Professionalism in War Reporting: A Correspondent's View

By Tom Gjelten

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The news media have long been players in the drama of war. The Spanish–American War of 1898 was provoked in part by a jingoistic press in the United States. Seventy years later, the lack of public support for the U.S. effort in Vietnam was blamed in part on correspondents who looked skeptically at Pentagon war claims. But rarely has the work of war correspondents come under the kind of scrutiny it does today. It is no longer enough for journalists not to aggravate conflicts; now we should help end them . . . or so argue the "conflict resolution" experts. The smaller the war and the wider our reach, the more impact our reporting is believed to have. Advances in information technology have made it possible for journalists to report instantaneously from remote locations. With the downscaling of conflict in the post–Cold War era, meanwhile, there are more wars to choose from. Some get covered and some do not, and coverage decisions by news organizations may help determine how the conflicts end.

In 1984, television pictures shaped the international response to the war and famine in Ethiopia. By 1994, the effect of news coverage in conflict situations was considered so significant as to be factored into military planning. During the Haiti intervention that year, the U.S. Atlantic Command "Operation Room" was dominated not by maps and charts, but by four television sets. Officers tracking and coordinating military operations wanted to monitor in real time all broadcasts concerning the intervention, so they could react accordingly.

The diplomats, military officers, policymakers, and aid workers who examine the performance of the news media are increasingly critical in their assessment. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, then the UN secretary-general, argued in a June 1996 speech delivered in Germany that "through the issues, people and places it chooses to highlight—or to ignore—the media today has enormous influence over the international agenda." This new reality, Boutros-Ghali said, "has drastically transformed the conduct of international relations, the age-old practice of diplomacy."[1] He left little doubt that it displeased him.

As a U.S. journalist reporting the war in Bosnia, I was surprised by the harsh reviews our work there sometimes received. For example, *Foreign Policy*, the quarterly journal published by the

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, carried an article in its winter 1993–94 issue alleging that in the Yugoslav conflict, "the press itself has been a large part of the bad news." In Bosnia, the writer claimed, the news media deliberately attempted to influence policy, to the point that they "became a movement, co-belligerents no longer disguised as noncombatant and nonpartisan."[2]

Humanitarian aid agencies, finding their own activities increasingly affected by news coverage, complain that we in the media focus too much on tragedy and misery, that we sensationalize the news, and that we oversimplify complicated stories. Some critics say news organizations should go so far as to change the way they approach their work. A representative from the "Bread for the World" aid agency suggests that journalists dedicate themselves "to re-imagining the purposes of the profession," with the aim of becoming more humanitarian in their outlook.[3] People working on programs and strategies to prevent or resolve conflicts recommend that we think more about the impact our reporting may have on a conflict's development. Human rights monitoring organizations insist that we be aggressive in uncovering atrocities and injustice.

Advocates of a truly free press are understandably wary of calls for journalists to steer their reporting deliberately toward some broader social good. Journalists cannot always anticipate the consequences a story may have—and those consequences should not be our chief concern. Our obligation is to report the news as we see it, not as diplomats or government leaders or aid workers would prefer to have it reported. Our guiding principle should be to tell the truth, without trying first to identify what news is helpful or harmful.

But the changes that heighten the impact of international news reporting do have implications for the way journalists who work abroad should be trained, assigned, and monitored. We need to understand the interaction between all the parties in a conflict or crisis situation, the news media included. While this is not a time for us journalists to "re-imagine" our profession, we do need to be more diligent in our reporting, more sophisticated in our description of world events, more thoughtful in our analysis, and more clear about the role we actually play. In short, we need to be more professional.

WAR AND THE MEDIA IN THE POSTMODERN ERA

As a foreign correspondent in the 1980's, I covered war and revolution in Central America. In the 1990s, I reported the violent breakup of Yugoslavia. Although these two regional conflicts were only a few years apart, they were fundamentally different in character. In Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, the opposing sides were easily distinguished by ideology, with sharply contrasting views on how society should be organized and resources distributed. Though the wars were local, they fitted neatly into the wider East–West struggle. The Soviet Union, Cuba, and other socialist countries generally supported one side and the United States the other. In Croatia and Bosnia, however, the parties were not easy to place along a left–right spectrum. These were not conflicts in which issues of land ownership or worker rights had much importance, and they were mostly unconnected to any broader global rivalry. War in the former Yugoslavia was for the most part provoked by local demagogues who, in a time of rising social and economic discontent, saw benefits to be gained by turning people against their neighbors.

The Central American and Yugoslav wars belonged to different eras, the one before and the other after the end of the Cold War. For now, the Yugoslav pattern is prevailing in conflicts around the world, from Central Africa to East Timor. State disintegration is an increasingly common phenomenon. Old ethnic rivalries are rekindled, even when linguistic and cultural differences between groups are slight. Much of the fighting takes place between and among civilians, and it is especially brutal. Rules of war and international humanitarian conventions are ignored. The conflicts create enormous problems for neighboring states, yet the outside world is not sure whether, when, or how to intervene. At times, in its primitiveness, warfare seems to be reverting to the style of past centuries. But these are also Information Age conflicts, and one of their defining characteristics is the key role they leave to the news media, both local and international. In Central America, journalists observed but did not significantly affect the conflicts. In Bosnia and Rwanda, the news media were key players, on both the local and international scenes.

The outcomes of these small, postmodern wars may depend as much on how they are perceived as on how they are fought. To mobilize his people, a leader must portray a conflict as a fight for collective survival, and this means getting people to identify with an exclusive group, defined perhaps by religion or ethnicity. Hate-mongering demagogues in Rwanda and Bosnia used the local media to foment interethnic conflict and civil war. The media presentation of the conflicts at the international level was just as important, because it influenced the response of the external players. Governments and international agencies are finding it increasingly difficult to stay abreast of developments in regional hot spots, and are coming to rely to a greater extent on the information provided by international news agencies.

In the early months of war in Chechnya and Bosnia, few foreign governments had representatives positioned on the ground to report back to their capitals on the unfolding conflicts. Many foreign journalists, however, had access to a portable satellite telephone or telex and were prepared, sometimes foolishly, to head straight for the most troubled areas. Under such circumstances, press reports may provide the only information available to the outside world. The more unfamiliar the locale, the more important the media's role may be. By one estimate, in 1995 there were 30 ongoing civil wars around the world that were each claiming at least 1,000 lives per year.[4] Since these conflicts can no longer be neatly placed within a Cold War framework, policymakers and opinion leaders must analyze them on a case-by-case basis, and press reports can be helpful in this regard.

Whether the United States or other Western countries should intervene in these small, localized conflicts is by no means clear, as can be seen by the vigorous debate over U.S. policy in Somalia, Bosnia, Haiti, and Central Africa. In 1994, Defense Secretary William Perry distinguished between situations involving "vital" national interests, which require a readiness to risk military action, "important but not vital" interests, where force should be used more selectively, and "humanitarian" interests, where force should be used only if needed to deal with a catastrophe.[5] With such mushy formulations, debates over whether to intervene or to stay out of a particular crisis are bound to be contentious; in the absence of a consensus, policy decisions may well be influenced by the pattern of news coverage that the crisis receives.

