

**PUBLIC OPINION AS A
WEAPON IN DEMOCRACY'S
FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL**

**ADDRESS BY
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If there is any phrase we hear more frequently than any other these days, it is "the American way of life." Certainly, this is a noble phrase and it summons up our complete devotion and loyalty. Yet, at the risk of my reputation for patriotism, I believe there is at least one minor aspect of "the American way" which might be amended without seriously damaging our democracy. Take the situation in which you and I find ourselves right now. "The American way of life" has involved us in one of its most durable and inescapable institutions—speechmaking. At any given movement, from dawn to midnight, you may be sure that a torrent of words is pouring from hundreds of platforms upon defenseless listeners like yourselves in all parts of our land. Our most voluminous national product, although by no means the most valuable, is oratory.

Now, I propose no sympathy for the speechmakers. Many of them actually enjoy the privileges of the rostrum and, as for those of us who do not, we have no one to blame but ourselves for the predicament in which we find ourselves.

My compassion is reserved for the audiences, especially for captive audiences. Our Founding Fathers could never have anticipated the rise of the captive audience in our nation when they incorporated freedom of speech and freedom of assembly in our original charter of government. If they had, I am sure that Thomas Jefferson or James Madison would have insisted on a fifth freedom—freedom from attending any speech unless you wanted to hear it. If such a practice prevailed as the accepted American way, only

those of you who felt a burning desire to listen to a speech today would be present now and I could shake hands with the two or three attending, say a few words and be on my way back to my office. Custom dictates otherwise, however, and so I will do my best to make your brief period of captivity as agreeable as possible.

Actually, I am both pleased and honored to be here today and I thank you, Admiral Binford, most sincerely for your invitation. I firmly believe that the duty for which this school prepares its students is fully as important in our national defense as any duty the armed services afford. This is not a mere politeness from a friendly guest. There is no question in my mind that the responsibilities you will assume on leaving here are as essential to the safeguarding of democracy as is, for example, accurate gun fire and adequate troop leadership in ground combat. Public opinion is one of the major weapons in our fight for survival. It is of the essence of democracy that each individual has a right to independent thought and independent decision. Therefore, we can hope for unity and the full marshaling of democratic strength only when all of us have a common access to truth and are actuated by it to a common understanding and a common purpose. To meet successfully the foe who threatens us around the world, we all must have full knowledge of the issues at stake and the objectives toward which we are struggling. In a free society, information must be the common denominator behind unified public opinion and national policy.

This is where you fit into our crucial battle in which the free world now finds itself. We are engaged in a war of ideas as fully as we are fighting a war of guns, tanks, planes and ships. Without the kind of contribution you are preparing to make, our task would be infinitely more difficult, perhaps impossible.

In a way, I feel especially at home in discussing these ideas with you because of my good fortune in having had two great parallel interests during practically all my adult life. I have been a newspaper man for over 35 years and therefore have been close to the art and technique of communication. At the same time, I have been active in military affairs, having participated in both World Wars and continue today as an active Reservist. So my views on the relationship of information and education to national defense arise from personal observation in two pertinent professional fields.

As a starting point, I think we can postulate that democracy will survive as a system of government only where the individual citizen has adequate access to all information necessary for sound judgment and decision. That is because the will and judgment of the individual citizen are the foundations upon which our democratic edifice is built.

Conversely, we can postulate that a totalitarian dictatorship such as Russia will collapse speedily when the mass of its people penetrates the iron curtain of prescribed doctrine and can be exposed to fact and to truth.

In the crisis which confronts us, the actions and com-

mitments which the United States makes to defend the free world will be to an overwhelming degree, controlled by public opinion. That opinion may be informed or uninformed, but of this we may be sure—either way, it will guide the course of history. Now if we have an ignorant public, we may expect it to be an apathetic public or, worse still, an obstructive public, unable to react to emergencies which it can only dimly comprehend. Citizens do not lose their democratic right to have a voice in determining vital policies even though, through lack of information, they are incapable of weighing the issues involved. I should say that anyone who subscribes to the old adage that “what you don’t know won’t hurt you” is as far off the truth as it is possible to get in this 20th Century world.

