

# A Year After the Gulf War, a Reporter Reflects on How the Media Have Changed

**FROM A JOURNALIST'S** point of view, the 1960s was a golden era for reporting—a period in which newspaper people really felt involved in the social shifts even if they paid lip service to the concept of objectivity. It was in that spirit that many reporters went to Vietnam: to try to expose the cruelties of war, the ham-handed attitude of many American bureaucrats, the arrogance of power as wielded from Washington. Vietnam was in fact a reporter's dream—one that the press at the time may not have fully appreciated, and one that reporters still do not appreciate unless they have tried to contrast their experiences in Southeast Asia with those in the Middle East during the Gulf War last year.

Since Vietnam, the Pentagon has made the press into a scapegoat for many of its troubles in that war. It has blamed reporters for bothering commanders on operations, for revealing war plans to the enemy, for getting in the way of troops, and above all for reporting negatively on the war. Officers resented the impunity with which reporters, armed with easily obtainable press cards, could jump on helicopters, go almost anywhere, and return to Saigon to write whatever they wanted, free of censorship or bureaucratic delays.

The downside of the reporting on Vietnam was that it provoked the Pentagon's counterreaction that was plain in the Gulf War—and shows every sign of continuing into the next war and the next. This time around, in spite of the complaints of journalists who tried to evade the restrictions, the Pentagon had the press largely under control.

But the press was not to blame for what happened in Vietnam, and the Pentagon refuses to accept this. Rather, the press reflected an era of much wider protest and

much deeper problems inside official Washington and within society at large. There was a sense of hubris in Washington's plunge into the Indochinese quagmire, a feeling that reporters would inevitably be on the government's side.

of visas they issued and then by insisting that government "minders" escort reporters wherever they went. But, paradoxically, until the bombing began, early on the morning of January 17, 1991, there was far more freedom to report from the scene in Iraq than there was from Saudi Arabia.

Reporters learned to ditch their escorts, and they filed without censorship through telephone lines at the American and British embassies.

Not that the Iraqis were nice guys. They imposed censorship the day the bombing began, and for the first few days the manager of the foreign press prohibited any reports of damage to strategic targets.

The Iraqis tried to manipulate the press—first by expelling all the journalists except for CNN's Peter Arnett, then by inviting only those who they believed would serve their cause. CNN's value was obvious, but I am not one of those who criticized Arnett. He is a tough, gutsy journalist, and he went as far as he could in reporting the war as he saw it. He's the first to acknowledge the restraints the Iraqis imposed on him. The bottom line is that he emerged from the war as by far its best reporter—even though he reported only one side of it.

I, too, reported from only one side: I had to leave Iraq at the behest of the same officials and censors who had admitted me in the first place. I left by road for Jordan two and a half days after the bombing began and never got a visa to return.

The Iraqis, though, were the enemy, and we expected them to behave in this way. The real disgrace, from a journalist's viewpoint, is that the press allowed the Pentagon also to become an enemy, in a way that was never possible in Vietnam. The press, including major newspapers like *The New York Times* and *The*

*Continued on page 39*



The press allowed itself to be declared by the Pentagon, writes Donald Kirk '59, pictured last year between two firefighters at Kuwait's burning Ahmadi oilfield.

In fact, the press in Vietnam played a healthy role in pointing out the military and political inanities of the war. No one was more to blame than a succession of presidents—from both parties—for what happened. Thus, in January 1968, reporters could witness the Tet Offensive and analyze it as a political victory for North Vietnam. Indeed, the press rightly saw Tet as a turning point in American public opinion—in part because of what it revealed about U.S. officials' exaggerations of North Vietnamese weakness. In more than four years in the region, I never had any doubt about my right to cover such events. We were the eyes and ears of the American people, and there was no suggestion of military censorship.

The question we should ask now is, What has happened in our society that such controls are now imposed on the press? On assignment for *USA Today*, I wanted to cover the Iraqi side in the Gulf War in part because I had no desire to waste a lot of time fighting U.S. "information officers." I have no love and little respect for the Iraqi press people, who exercised whatever controls they could, first by severely limiting the number

librarian for the band. Among his close friends in the Class were the late David Hinchman, Charlie Reusch, Nick MacNeil, Steve Csejtey and Cy Adams. A member of the American Institute of Architecture, Brooke was active in St. Bede's Episcopal Church and was past president of the Friends of Dunwoody Library, in Dunwoody, Ga., where a room is to be named for him. "May you live in interesting times," he wished us in our 25th reunion yearbook.

Brooke is survived by his widow, Joan; sons Daniel and Peter; his mother; and his brother and sister. We join them in mourning his passing.

*The Class of 1961*

### **William Everett Kane '66**

BILL KANE died by his own hand Oct. 30, 1991. His death deprives us of a remarkable intellect and a lively and challenging personality.

Bill came to Princeton from Baylor Military School (Ga.). He was a University Scholar and graduated Phi Beta Kappa, with high honors from the Woodrow Wilson School. He received a Fulbright Scholarship for study in Colombia, and attended Yale Law School, where he was a law journal editor and an honors graduate.

Thereafter, his life followed two independent tracks. On the visible track, he was a lawyer and business executive specializing first in international merchant banking with Citicorp, Continental Illinois, and Finoil. Later he turned to real estate workouts and was a pioneer in the recapitalization of real estate portfolios for California Federal and for F.S.L.I.C. He authored one book, *CIVIL STRIFE IN LATIN AMERICA*, and several articles and lectures on international politics and real estate recapitalizations.