Pictures of starving children shamed the Bush administration into sending American forces to Mogadishu to help distribute food aid. Months later, pictures of a dead U.S. Army Ranger being dragged down a Mogadishu street prompted the Clinton administration to bring the troops back home. "The media got us into Somalia and then got us out," argued John Shattuck, the assistant secretary of state for human rights and democracy.[6] Some analysts, diplomats, and government officials go so far as to suggest that the news media (especially television) are the major driving force these days behind intervention policy. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright has argued that television's influence is so profound that CNN could be seen as "the sixteenth member" of the UN Security Council.

This "CNN effect" on policymaking, of course, can be overstated. After an extensive analysis of the relation between news coverage and U.S. policy overseas, journalist Warren Strobel of the *Washington Times* concluded that televised images "hold no power to force U.S. policymakers to intervene in a civil conflict where there is no clear national interest." News reports are most likely to prompt a government response, Strobel argued, when government officials are themselves undecided about what policy to follow in a crisis situation and when the presumed costs of intervening are relatively low.[7] Similarly, the role news reports play in shaping public attitudes toward a conflict is difficult to isolate and measure precisely. Americans were certainly far more aware of Bosnia in 1994 than in 1991, but news stories apparently had a cumulative, rather than immediate, effect on public opinion. A study by the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press found little correspondence between the month-to-month pattern of U.S. reporting of the Bosnian war over that three-year period and the fluctuating level of public interest in the conflict.[8]

To the extent that news reports do influence public attitudes, the effect can be subtle. Africa specialists have argued, for example, that negative reporting from Africa erodes the domestic constituency for U.S. involvement in the continent, which explains in turn the small amount of U.S. assistance there.[9] This would be the "CNN effect" in reverse, when television images of human tragedy, in Warren Strobel's words, "add to the viewer's frustration and cynicism about the ability of his or her government to do anything about the world's seemingly unsolvable and ever-present problems."[10]

If government officials are more likely to be influenced by news coverage when they are uncertain what to do about an overseas crisis, the same is probably true for the general public. Clearly, local leaders try hard to manipulate news coverage to suit their ends. If the followers of Somali warlord Mohammed Farah Aidid wanted to be rid of the U.S. troops in their country, they could not have chosen a more effective strategy than to arrange the filming of the dead U.S. Army Ranger being dragged down the street. Similarly, the military regime in Haiti cleverly staged a mob protest on the Port-au-Prince seashore, knowing well that television pictures of the scene would discourage U.S. officials from sending in the troops aboard the USS *Harlan County*, which was waiting offshore. The Mogadishu and Port-au-Prince experiences were humiliating for the U.S. military, and the fear that they might be repeated in Bosnia was one of the factors explaining the Pentagon's reluctance to intervene there.

Responsible news coverage in crisis or conflict situations requires that the competing agendas of all the interested parties be kept constantly in mind. During the fall 1996 crisis in eastern Zaire,

for example, estimates of the number of Rwandan refugees remaining in Zairean territory varied widely—and much depended on which estimates were quoted. On the eve of a major meeting to plan an international military mission in Central Africa, the U.S. ambassador to Rwanda, Robert Gribbin, said he believed that most of the refugees who wanted to return to Rwanda had already done so. Others, he said, were still deciding whether to go back, "but those groups appear to be in the ten to twenty thousands rather than vast numbers."

Gribbin was immediately challenged by the president of Refugees International, Lionel Rosenblatt, who called the ambassador's comments "disgraceful" and demanded his immediate recall. Rosenblatt claimed that as many as 600,000 refugees were still missing in Zaire.[11] Behind the conflicting numbers were different policy agendas. At the time, the United States was distinctly cool to the idea of a mission in Zaire, while Rosenblatt's organization was loudly advocating intervention. In such situations, professional news reporting requires that the various policy interests be considered while assessing information. If news coverage is unduly influenced by any of the interested parties, portrayals of the conflict will be distorted and could lead to misguided policies. The case of Bosnia illustrates how challenging reporting under these circumstances can be.

BOSNIA: RIVAL INTERESTS, COMPETING AGENDAS

Whether the news media are praised or criticized for their reporting of a story depends to a great extent on whose interests are served by the way the story is covered. Boutros-Ghali made clear in his June 1996 speech in Germany that he regarded the media as working at cross-purposes with peace negotiators. "Traditionally, the cause of diplomacy has been for conciliation," he said, "which often requires talks to take place outside the public eye. The cause of media coverage has been for public information. Privacy versus publicity. The press seeks immediacy. Good diplomacy, however, requires the opposite. . . . The media wants action and drama; diplomats often see that no action may be the safer course for the moment." It is because of these competing interests, Boutros-Ghali suggested, that conflict mediators tend to be unhappy with crisis news coverage.

But international officials with other priorities view the press more favorably. Richard Goldstone, the South African judge who served as the first chief prosecutor for the UN war crimes tribunals for Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, declared upon finishing his term of office that he felt "very warm gratitude and appreciation" for the attention that the press gave to war crime prosecutions. "Without the media," Goldstone said, "there wouldn't have been ad hoc tribunals at all. The media built up public pressure for them."[12]

Those of us who covered the war in Bosnia quickly discovered that the various players in the conflict all had their own action agendas and consequently their own notions of how the war story should be reported. The lead international organization was the UN mission, consisting of the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) and its affiliated civilian operations. The UN assignment, as defined by the UN Security Council, was to ensure the delivery of food and other assistance to the afflicted civilian population. In theory, feeding civilians should have been a neutral act; however, given the circumstances of the Bosnian war, an aggressive humanitarian intervention would have weakened the military advantage enjoyed by the Bosnian Serb forces.

Winning Serb consent for UN humanitarian operations in Bosnia was therefore a major challenge.

By the time the mission began in the summer of 1992, the Bosnian Serb army already had control of about two-thirds of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Most of the Muslims and Croats had fled to government-held territory. A majority of Bosnia's population was therefore crowded onto about a third of Bosnia's territory. The Serb army had closed all roads leading in and out of the encircled areas. Where they could, the Serbs shut off the electricity and water supply. They positioned artillery and infantry on all sides of the enclaves. Bosnian government forces might well have followed the same strategy but lacked the opportunity. No Serb-controlled area anywhere in Bosnia was similarly vulnerable. In the spring of 1993, the United Nations declared six endangered Bosnian towns to be "safe areas" deserving of international protection. All six were in government-controlled territory—a reflection of reality, not Security Council bias.

Aid workers in Bosnia therefore faced a totally imbalanced situation. An impartial humanitarian operation to deliver food and other assistance to all civilians who needed help would be lopsided in its effect. If diligently implemented, such an operation would frustrate Serb efforts to capture the besieged enclaves, thus blocking Serb war aims and bolstering the position of the Bosnian government. The UN Security Council seemed to recognize that the Serb forces might oppose the intervention, because most of the resolutions defining the mission were passed under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which empowers the Security Council to authorize the use of force. Security Council Resolution 770 ordered that states take "all necessary measures" to facilitate aid deliveries in Bosnia.