We are therefore at the heart of the matter when we say that a primary responsibility of our government is to maintain a full flow of information to the people from whom it draws its ultimate authority. This should be done if only on the practical theory that in the United States the people are supreme.

Up to this point, I think we would find universal acceptance of our general thesis. The memory of World War II, in which free men out-fought, out-produced and out-lasting the totalitarian enemy, is too fresh for anyone to undervalue the importance of public opinion. As a matter of principle the people should be informed. It would be hard to find anywhere in this country a spokesman for censorship or restriction of the freedom of the press. The channels of

communication from the government and the defense establishment to the people, we say, are free and clear. The only limitations are those made necessary by considerations of national security.

“National security”—this is where the confusion and the difficulty start. There are, of course, military and diplomatic plans whose premature publication would not only threaten our national security and that of our allies, but also give aid and comfort to the enemy. However, from the base of legitimate security has grown an immense barrier of over-secrecy involving the classification and restriction of material relating to the national defense.

War and the preparations for it are so total today that the excuse of “military security” can be, and often has been, invoked to screen and hide all sorts of information. The trend toward over-classification and ultra secrecy has become more and more pronounced, and in many ways these security restrictions have had an effect opposite to that intended. They have been self-defeating and instead of helping to preserve our strength they have far too often merely cloaked weaknesses of which the public should be aware.

Secrecy and security are by no means synonymous, no matter how closely allied they may seem to some of those in military or governmental authority. If secrecy operates to deprive public opinion of facts which it needs

for balanced judgment, if secrecy leads the citizens of our country to feel smug and complacent, when they should be aroused and alarmed, then secrecy really damages our security. Representative government cannot demand corrective action (that is, it cannot act in its vital self-interest) if legitimate facts are withheld from it by irresponsible over-censorship at the source.

Senator Stuart Symington of Missouri had something to say on this subject only last week. As a former Secretary of the Air Force, Senator Symington has sat in the inner councils of the defense establishment and therefore is highly qualified to point out the boundaries of justifiable secrecy. In the opinion of Mr. Symington the safety of the nation has been endangered by the failure to tell the people the whole truth about our military might as compared with the strength of the Soviet Union and its satellites. The people must receive all the facts, he said, so that they can make an intelligent assessment of the nation's rearmament program. "For years," said the Senator, "a few of us have tried to get the truth of our military position out to the people because we believe our national security, far from preventing the publication of this information, rather demands it."

Recently one of The New York Times correspondents wrote a series of articles on shell production in which it was revealed that for two months last fall the reserve stocks of artillery shells were well below the point of safety. Indeed, a substantial portion of the press of the

nation followed with stories along similar lines. Subsequently, it was authoritatively stated that enough shells are now on hand to repel any probable Communist attack but a considerably larger reserve than we have would be required to support a broad United Nations offensive. Production now is on the increase but is not yet close to being satisfactory.

This information had been withheld from the American people, for what undoubtedly seemed to be good reasons. But in view of those who believe that the public is integral in our national defense, the incident was an alarming example of the way in which secrecy can actually weaken security. One metropolitan newspaper commented editorially, "These admissions are made by the Army after months of denial. It shows what can happen when agencies of the government can hide their shortcomings behind so-called security regulations of their own making. It is what to expect when government conceals the truth from the people. An outraged public opinion would have forced an improvement in this situation months ago—had the facts been known."

General Van Fleet, upon his return, reiterated the charge of shortages, despite weak denials by the Pentagon, and a Congressional investigation is the consequence. This is not good for morale of our own troops and is, in turn, helpful to the enemy.

So, we have the results of secrecy—a bad situation

which persisted too long and serious criticism of the Army.