On the less visible track, Bill continued to develop the expertise in military and diplomatic strategy that he first discovered at Princeton. He directed the Systems Intelligence Enhancement project of the American Society of Professional Strategists. He consulted regularly with a number of entities involved with our nation's defense. This work culminated in an intense involvement with Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

Bill leaves two children, W. Everett Jr. '93 and Katie, a student at the N.Y.U. Film School. Divorced, he spent the last five years with Deborah Hecht. To them, and to his many friends, the Class extends its deepest sympathy.

*The Class of 1966*

### **H. William Evans III '67**

H. WILLIAM EVANS III drowned near his cottage at Moosehead Lake, Me., on Sept. 3, 1991. Bill had been headmaster of the Dublin School in New Hampshire since 1985.

Bill came to Princeton from Scarsdale H.S. He was a dean's list student in classics, won the Steele Prize, and roomed with Walter Kohler and Richard Davidson in Little. He was Elm's social chair and was in the yacht club, WPRB, and parking squad.

Bill also earned an A.B. in classical studies at Penn in 1970. He taught, coached, and advised at Milton until 1977, when he became director of admission and later dean at Tabor. He came to Dublin in 1985 with a vision of academic integrity. He developed and participated in a successful community service program.

One of his colleagues described Bill as "a gentleman among men." Another stated that "he was a really, genuinely caring and compassionate man."

Shunning personal limelight, Bill put the school first in anything he did and thought of the school as a part of his family. No matter what part someone played, Bill was genuinely interested in his or her well being.

Bill's interest in the 1950s and '60s manifested itself in his collection of cars, music, and memorabilia. At school dances, Bill could be coaxed to the floor with a Roy Orbison tune.

In our 15th reunion book, Bill described the intensity of commitment required at a boarding school and how rewarding it had been for him. He concluded: "I give Princeton credit for a lot of the good that's dominated my life."

Bill is survived by his father, Herbert W. Evans Jr. A memorial fund has been established. Contributions should be sent to the H. William Evans III Memorial Fund, Dublin School, Dublin, NH 03444-0522.

*The Class of 1967*

*Continued from page 40*

*Washington Post*, went along with the Pentagon's idea that reporters be escorted in pools to cover military emergencies, after which they would share their stories with other reporters. Any journalist who had spent time in Vietnam should have known that the pool system was just a device to hang up the press, to keep reporters from getting to the story. When the dam finally burst and the press poured into Kuwait after the start of the ground offensive, reporters became cheerleaders whether they liked it or not. Few Americans read those learned analyses of the problems between the press and the bureaucrats—and, a year later, who remembers or cares about this issue? Few Americans cared about anything other than the glory that befell the American troops in their lightning-quick victory. That this victory was really just the beginning of another Middle Eastern quagmire—with Saddam Hussein still in power, stymieing all attempts to dislodge or disarm him—has been largely ignored.

One might argue that this conflict was *USA Today's* kind of war: a quick hit, easily covered in short paragraphs and graphics, with interviews of G.I.s and plenty of local, first-person color. It is an unfortunate commentary on American journalism—and American society—that *USA Today*-style reporting somehow reflects the national mood, with all its emphasis of fluff, its trivialization of stories, its avoidance of original analysis, and its anxiety to gloss over news as well as issues. Just as the reporting of the Vietnam era caught the mood of that time, so *USA Today* epitomizes the eighties. It was a time when we deluded ourselves into forgetting about budget and trade deficits, savings-and-loan failures, poverty and homelessness. In that spirit, much reporting on the Gulf War ignored not only the real problems of the region, but also those besetting America—all inextricably linked.

*USA Today*, to be sure, was more offensive than most other newspapers. It obviously did not care about the debacle that befell the press in the war, but the worst feature of its special brand of journalism is that its published stories are often artificial. Editors routinely take their cues from the TV networks' evening news broadcasts, flesh out reports using the wire services and calls to ersatz experts, and slap on the bylines of reporters who may know little about the region or issue to which they have been assigned. And when the editors were not manufacturing stories in this way

during the Gulf War, they were devoting a lot of space to what were basically propaganda pieces that built up the American cause, erasing questions and doubts and covering up real issues.

Had reporters adopted an appropriately skeptical view, I doubt if they would have permitted the Pentagon to use them through the so-called pool system, to divide and conquer them by carefully doling out background briefings to a favored few, to censor them by decreeing what they could and could not file. At the very least, I wonder why a few hardy souls in the press corps did not send their copy out of Saudi Arabia by messenger—or pigeon, as we called human couriers in such remote places as Jakarta in 1965 and 1966, during the "Year of Living Dangerously." If reporters disagreed with the Pentagon's restrictions, why did they not fight en masse to break them, and why did their papers not back them up? News organizations with wide experience and memories of covering Vietnam should have displayed that much daring. It's a sad commentary on American life that our government's constraints on the press were just as severe as Iraq's—and maybe even more so.

These views might appear unfashionable nowadays, but I suppose I reflect that era of *Daily Princetonian* history that produced some of our most interesting journalists: Richard Kluger '56, R. W. Apple '57, Robert Caro '57, William Greider '58, and James Ridgeway '59, among others. At that time, writers and editors at the *Prince* maintained what might be called a healthy contempt for Nassau Hall, and this is the way any reporter should treat the White House, the Pentagon, the State Department. Out of such contempt can grow a more healthy awareness of what is really happening, and perhaps lead to constructive change. Certainly, for example, Princeton has improved socially since the days of "100 percent bicker," the farcical and hypocritical process by which all sophomores—even "undesirables"—got bids to eating clubs.

And certainly American foreign policy got a little more sophisticated—and somewhat less warlike—after Vietnam. Now the worm has turned, and it's up to the press to return to its role as a watchdog to which nothing is sacred.

—Donald Kirk '59

*This article is based on remarks that Don Kirk, who reported for USA Today for the first eight years of its existence, delivered at the annual Daily Princetonian banquet last year.*