But the countries contributing UNPROFOR troops did not provide the resources necessary for a robust interpretation of their mandate, and UN commanders chose to view their mission as a traditional peacekeeping operation, meaning it could be implemented only with the *consent* of both parties. If they were to be successful in their humanitarian work under the circumstances, UN officials in Bosnia had to maintain good relations with the Serb leadership, and that aim became an overriding mission interest.

On the Serb side, the priorities were to block outside military intervention and secure a peace settlement that consolidated and secured their most important territorial gains. By July 1992, Serb war objectives were largely realized. Serb army commanders still coveted the remaining Muslim enclaves in eastern Bosnia, because they stood between Serb-held territory in Bosnia and Serbia itself, and Serb political leaders still wanted to secure a portion of Sarajevo for their "capital," but they were willing to trade away some territory to achieve those goals. The Bosnian Croats, like the Serbs, were relatively satisfied with their situation and anxious for a peace settlement.

The Muslim-dominated Bosnian government in Sarajevo was in the weakest position. Having lost both population and territory, government forces were in a life-or-death struggle. They needed to recover territory if they were to survive, but were in no position to make demands at the negotiating table. A peace settlement based on the existing front lines would have sealed their doom. Former British foreign secretary David Owen, dispatched by the European Union to negotiate a peace settlement in Bosnia, argued in his memoirs that a "legitimate difference

between Muslim and Serb interests" made the arrangement of cease-fires a difficult task. "The Muslims," Owen said, "could not accept the present confrontation line: therefore it was in their interest to destabilize it by provoking incidents and planning breaches. The Serb interest, by contrast, was in maintaining the status quo."[13] Given the desperate circumstances, the Bosnian government's only hope was to turn the tide of war, but the government forces were at a serious military disadvantage. Unlike the Serbs and Croats, the Bosnian Muslims had no neighboring patron state on which they could depend for military aid, so the international arms embargo hurt them disproportionately. Their fortunes would change only if they received outside military assistance in one form or another, and that goal ranked near the top of their wartime agenda.

Western governments, meanwhile, had interests of their own. The war in Bosnia was an annoyance, having produced a humanitarian crisis in the heart of southern Europe that could not be ignored. More than a million people were displaced from their homes and in need of emergency food and shelter. Economic activity was at a standstill, and the vast majority of the civilian population was dependent on food aid for their survival. The humanitarian assistance programs were costing millions of dollars a day. In addition, hundreds of thousands of refugees had crossed the borders of the former Yugoslavia and were seeking asylum in Western European countries.

Some Western leaders also argued that Serb military aggression and "ethnic cleansing" operations in Bosnia should be punished, if not reversed, lest a bad example be set for other governments in the region; however, no Western government wanted to intervene militarily in Bosnia. The main Western government interests in Bosnia, therefore, were to arrange as just a peace settlement as possible, as quickly as possible, and to dampen pressure for military action. David Owen and Cyrus Vance, the UN envoys (later replaced by Norwegian diplomat Thorvald Stoltenberg), were single-minded in their pursuit of a negotiated settlement. Owen in particular was quick to criticize any party that made his work more diffi cult.

Human rights and nongovernmental organizations had yet another agenda in Bosnia. Many of these groups believed that the end of the Cold War brought an opportunity to establish the primacy of international humanitarian law and universal human rights standards. Bosnia was a test case. This war produced the most horrific human rights abuses seen in Europe since the end of World War II. The human rights groups and advocacy organizations were determined that the world community acknowledge what was happening in Bosnia and stand up against the crimes being committed there.

For all these parties, their interests meant they favored a particular slant on the Bosnia story. UNPROFOR officials had a strategic interest in dissuading the Bosnia press corps from filing news reports that upset the Serb leadership and made humanitarian work more difficult. Serb leaders, hoping to discourage Western governments from intervening militarily, wanted the news media to portray the Bosnian conflict as intractable. The Bosnian government, anxious to prompt outside intervention, pressured journalists to dramatize the moral issues involved. Peace mediators and conflict resolvers hoped that war correspondents would consider the impact their news reports might have on peace negotiations.

As journalists, we had the responsibility of ignoring all these pressures as best we could. Our duty was to describe the conflict objectively and completely, without regard for whose interests were served by our reporting. Given the competing agendas in Bosnia, somebody was bound to be displeased by the news coverage, at one point or another.

WHOSE TRUTH TO TELL?

The competing agendas in Bosnia meant that all the involved parties—not just the Muslims, Serbs, and Croats—were regularly in conflict. A complete story of the war, for example, has to include an explanation of the antagonism between the UN mission and the Bosnian government in Sarajevo. It is only in the context of that troubled relationship that pronouncements by either side can be fully understood. An analysis of this conflict between the United Nations and Sarajevo also helps illustrate the challenge of reporting from a war zone in the 1990s.

THE UNPROFOR VIEW

The UN operation in Bosnia was directed by military and civilian officials who had served previously in traditional peacekeeping operations, and the outlook they brought to their work reflected their prior experience. They saw their mission generally as one of "keeping the belligerents apart," as Maj. Gen. Lewis MacKenzie of Canada, the first UNPROFOR commander in Bosnia, wrote in his memoir.[14] But the humanitarian assignment they were given in Bosnia was unusual, because it inevitably favored one party over the other. The discomfort UN officers felt at being active primarily on the Muslim side was deepened by the fact that the Bosnian government did not show much appreciation for the UNPROFOR mission.

Instinctively, many of the UN officers felt more at ease among Serb army commanders, who were career military men and treated them respectfully, than among Muslim commanders, few of whom had professional military training. The UN officers had neither the time, the resources, nor the responsibility to investigate the war's political or historical background, and they were unprepared to challenge explanations they heard in daily conversations. For example, a Canadian battalion commander based in Banja Luka in the fall of 1992 told visiting reporters that the Serbs' capture of the town of Jajce a few weeks earlier was understandable, "because it had been a predominately Serb city." When the reporters pointed out that Serbs constituted only 19 percent of the 1991 population in Jajce according to the federal Yugoslav census, the Canadian officer admitted he was only passing on what the local Serb army commander had told him during a tour of the city.[15]

The Canadian's perspective was not unusual; relatively few senior UN officers in Bosnia bothered to investigate seriously the origins of the conflict. "Well, it's springtime in the Balkans," Major General MacKenzie wrote his friends back in Canada, "and history is repeating itself as the various ethnic groups seek to exterminate each other."[16]

As Bosnian government officials voiced increasing dissatisfaction with the UNPROFOR mission in Sarajevo, relations between the two sides deteriorated. David Owen wrote in his memoir that "the prevailing view of the UN military commanders . . . was that UNPROFOR's worst problems

were with the Muslims." Owen said the UN officers blamed the government forces for most of the cease-fire violations in Bosnia. "These senior UN officers," Owen wrote,

were practical military men dealing with an appallingly difficult problem on the ground, inevitably seeing their role as preserving order and drawing on classic peacekeeping models from previous UN experience. What they had difficulty in appreciating was that order was exactly what the Bosnian Muslims, for perfectly understandable reasons, were against. Disorder and destabilization were essential parts of the Bosnian Muslim strategy.[17]

What Owen called a "destabilization" strategy, not surprisingly, was seen quite differently in Sarajevo. Bosnian army commanders were determined to break the siege one way or another, and—Owen is right—they were not content to leave their fate in the hands of the UN mission or the Geneva negotiations. Owen was deeply unpopular in Sarajevo, where he was seen as arrogant and condescending. Loyal Serbs and Croats served in the Bosnian government, and Bosnian leaders insisted they were committed to a multiethnic state and society, but Owen insisted on referring to the Sarajevo side simply as "the Muslims." In his memoir, Owen wrote that he "was very conscious of the Muslims' problem and tried to see the issue [of whether and when to negotiate] from their viewpoint," but he expressed much annoyance with the Sarajevo authorities, charging that they waged a "propaganda war" to highlight their suffering and provoke outside military intervention on their behalf.