Hanson W. Baldwin, military editor of The New York Times, not long ago referred to what he called "the most dramatic and frightening example" of the trend to secrecy, which lies in the field of new weapons. "Civilian defense," says Mr. Baldwin, "has failed to receive adequate public support, in large measure because of the ultra secrecy with which all atomic developments have been guarded. Toward this and many other crucial defense problems of the atomic age the public is apathetic. A type of fatalism, of shifting responsibility to government shoulders for decisions the individual citizen should make, has influenced American public opinion.

"Only strong and enlightened Government leadership can penetrate the subconscious of American public opinion with the frightful facts of such a new weapon as the hydrogen bomb . . . more facts are needed before public and Congressional consciousness is sufficiently aroused to legislate wisely our defense problems in the hydrogen age."

The problem is a difficult one. No part of the public business more desperately concerns the interest of the people, individually and in the mass, than measures intended to protect this country in time of physical danger. Yet, paradoxically, no part of the public business is so largely conducted without the peoples' knowledge. What can safely be done to cope with this situation?

No patriotic person, whether he be journalist or otherwise, would want to jeopardize the national defense just to score a scoop or satisfy idle curiosity. Still, the public business, for the good reasons we have already enumerated, ought to be public—and there are steps that can be taken to accomplish this end.

It seems to me that the citizens and the press, together, should demand and require first of all that security regulations and classifications be justified in the light of the larger public good.

Second, we should insist that basic decisions on withholding information be made by competent authorities, who must take the responsibility for their acts before the electorate. Whatever restrictions may be imposed should be made subject to review by competent persons not directly concerned with the administration. On this very subject, Arthur Krock, Chief of The Times Washington Bureau, commented the other day that both the military authorities and the permanent civilian members of the administration have a tendency to see breaches of security where, by sensible tests, they do not exist.

Further, it should be basic that any rules which have for their purpose the withholding of information from the press and public should be subject to periodic review. The requirement should be established that these rules be revised or at least reviewed from time to time so that in seeking their renewal officials must justify them both in principle and in practice.

In other words, the people must always have reasonable access to full knowledge of the state of their own defenses, and no official or department has the right to hide such information from them, even though frankness may sometimes involve embarrassment and invite criticism.

When you enter your various tours of duty as information officers, you will immediately develop a relationship with the press, and when I say press, I have in mind the broad definition which includes not only newspapers, but also magazines, radio, television, news reels and all other vehicles of mass communication. It is needless to remind you that the press exists to convey information to the public and that its right and responsibility to do so are an indispensable part of our democratic system. Without a free press the democratic way of life collapses. Witness the fact that almost the very first step of Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin and Peron, on the long road to their respective dictatorships, was the same—the dissolution of freedom of the press.

Our American press fortunately is free, but however much you rejoice in theory over this solid bulwark for our liberties, there may well be instances when the press will be a source of great irritation. There will perhaps be some story, some development which you or your commanding officer would be quite happy not to share with the outside world which a persistent reporter will try to obtain from you. Before you decide that the

reporter is your mortal enemy and that you must try to thwart him at every turn, please recall some of the ideas we have been reviewing here today. The people have a basic "right to know." The allegiance of the press, and therefore of that individual reporter, is not to you but to the public to whose service he owes the highest degree of alertness, persistence and loyalty. If he and his fellows just sat around and waited for authorized handouts, they would be guilty of misfeasance, malfeasance and gross neglect of duty. Their mission is aggressively to unearth and report the news.

Please I urge you not to fall into the error of thinking of the press or the reporter as an antagonist or that there exists between you a conflict of interest which requires a running battle of wits. Reporters are not searching only for bad news. What they seek and must do their best to obtain is all the news of the armed services—the good news and, if there be any, the bad news, too. In the long run, the defense establishment strengthens its position if it helps rather than hinders the press in its appointed duty, even if an occasional private skeleton comes out of the closet for an airing.

