapon system mishaps, Public Affairs should be in place at the PA office, the accident scene, and the installation command post.

7.5.1. When the accident occurs off the installation in an area accessible to the media, a PA person must arrive at the site at the same time as the OSC and the IRF. Public Affairs officers must ensure unit contingency plans include transportation to the accident site via arrival with the DCG during on-base accidents/incidents.

7.5.2. Regardless of location, establish communication at once between the on-scene PA representative and those at the installation. This permits Public Affairs at the site and those at the PA office to coordinate information for release on a timely basis.

7.5.3. The host Public Affairs office must establish procedures to notify a tenant unit commander of any follow-on PA actions in accidents involving that commander's resources.

7.5.4. In accidents or incidents likely to require Public Affairs support for extended periods of time, or likely to exceed the capabilities of the responsible PA office, Public Affairs should:

7.5.4.1. Set up a 24-hour news media operations center. If other federal, state, and local response force Public Affairs officers are on scene, the media center should be a joint operation.

7.5.4.2. Give Air Force news releases about the accident to state, local, or other officials responsible for informing the public and media, or who needs the releases for any other purpose.

7.5.4.3. Anticipate public concerns and issues news releases before such concerns distort public perceptions.

7.5.4.4. Ask the next higher PA echelon for additional people and equipment if needed.

7.5.4.5. Have each PA staff member record media, and public queries on AF Form 39, Response to Query.

7.5.4.6. Use a central log to record: Time of accident, important developments, time of releases, policy received from higher PA echelons and how or when it was implemented, and thumbnail sketches of most significant queries and events.

7.5.4.7. Alert switchboard operators to direct all news media and public calls to the media center.

7.5.4.8. Ensure major command and Air Force News Service are included as addressees on initial information release and other publicly releasable information and images.

## APPENDIX C

### PAQC ACCIDENT RESPONSE GUIDELINES

1. We must acknowledge that an accident or incident has occurred.
2. The time standard for getting out the first release after an accident is ONE HOUR after the first notification.
3. On military installations, names of the dead and injured in an accident cannot be released until 24 hours after the next of kin have been notified.
4. We must provide accurate information.
5. We must not interpret or speculate about the cause of an accident until it is known and made public by an investigation board. Sometimes, that can take several weeks or even longer.
6. You must attribute information when required.

## APPENDIX D

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is your military background (rank, positions, assignments, etc)?
2. Have you deployed as a PA practitioner? If yes, when and where?
3. Have you worked at the headquarters level as a PA practitioner? If yes, when and where?
4. Have you instructed at DINFOS? If yes, what subject did you instruct?
5. What military PA courses have you attended?
6. Did you receive crisis communication training while in the military? If yes, describe the training.
7. Did you receive ethics training while in the military? If yes, describe the training.
8. Have you worked in military media relations? If yes, describe your overall impression of working with the media. If there was conflict, where did it originate?
9. Have you had to publicly respond to crisis? If yes, describe each event, your role, the military's response, and the resulting media coverage.
10. If you communicated during a crisis, did you or your co-workers ethically deliberate communication tactics? If yes, describe the deliberation in as much detail as possible.
11. In your opinion, what effect does military culture have on the military's ability to effectively communicate internally and externally during a crisis?
12. In your opinion, what effect does the military justice system have on the military's ability to effectively communicate internally and externally during a crisis?
13. In your opinion, what effect does technology have on the military's ability to effectively communicate internally and externally during a crisis?