IMPARTIALITY

The international news media in Bosnia were inevitably drawn into these conflicts, and neither the UN nor the government side was entirely happy with the way the Sarajevo story was told. UN officials were especially critical, alleging the media were inclined toward the government viewpoint. General Sir Michael Rose of Britain, UNPROFOR commander in 1994–95, expressed his view in a speech in London in March 1995. "It is of course quite understandable that a government struggling for survival should have a propaganda machine," Rose said. "It is not understandable that the international media should become part of that machine. Mischievous distortion of reality can only undermine the work of those who are pursuing the path towards peace."[18]

Rose's views were apparently widespread in the UN command, though other officers were reluctant to speak for attribution. Nik Gowing, a British journalist who studied Bosnia news coverage while on fellowship at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, reported that many of the UN officials he interviewed "questioned the picture painted by the media" in Sarajevo.[19] In another, anonymously offered commentary, a "senior UN official with significant responsibility in the former Yugoslavia" wrote in response to *Foreign Policy's* critique of Bosnia news coverage: "Most international personnel in the former Yugoslavia have been well aware" of a pattern of press partisanship in coverage. The press corps in Sarajevo "developed its own momentum and esprit. Much of it set out to invoke international military intervention against the Serb aggressors—a principal strategy, also of the Bosnian government. . . . [The] collective political fury of the Sarajevo-based press corps became legendary among all who had to deal with them."[20]

Such an accusation is not easily refuted, but it is important to note that most of the professional journalists assigned to Bosnia were veteran foreign correspondents with years of reporting from war zones around the world. Their prior experience—in Southeast Asia, Africa, Afghanistan, Central America, the Persian Gulf, and elsewhere—had hardly left them sentimental or easy to manipulate. It is undeniable that relations between the UNPROFOR command and the international press were often adversarial. At the daily briefings at UNPROFOR headquarters, reporters aggressively challenged the mission spokesman to be more forthright in his description of events on the ground and in his explanation of UNPROFOR's actions. UN officers in turn were often hostile toward the reporters.

At the root of this antagonism was the fact that the news media and the UN command had different, sometimes conflicting, responsibilities in Bosnia. The UNPROFOR staff were there to oversee the delivery of humanitarian assistance and promote a negotiated settlement of the war. They were soldiers, diplomats, and aid workers. Their work would not be judged, as our work would, on the basis of how well they understood the Bosnian conflict and explained it to the outside world.

The news media and the UN command both claimed to be impartial in their work, but that concept meant different things to each side. The UNPROFOR commanders, practical in their orientation, generally defined impartiality by reference to the opposing players in the conflict. With this approach, the UN mission needed to position itself in the middle between the adversaries and focus on maintaining the consent of both sides for whatever needed to be done. Journalists, with no aid to deliver or roads to keep open, had a more abstract notion of impartiality, based on facts and principles. For us, reporting impartially meant telling the truth, without regard for who was most affected by our reporting or who would be most angered by it.

This was the same approach Justice Goldstone followed in his war crimes prosecutions. "Being evenhanded in my opinion doesn't mean 'one for you and one for you and one for you,'" Goldstone said in a November 1995 interview. "Being evenhanded means treating similar atrocities in a similar way."[21] Using that guideline, the tribunal prosecutors indicted far more Serbs than Muslims or Croats, but they denied emphatically that they showed bias in the process.

The meaning of "impartiality" has also been debated in peacekeeping circles. Oxford University's Adam Roberts argued in a recent article that impartiality in UN peacekeeping "is no longer interpreted to mean, in every case, impartiality between the parties to a conflict. In some cases, the UN may, and perhaps should, be tougher with one party than another or give more aid to one side than another." Roberts suggested that another standard might be followed, based on "the idea that the UN represents a set of interests, values, and tasks that are distinct in some respects from those of any one belligerent party. *In some peacekeeping operations, 'impartiality' may mean not impartiality between the belligerents, but impartiality in carrying out UN Security Council decisions* [emphasis added]."[22]

Disagreement over which of these two approaches was proper in Bosnia was one of the factors contributing to tensions between the UNPROFOR command and the U.S. government. Susan Woodward, a former senior advisor to UN envoy Yasushi Akashi, expressed the UNPROFOR view in a paper published in May 1996, six months after the end of the UN peacekeeping

operation in Bosnia. "UNPROFOR unravelled," she wrote, "when it was required by Washington and NATO to act contrary to its mandate of impartiality and consent by taking sides with the Bosnian government and its army as the legitimate government and against the Bosnian Serbs."[23]

Many U.S. State Department officials countered that UNPROFOR was failing to act impartially, because it did not follow a single standard in its political dealings with the rival sides. They pointed, for example, to an agreement UN commanders negotiated with the Bosnian Serb leadership in June 1992, under which the United Nations was to provide the Serb side with 23 percent of all relief commodities flown to Sarajevo, regardless of whether the humanitarian needs on the Serb side justified that share. The same agreement gave Serb authorities the right to inspect each cargo delivered to Sarajevo by air or road and to approve or disapprove the shipments. The Bosnian government had no comparable rights with respect to aid delivered to Serb-held areas. An internal State Department report, leaked to the *New York Times*, accused the UN command in Sarajevo of seeking "to appease the Serb militias" in this manner. "Within Serb-controlled territories, it is the Serb `authorities,' not the UN, who decide how and to whom relief will be distributed," the report said.[24]

UNPROFOR MISINFORMATION

To the news media in Bosnia, with no professional obligation to satisfy one side or another, it sometimes appeared that UNPROFOR commanders were misrepresenting reality in their eagerness to maintain good relations with the Serbs. A good example was the effort by UNPROFOR commanders to promote the notion that Sarajevo was not actually besieged, because the Serb forces that encircled the city occasionally let UN convoys proceed through their lines. "There is no humanitarian siege," declared Brigadier Vere Hayes, chief of staff to the UNPROFOR commander in Bosnia, speaking in Sarajevo in August 1993.