This observation brings us back in a full circle to our starting point—to the importance of public opinion. I am sure that part of your indoctrination and training here is devoted to an exposition of the specific need of the armed services for a favorable public opinion. If that concept were not fully appreciated and accepted in the Pentagon,

this school would never have been instituted. Public opinion in the last analysis either supports or retards the programs of the military planners. Appropriations are extracted from the public purse and must overcome a perfectly natural inclination to cut expenditures wherever possible and thereby reduce taxes. There is a tendency today in many quarters to view the services as fat, wasteful and inefficient. Whether this attitude is justified certainly is not the subject of our consideration this morning. But we can agree that public opinion affects the morale of all members of the standing forces, and certainly the respect in which matters military are generally held has a decisive bearing on the ratio of re-enlistments and the desire of the more competent to continue in military careers. In these and many other ways, the state of public opinion directly affects the progress of the armed services.

Thus there are at least two main purposes to whose fulfillment your activities will make an indispensable contribution.

First, the armed services, no less than the other branches of the government, have the democratic obligation to the American people to keep them fully informed of the defense operations for which they are paying so much to support. Gordon Gray put this very well when, as Secretary of the Army, he addressed the West Point graduating class in 1949. Mr. Gray emphasized that the responsibility for developing understanding between civilians and the military rests squarely with the soldiers.

He said:

“This process (of understanding) must be initiated by you—the soldiers. You must always take the first step, because you will always be just what you are now—instruments of the civilian public of the United States. You—not the civilian members of the public—have the responsibility of creating public understanding of your profession.”

Second, the armed services in their own interest need the climate of good public opinion, which in turn requires the functioning of an enlightened and far-seeing information program.

There can exist no doubt that you gentlemen have an assignment which ranks high among tasks of national defense. Your duties will require intelligence, tact, understanding and imagination--and besides these qualities, a thorough knowledge of news techniques and all the media of news dissemination. I am sure I can give you no advice on the execution of your future duties which will not be a repetition of principles you have already mastered in your courses at Fort Slocum. Yet, availing myself of the hallowed privileges of the rostrum, I am going to risk making briefly a few practical suggestions. If they duplicate points covered in your training here, they will at least, by repetition, serve the purpose of emphasis:

(1) If I were an information officer I would make it my first objective to establish a reputation for honesty

and frankness with the members of the press with whom I came into contact. I would give them freely all the information I could, and if, for any reason, I were unable to answer a question, I'd tell them candidly why. A policy such as this will pay dividends. It will encourage reporters automatically to check and verify facts with you whenever they have a story that is within your jurisdiction. You will then know what is brewing and will often be able to supply material that will complete a story with all essential facts. If you are typed as evasive and uncommunicative, the press will try to bypass you—and you may be a bigger loser than they.

(2) Corollary to the first point is this second piece of counsel:—do not try to suppress news. I tell you this as a military man with the welfare of the services at heart, not in my capacity as newspaperman. In this connection, I can do no better than quote Major General Floyd V. Parks—Chief of Information of the Department of the Army. In addressing a group of officers, General Parks said, “Many people think the public information job is to suppress unsavory stories and get out something to offset or change bad stories—I say here today—it is not possible to suppress news, whether it is good or bad, and it is poor policy to try. What you generally wind up with when you try to suppress news is a distorted story. A reporter gets part of it; it is news and he is going to print it—and the thing for you to do is to get the facts out fast, so the whole facts are available to the reporters. If it is bad, it's to be regretted but if there

is any good, get it in.”

General Parks' advice is eminently sound. No matter how much you or your commanding officer on rare occasions might want to do so, you cannot take a news story to the far end of the parade ground and bury it.

(3) The exclusive story is a problem every information officer encounters sooner or later. Naturally you should treat all of the press alike and when you send out a release provide that everyone receives it simultaneously. But if a reporter develops a lead on a legitimate story and should come to you for elaboration, his exclusive angle should be protected. I say this because information officers have been known in similar circumstances to say, "I'll check up," and then file the story as a general release available to everyone. When you deprive a man of a rightful scoop which even his competitors would recognize, neither he nor they are likely to check with you hereafter.

(4) Nearly six years ago, Congress passed a bill to unify and integrate the armed services, a constructive step in behalf of national security. In an atomic age when attacks and counter-attacks move with lightning speed, when one major error may be the final error which can never be retrieved, complete coordination is absolutely essential. We cannot have the line of a football team devising one play and the backfield planning something entirely different. We must have a single American team with which the various service com-

ponents fit tactically and strategically according to an integrated plan.

The very fact that this school, representing all services, studies information doctrine together, is a most encouraging sign. From your joint experience here will emerge a greater understanding of your opposite numbers and a better disposition to strengthen unified effort. This is highly important because, although integration has made considerable progress, it still has a long way to go. There are many evidences of inter-service rivalries, even among the public information officers who, above all, should know better. To see some of the releases that erupt from the mimeograph machines, one would think the end in view is discord rather than harmony.

Let me give you a small example. About a month ago, the Navy announced that, at a cost of \$250,000 and after long experiment, it had produced a "space suit." The Air Force information people greeted this announcement with what sounded like jeers. They claimed that the Air Force had made a similar announcement last fall and that the Air Force had ten years ago abandoned as too cumbersome the same kind of suit now displayed by the Navy.

This type of cross-fire causes the simple taxpayer to wonder about both the definitely un-unified sentiment displayed and the apparently unnecessary duplication of effort—and cost.

I hope in your future duty you will avail yourself of

every opportunity to support integration and thereby augment public confidence in the entire military establishment. If the sarcastic expression that will embarrass or irritate another service offers itself, manfully thrust the temptation aside. Let's save our barbs and ridicule for the real enemy, not our own teammates.

Before I bring this compendium of gratuitous advice to a close there is one more thought I should like briefly to outline—and that is the urgent need of information by the public on the duties and obligations of the citizen to our armed forces. Today, not information but misinformation is abroad throughout the nation, especially among parents and teen-agers themselves. They do not understand the Armed Forces Reserve Act nor the Selective Service Act, nor the purposes of the National Security Training Commission; they fail to comprehend their own relationship and obligations to the national defense and, as a result, morale of the public is often far from what it should be.

We urgently need a thoughtfully planned information program that will answer the expressed and unexpressed questions in the public mind. I do not mean thinly disguised recruiting propaganda but an objective presentation that will help find the answers to such questions as these: Should a youngster wait until called by the draft?—or should he enlist? Should he seek by deferment to delay military service to the latest possible minute?—or should he undertake now the patriotic obli-

gations that fall on everyone?

Public thinking is muddy on these subjects and many young men acquire doubt and uncertainty from the confusion that prevails among their elders, in the home, in the schools and in the colleges. Would it not, in such circumstances, be a constructive project for the information services to undertake jointly this phase of public enlightenment? Could there not be assembled a comprehensive report or thesis which would answer questions and dispel misconceptions? Out of such a document could then be extracted a brief statement of fundamental doctrine to be used for example by speakers on Armed Forces Day and on numerous other occasions. With a well-organized, well-balanced presentation as a source, these ideas would flow to the public through a multitude of diverse channels, helping hundreds of thousands to think in accordance with the national good rather than along lines of mere personal convenience.

To carry out and implement such an assignment is, I think, a clear and present challenge to the highest skills of our information facilities.

In conclusion, let me again congratulate you on the opportunities which lie before you. The day is long past when information and education can be considered an inconsequential assignment. No weapons in the democratic arsenal are more important than information and education. The information officer is a tremendous factor in our total strength and you can justifiably go from here to your new duty with a deep sense of pride and responsibility.