Sarajevo-based reporters, astonished at the claim, badgered the UNPROFOR spokesman, Commander Barry Frewer of Canada, at a subsequent press briefing. Some reporters brought dictionaries to the briefing and read him the definition of "siege," challenging Frewer to explain how Sarajevo did not fit the criteria. But Frewer defended his superior's choice of words. "The Serbs have encircled the city," he acknowledged at one point. "They are in a position to bring force to bear on the city. You call it a siege. We say they are deployed in a tactically advantageous position."[25] The Sarajevo representative of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), seated next to Frewer at the briefing, promptly and publicly disagreed with the UNPROFOR assessment, as did the local representative of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which is the recognized international authority on humanitarian law. Both officials said their agencies did indeed consider Sarajevo to be under siege.

Why were the UNPROFOR commanders anxious to downplay Sarajevo's problems? At the time, the United States was pushing for NATO air strikes against Serb positions if moves by the Serb forces around Sarajevo threatened the "strangulation" of the city. The UNPROFOR commanders were opposed to air strikes, believing they would complicate UNPROFOR's work and expose the UNPROFOR troops to Serb retaliation. Blocking the NATO strikes was a top priority for UNPROFOR, and in their eagerness to pursue that objective, UNPROFOR officials were apparently willing to paint a distorted view of Sarajevo conditions.

Similarly, international mediators responsible for promoting peace in Bosnia had reason occasionally to shade the truth about developments in the country, or to keep them secret, if such an approach made negotiations easier. Typically, the main international players in the Bosnian conflict had responsibilities above and beyond their obligation to report accurately and completely what was happening in Bosnia. This was understandable, but it also meant that peacekeepers and diplomats were not necessarily credible news sources, a point that should be kept in mind while considering instances when UN officials and international journalists have provided conflicting accounts of the same events. Reporters could not assume that UN officials in Bosnia were better informed or more trustworthy as sources than were the representatives of nongovernmental organizations active there.

Among the UN officers whose declarations proved unreliable was Major General MacKenzie. MacKenzie was a well-respected UN officer, admired by his colleagues and countrymen, but he was not well informed about the Bosnian conflict. In his Sarajevo memoirs, MacKenzie reported that "60–65 percent" of Bosnia belonged to the Serb side before the war, "since many of them are farmers with relatively large tracts of land." This was an oft-repeated Serb propaganda claim, but it had no basis in fact, as enterprising reporters quickly discovered. MacKenzie went on to declare, "There was a lack of conclusive evidence that President [Slobodan] Milosevic in Belgrade was . . . providing [Bosnian Serb leader Radovan] Karadzic with significant military support." At the time (April 1992), paramilitary units under Milosevic's control were terrorizing Muslim communities in eastern Bosnia, and the Bosnian Serb army was being supplied from Belgrade and directed by Belgrade-based officers. The evidence of Milosevic's involvement in Bosnia was overwhelming and available to any reporter who bothered to track it down, and many did.

Misstating the facts in Bosnia could get a professional journalist in trouble, but MacKenzie had loftier concerns. "I'm not particularly interested in the long and complex history of this region," MacKenzie told François Mitterand in June 1992. "All that does is complicate the discussions I have with both sides. Our job is to try and achieve some semblance of a cease-fire, so we can deliver food and medicine."[26] In MacKenzie's view, he needed to establish roughly equal distance from all the "warring factions." As if to compensate for his assistance to the government side, MacKenzie felt obliged at times to disassociate himself from the Sarajevo authorities, according to his associates.

One incident MacKenzie mentioned repeatedly in private conversations with other military officials and with reporters and diplomats was the "Breadline Massacre" of May 27, 1992, when 22 people died and more than 100 were injured after two shells exploded in the midst of about 150 people queuing for bread on Vase Miskina street, a pedestrian walkway in the Sarajevo city center. A Sarajevo television crew arrived on the scene moments after the attack and filmed the carnage. The pictures were broadcast by CNN and other television networks around the world and brought the war in Sarajevo to the immediate attention of the international community, with most of the outrage directed at the Bosnian Serbs.

Serb commanders, however, denied they were responsible for the massacre and suggested that the Bosnian army was slaughtering its own civilian population for propaganda purposes. They had made similar claims earlier, but the Breadline Massacre was the bloodiest event of the war to

that point, and the Serb leaders were especially anxious to blame it on their Muslim enemies. The Belgrade newspaper *Politika*, a tool of the Milosevic regime, quoted an "expert in explosives" from the Yugoslav air force, as saying his analysis of televised reports from the massacre scene convinced him that the explosion was caused by a land mine triggered remotely. The "expert" reported that there were no traces of mortar craters on the scene and no signs of shrapnel damage on nearby walls, and that victims pictured in the television tapes were all injured below the waist—a pattern consistent, he argued, with a mine explosion but not a mortar blast. Other Serbian officials noted the "on the spot" appearance of the television crew and suggested that they had been standing by, waiting for the massacre to happen.

Journalists who pursued the story soon learned that much of the "evidence" of a remotely detonated mine was bogus. Hospital records showed that some of the bombing victims had upper-body and head wounds, and not just leg injuries as the Serbs had reported. There were two distinct craters on the sidewalk where people had been lined up for bread, and the bakery walls showed clear signs of shrapnel damage. The Sarajevo TV crew had not been waiting on the sidelines for the blast to occur; they had been filming an interview in an office about a block away from Vase Miskina and rushed to the scene only after hearing the explosion.

General MacKenzie, however, told visitors that he found the Serb claims believable, as he made clear later in his Sarajevo memoir.[27] In August 1992, MacKenzie left Bosnia, his tour of peacekeeping duty finished. On his way home, he stopped to brief U.S. officials in Washington and UN colleagues in New York. Shortly thereafter, a story headlined "Muslims `Slaughter Their Own People'" ran on the front page of the *Independent* in London, written by Leonard Doyle, the newspaper's New York–based UN correspondent. Doyle quoted a "UN official" as believing that the bombing of the breadline was "a command-detonated explosion, probably in a can." Colleagues of Doyle's later said he told them that MacKenzie was the principal source.

General MacKenzie, however, was in Belgrade at the time of the bombing, having led most UN personnel out of Sarajevo eleven days earlier in response to safety concerns. The UN mission in Sarajevo on May 27 was under the command of Col. John Wilson of New Zealand, MacKenzie's deputy, assisted by political officer Adnan Abdel Razek, a civilian. In separate interviews, both men denied having made any report suggesting that the Bosnian army might have been responsible. "We couldn't have," Wilson said. "We did no investigation and had no information about it." At the time, the UN mission in Sarajevo had no military observers. No witnesses or survivors were interviewed, and there was no analysis of the craters.

According to Abdel Razek, details of the Serb claim that the massacre was staged were relayed to MacKenzie and other UN officials in Belgrade after Yugoslav army officers laid out the theory during a visit to the UN headquarters in Sarajevo. Upon his return to Sarajevo, MacKenzie told his fellow UN officers that in his view the Serb claim of a Muslim set-up "made sense." At least one UN officer cautioned MacKenzie later that the Serb story was not supported by the evidence, but MacKenzie clung to his suspicions.

The *Independent* report on the breadline bombing became one of the best-known articles of the Bosnian war, particularly among people sympathetic to the Serb cause. The theory that the Muslims were responsible for the massacre, having been spread within UN circles by General

MacKenzie, persisted after his departure. Some UN officials believe it to this day, despite the absence of evidence.

The failure of the Sarajevo-based press corps to report the story of UN officers blaming the Bosnian army for the Breadline Massacre has been cited repeatedly as evidence that the news media were prejudiced against the Serb side. But the opposite argument could also be made, that the story revealed a biased perspective on the part of the UNPROFOR commander. A UN official who served with him in Bosnia said MacKenzie was prepared to believe the Serb charge of Muslim responsibility for the May 27 Vase Miskina shelling because at the time he was looking for something he could pin on the Bosnian government. "Psychologically, he needed it," the UN officer said. "We had been blaming the Serbs for everything, and it was uncomfortable for MacKenzie. He felt this need to balance it."

DISINTERESTED REPORTING

Such experiences led journalists in Bosnia to regard unproven UNPROFOR claims with a healthy skepticism. UN officials, we learned, were not above spreading hearsay allegations or rumors, some of which made it back to their home countries and were recirculated there by domestic reporters. As professional journalists, we believed we were able to report developments in Bosnia more objectively and accurately than many military officers could, because we were trained to do so and because we did not have competing responsibilities. We had no aid to deliver across front lines, and no "discussions" to maintain. Unlike MacKenzie, we did not worry whether our reports might "complicate" our relations with the opposing sides.

For the sake of accuracy and fairness, journalists in Bosnia needed to challenge any interpretation of events there that reflected the agenda of an interested party rather than the reality on the ground. We were obliged, for example, to report that the United States and other Western governments routinely exaggerated the importance of "ancient hatreds" in Bosnia in an effort to portray the conflict as beyond resolution and thus to deflect pressure to intervene there. As a presidential candidate, Bill Clinton argued that the Serbs in Bosnia were engaged in "what appears to be a deliberate and systematic extermination of human beings based on their ethnic origins,"[28] and that the United States could not afford to ignore it. But as president, Clinton apparently became convinced that the Pentagon, the U.S. Congress, and the American public would not support a military intervention in Bosnia, and his characterization of the war then changed.

Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times* called attention to the shift in an April 1993 article headlined "Bosnia Reconsidered: Clinton Administration Recasts a Conflict from a Historic Crime to an Ancient Feud." Administration officials, Friedman noted, "concede that they have begun to talk about Bosnia differently, to cast the problem there less as a moral tragedy—which would make American inaction immoral—and more as a tribal feud that no outsider could hope to settle."[29] In fact, interethnic tensions in Bosnia had dissipated considerably since World War II. One out of four marriages registered in 1991, the year before the war broke out, were between partners of different ethnic backgrounds. It was the highest such rate on record in Bosnia. U.S. diplomats based in the former Yugoslavia readily acknowledged that the administration's

characterization of the war as motivated by ancient hatreds reflected political considerations rather than the analysis offered from the field.

In June 1995, when the UN operation was in serious jeopardy and the United States was under intense pressure from European allies to send American troops to Bosnia either to bolster the UN peacekeepers or to assist in their withdrawal, President Clinton declared that conflict between Serbs, Croats, and Muslims in Bosnia dated "at least going back to the eleventh century."[30] In fact, there were no Muslims in Bosnia until the late fifteenth century, and no ethnic or religious warfare in the country until the nineteenth century . . . When challenged to explain the president's statement, National Security Advisor Anthony Lake told National Public Radio that the president was merely trying to point out "that this is indeed an intractable conflict with deep historical roots. . . . What the president is saying is, 'Just understand this doesn't get settled overnight.'"[31]

The news media did not have to worry about the consequences of readers or listeners underestimating the difficulty of ending the Bosnian war. Our concern was to report truthfully, and to have exaggerated the intractability of the conflict or twisted its history, for whatever reason, would have been misleading. Most experienced war correspondents in Bosnia concluded that the conflict was rooted in the political and economic crisis that befell Yugoslavia in the late 1980s and early 1990s, that it could have been prevented were it not for nationalist demagogues such as Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia and Franjo Tudjman in Croatia, that much of the fighting was directed from outside Bosnia, and that the Bosnian Serb forces were responsible for the greatest share of war crimes and human rights violations, most of them committed in the course of efforts to "cleanse" their territory of the non-Serb population. We reported the "ethnic cleansing" story, with the associated massacres and detention camps, without any obligation to say what the world should do about the situation.

The allegation that we were reporting, as the *Foreign Policy* critic claimed, so as "to force governments to intervene militarily" in Bosnia was made many times, usually by people opposed to intervention. It is true that we did not report the war the way some critics of intervention wanted it described: We generally did not present it as a civil war between ethnic "factions" that had fought one another for centuries and were equally responsible for atrocities—and we did not do so because that analysis was wrong. It is also true that many, probably most, of the experienced foreign correspondents in Bosnia came to believe that outside military intervention of some kind was warranted. But this fact did not mean that their reporting was scripted to make the case for intervention, any more than personal political opinions among Capitol Hill reporters necessarily bias their reports on Congress.

A key test of objectivity was whether the Bosnia-based press corps reported stories that undermined arguments for intervention or that cast the Bosnian government (the principal advocate of intervention) in an uncomplimentary light. We were obliged to report, for example, that Bosnian government officials occasionally misled the U.S. Congress and other institutions in an effort to win Western support for intervention. In interviews and speeches, Bosnian vice president Ejup Ganic insisted that his government wanted nothing more from the West than the right to import arms for its own defense, even if it meant an end to the UN operation in Bosnia. Senator Robert Dole, one of Bosnia's best friends in the U.S. Congress, called attention to the

Ganic promise in a 1994 Senate floor speech. "All they want us to do is lift the embargo," Dole said. "No American troops, no air strikes, nothing, nothing, nothing but lifting the embargo."

The Ganic assurances were disingenuous, however. Behind the scenes, the Bosnian government would *not* allow Western governments to lift the arms embargo and then walk away from Bosnia. Bosnia's ambassador to the United Nations, Mohamed Sacirbey, acknowledged the point in an interview. "They can't try to drop it back on our lap," Sacirbey said. "I think they have to continue to carry the responsibility of maintaining at least some level of security for the most exposed civilian centers."[32]

Similarly, Bosnian Muslim leaders exaggerated their determination to preserve a unitary Bosnian state where people of all nationalities would be treated alike. They argued that supporting their struggle was the best way to oppose "apartheid" and "fascism" in the heart of Europe. But while making those arguments abroad, Muslim authorities in Sarajevo and other parts of Bosnia were systematically discriminating against citizens of Serb and Croat background, and they were building a state in which Muslim interests would be paramount. They established close ties with Iran and other Islamic states and invited Islamic *mujahideen* fighters to join Bosnian army units. The international news media in Sarajevo needed to report these stories as aggressively as we highlighted cowardice on the part of UNPROFOR, diplomatic dithering, and Serb or Croat war crimes.

The goal in all these cases was for us to report disinterestedly. All the other players in the Bosnia story had their own agendas to advance, but we needed to maintain our independence. Richard Goldstone, as chief prosecutor of the international war crimes tribunal, suggested a model in his description of his role vis-à-vis that of peace mediators. Many analysts warned Goldstone that his prosecutions could undermine negotiations to end the war in Bosnia, but he insisted that a peace agreement was not his concern. "Of course it's my business as a world citizen and as a concerned human being," Goldstone said, "but as a prosecutor I've been given a job and a duty by the Security Council, and it's not for me to decide to do it in a half-hearted manner or to suspend it or not to do it."[33] In an ideal world, journalists would adopt the same disciplined perspective in their work.

WAR REPORTING AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

The question of what constitutes responsible war reporting is especially complicated when we are dealing with atrocities and preventable human suffering. We journalists have always had a difficult time deciding whether professional ethics require that we care about the people we cover or remain indifferent to their plight. Critics of our performance in war and crisis situations suggest that we should consider the impact of our reporting; some critics even propose that we should try to be more constructive in our approach. We instinctively resist arguments that we should be more "socially responsible," having seen how authoritarian governments around the world have used that demand to muzzle an irksome free press. Moreover, we have faith that good journalism intrinsically serves the public interest. But we need to think more carefully about the responsibilities we have, individually and professionally, when we find ourselves in a place where crimes of war are occurring and where our actions as journalists and as people may change the course of events.

Most journalists want their reporting to make a difference in the world. War correspondents would have little reason to risk their lives for a story if they did not believe that some larger goal were served by getting the news to their readers, listeners, or viewers. Reporting the wars in the former Yugoslavia, Central Africa, and Chechnya was for many of us an impassioning personal experience. We were among the first to learn that great atrocities had been committed and to witness the terrible human suffering that came in the aftermath. Having seen such things, we had to decide what reaction was appropriate. Lindsey Hilsum, a reporter for Independent Television News in the United Kingdom who covered the mass killing of Tutsis in Rwanda, decided to testify before the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. "It was not my responsibility as a journalist," she later explained. "My role as a journalist could even have been compromised by my testifying. But I also have responsibilities as a human being."[34] A journalist who witnesses the commission of a crime is not absolved of the responsibility to report the crime to the proper legal authorities.

Roy Gutman, who won a Pulitzer Prize for revealing the existence of Serb-run concentration camps in Bosnia, hoped his stories would save lives. "You've got to do everything in your power to stop these things," Gutman said, "and exposing it is one of the best ways to do it."[35] Gutman is careful, however, to limit the journalist's role: "Our job is to supply the facts so other people can make the judgments. The worst thing is to step across the line and recommend what should be done."[36]

Some media analysts argue that journalists should maintain total moral detachment. Former newsman Marvin Kalb (currently directing the Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard) complained in a recent book that some journalists in Bosnia wrote their stories "for the specific purpose of affecting national policy," a practice he criticized as a departure from the standard of objectivity. "To the degree that this change in professional attitude is simply a limited response to the anguish of covering a truly dreadful human tragedy such as the events in Bosnia," Kalb wrote, "this may be understandable though still regrettable. But if reporters are now to adopt a moral attitude toward their stories, then the public is almost certain to be shortchanged."[37]

As a veteran journalist, however, Kalb should have known that adopting a "moral attitude" in journalism was hardly unprecedented. Crusading reporters who uncover corruption in local government or child abuse in day-care centers are seen as performing a public service. There is even a Pulitzer Prize for this kind of journalism. Many reporters who covered the civil rights movement in the 1960s adopted a "moral attitude" in the stories they wrote without being criticized for surrendering their objectivity. Bob Greene, a longtime investigative reporter for *Newsday* and now a journalism professor at Hofstra University, told an interviewer that his generation of journalists went into the business "because it was an opportunity to effect change for good. You never did it for money, because you knew it was the poorest paying job in the world. . . . [But] . . . you can try to work for what is presumed to be good, if nothing else, by bringing accurate information to people."[38]

In fact, journalists who *do not* make moral judgments in their reporting and who treat all stories as equal are routinely criticized for being cynical or mercenary in outlook. Such charges helped prompt the reform movement known as "public journalism," whose advocates contend that the

press should work openly "to help communities solve problems, and to aid in the country's search for a workable public life."[39] News organizations practicing "public journalism" (generally, community newspapers) have polled citizens about their main concerns and then prepared extensive reports about possible solutions to the identified problems.

The practice has been confined so far to domestic affairs, but some critics of international news reporting suggest that public journalism should be extended overseas. "Such an approach could be usefully applied to conflict situations abroad," writes one relief official, "wherein reporting would focus not only on the conflict, but also on an array of both indigenous and international strategies for dealing with the conflict."[40]

This approach probably takes a noble idea a step too far, however. Reporters can demonstrate moral and social responsibility without becoming proactively involved in their own stories. If journalists are to be deployed abroad as social workers or conflict resolvers, it will probably be through groups or projects with exclusively humanitarian aims (such as Search for Common Ground) rather than on the staffs of traditional news organizations.

Another recommendation directed to journalists assigned to hot spots overseas is that we revise our notion of what is newsworthy. The news media are often criticized for focusing excessively on emergencies instead of paying close attention to potential conflict or crisis areas before they erupt into violence. Such criticism is at times naive, however. John Hammock and Joel Charny, both associated with Oxfam America, suggested in a recent article that "journalists given overseas assignments—even when parachuting into a disaster—should be fluent in the language favored locally."[41] To meet that requirement, a news organization would have to employ as many linguists as the United Nations does. Hammock and Charny go on to recommend that journalists "present the daily lives of people in developing countries and their organized efforts to solve their own problems—before, during, and after crises." Would Hammock and Charny promise to read such articles or listen to such programs? The media organization best known for taking this approach in covering the developing world, United Nations Radio, is not known for its wide audience.

If criticism of the news media is to be useful, it must take into consideration the realities of our business. We have to hold the attention of readers, listeners, and viewers. We operate under tight budgetary constraints, and our resources are limited. Covering emergencies will always be a higher priority than covering people's daily lives. We are not development officers, agricultural extension agents, public health workers, or family planning advisors.

The representative from Bread for the World who called on journalists to "re-imagine" the purposes of their profession lamented that "good news is too often considered not newsworthy. . . . Murder in a small town and its big time equivalent, war within or between nations, makes better news," she complained, "than a nutrition program that improves a million lives."[42] But editors do not consider war to be "better" than life-saving nutrition programs. Their major responsibility is to see that the world is *explained*, not that it is *improved.* In the editors' judgment, an overseas story deserves to be reported if it is, among other things:

- Important: Broader values, interests, or resources are at stake.

- Dynamic: The story has some suspense, with events changing and the outcome uncertain.
- Illustrative: The story has explanatory power, suggesting trends or patterns.
- Interesting: The story will hold the attention of readers, listeners, or viewers.

If our critics want us to cover stories that do not meet at least some of these criteria, their advice is not helpful. They are on solid ground, however, when they fault us for being inaccurate, for distorting reality, for paying insufficient attention to the root causes of conflicts, for resorting to simplistic analysis or clichés, for stereotyping, or for failing to ask tough questions. When diplomats, historians, social scientists, or anyone else explain how we get a story *wrong*, they help us.

Journalists do not need to "re-imagine" their overseas work in order to contribute more to the prevention or resolution of conflicts around the world. We simply need to do our job better, by the traditional standards of our profession. Geneva Overholser, the *Washington Post* ombudsman, quotes a *Post* reader who wrote the newspaper recently complaining that she did not understand foreign news stories and consequently did not read them. "If Americans better understood economic and political circumstances abroad," Overholser wrote in one of her weekly columns, "wouldn't there be hope for steadier policies and more effective interventions?" Overholser suggested that news organizations offer their readers regular "primers" on the major foreign news stories, answering basic questions such as: Who are the players? and What is the history?[43]

War correspondents are often witnesses to the first stages of a conflict, and their reports can serve as an early warning. One of the major challenges to diplomats, aid organizations, and peace mediators alike is the relatively weak domestic constituency for their efforts. Foreign news coverage can change that, as the current UN secretary-general, Kofi Annan, has recognized. "Peacekeeping operations," Annan has said, "depend for their support on widespread public awareness of the conflicts, and we are committed to doing everything we can to facilitate the work of the media."[44]

TOWARD A NEW PROFESSIONALISM IN WAR REPORTING

The media's performance in war situations needs to improve, but this does not require a major rethinking of the practice of war reporting. Our traditional role is important enough. If conflicts are to be prevented or settled, they must first be understood. If a domestic constituency is to be built for interventions abroad, it will depend on people knowing what is at stake, what challenges must be overcome, and what the prospects are for effective action. Making such points clear is a more challenging and more urgent task now than it has ever been, so war correspondents must be better trained. Just as medical, legal, science, and business news reporting has grown more sophisticated and specialized in recent years, so should the reporting of war, peacekeeping, and humanitarian interventions. We need to clarify our professional obligations, develop new ethical guidelines for the new situations in which we find ourselves, and commit ourselves as a profession to upholding those standards and even to being held accountable to them.

The standards for professional war reporting are basically the same as for journalism generally, but they may need to be redefined for a wartime context. We need to think more deeply, for

example, about the meaning of objectivity. Although we must report impartially, without being swayed by the people or events we are covering, this obligation is not met simply by according each party in a conflict equal weight in the representation of its views. If we had reported that the Serbs and Croats were responsible for all wartime atrocities in Bosnia and that the Muslims were innocent, we would have been incorrect. But we would have misled our readers and listeners just as grievously if we had portrayed all sides as being equally responsible for the war and equally culpable of war crimes.

When reporting on complicated conflicts in unfamiliar settings, we must also put more effort into explanation, while stopping short of oversimplification. Experts and interested parties may quarrel with our generalizations, but if we err on the opposite side, readers and listeners find the story too complex and difficult to comprehend. In Bosnia, we had to balance the need to keep our reporting grounded in direct observation against the importance of analysis. It was not enough to report that a village had been burned. We had to dig deeper, to find who was responsible, and to report the patterns of what we saw. If it turned out that only Muslim—or Croat, or Serb—houses were being torched, for example, we needed to make that fact clear. We needed to compare what happened in Serb-controlled territory with what happened in Muslim- or Croat-controlled areas. Reporters should stick to description and avoid commentary, but in a conflict as complex as the one in Bosnia, our readers and listeners demand and deserve as much generalization as we can responsibly provide.

Critics of the coverage of Bosnia sometimes accused the news media of overdramatizing the conflict, exaggerating the number of casualties on the Muslim side, and being too quick to suggest that the observed atrocities could be war crimes. But the opposite charge was made in Rwanda: A steering committee evaluating the international response to the crisis faulted the media for not realizing how widespread the killing there actually was. "The overall failure of the media to accurately and adequately report on a crime against humanity," the committee said, "significantly contributed to international disinterest in the genocide, and hence to the inadequate response."[45]

Good war reporting will put developments into a historical and political context and identify root causes of conflicts. This was especially important in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, where historical grievances were used as a justification for mass murder, and where each side drew different lessons from history. In the Yugoslav case, it was important to understand not only how and why Serbs feared living again under Croat rule, but also why Croats resented the Serbs, and why Muslims felt safe only in a unitary state not organized along ethnic lines. It was important not only to know how old animosities could be rekindled in Bosnia, but also to appreciate the extent to which interethnic enmity had diminished in the preceding forty-five years. In Rwanda, journalists not familiar with the events that preceded the killing were inclined to suggest, as BBC journalist Fergal Keane later observed, "that the genocide was the result of some innate inter-ethnic loathing that had erupted into irrational violence. . . . Much of the coverage of Rwanda in the early days," Keane lamented, "neglected the part that power and money had played in the calculations of those who launched the genocide."[46]

War reporters should prepare for their assignments with area studies and language training. Although such preparations are extremely difficult to make at a time of shrinking news budgets,

the decentralization of global conflict and the prospect of further unrest in the developing world make greater specialization a necessity. In particular, journalists need to be grounded in international humanitarian law, the rules of war, and the Geneva Conventions. At a time when participants in a conflict casually fling charges of "genocide" and "war crimes," reporters need to know what those terms actually mean.

In the end, of course, journalists are storytellers, not social scientists or historians or criminal investigators. We contribute the power and eloquence of our writing and observations. When people are in anguish, or when they are elated, it is our unique professional responsibility to convey what they *feel* and not just the facts. We must aim to preserve the human dignity of the people whose experiences we are relating. Too often, news coverage of tragedies dehumanizes the victims, and when their suffering is gruesome, the reporting can border on pornography. Stories that pander to emotion and offer no insight or analysis titillate but do not explain and may even distort what has happened. To manage emotion and to balance it properly with dispassionate observation is one of the greatest professional challenges of good war journalism.

Ideally, reporters and editors could turn these principles into a professional code of conduct. Our problem is that we have not yet found a way to preserve and defend press freedom and simultaneously to insist on an adherence to professional standards in our work. Changes in the nature of global conflict and in the impact of global journalism underscore this problem. War correspondents must consider working collectively to promote greater professionalism, both in our own ranks and among local journalists in regions where conflicts occur. An important start has been made by organizations such as New York University's Center for War, Peace, and the News Media and the Institute for War and Peace Reporting in London, both of which have developed and managed programs that define and promote the ideal of professional and responsible war reporting.

As journalists, however, we must also caution our own political leaders not to overstate the role of the news media. No geopolitical or technological development changes the fundamental fact that we are and always will be bystanders at the moment of decision. Reporters can contribute to the political pressures that bear on governments, but the responsibility for policies and actions rests finally with government leaders, no matter the power of a headline or the impact of a picture.

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* Deceased September 1996.
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Tom Gjelten is diplomatic correspondent for National Public Radio. From 1986 to 1994 he was based abroad, first in Mexico City and then in Berlin. He has reported from war zones in the former Yugoslavia, the Middle East, and Central and South America. His war coverage in Croatia and Bosnia won a Lowell Thomas Award from the Overseas Press Club, a George Polk Award, and a Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award. Gjelten is the author of the well-received *Sarajevo Daily: A City and Its Newspaper Under Siege* (HarperPerennial, 1996). He has also written for the *New Republic* and other publications. Gjelten is married to Martha Raddatz, NPR's Pentagon correspondent. They live with their family in Arlington, Virginia.