



*How  
much  
influence  
does the  
24-hour  
news  
network  
really  
have on  
foreign  
policy?*

*By Warren P. Strobel*

# THE CNN EFFECT

IT'S MAY 31, 1995, THERE'S ANOTHER FLARE-UP IN THE long-running Bosnia crisis and the Defense Department spokesman, Kenneth Bacon, is sitting in his office on the Pentagon's policy making E Ring. A clock is ticking over his head. On the wall right outside the door to Bacon's inner office is a television. Aide Brian Cullen glances at it from time to time.

On the bottom of the screen is the familiar CNN logo. Above it is the equally familiar figure of Peter Arnett in flak jacket and helmet, reporting breathlessly from Bosnia, analyzing the latest NATO airstrikes and the Bosnian Serbs' retaliation by taking U.N. peacekeepers hostage. Arnett is answering questions for the host and audience of CNN's interactive "Talk Back Live." Some of that audience is in cyberspace, sending in questions via CompuServe. At the top of the hour, Bacon will escort a "senior Defense Department official" to the podium of the Pentagon briefing room to explain to skeptical reporters why the Clinton administration's latest apparent policy change toward Bosnia is not a change at all.

Here it is, the nexus of media power and foreign policy, where television's instantly transmitted images fire public opinion, demanding instant responses from government officials, shaping and reshaping foreign policy at the whim of electrons. It's known as the CNN Effect.

It's a catchall phrase that has been used to describe a number of different phenomena. Perhaps the best definition, used by Professor Steven Livingston of George Washington University, is a loss of policy control on the part of policy makers because of the power of the media, a power that they can do nothing about.

Or is it the best definition? I'm here to ask Bacon that question. Bacon, a former journalist, is a precise man. He wears a bow tie and wire rim glasses, and looks like he doesn't get ruffled easily. On a day like today, his response is telling. "Policy makers," he says, "are becoming more adept at dealing with the CNN factor."

Bacon's opinion is one heard, in one form or another, over and over in the course of nearly 100 interviews during the last

**Defense  
Department  
spokesman  
Kenneth  
Bacon**



PHOTOGRAPH BY WALTER P. CALAHAN

year with secretaries of state, spokespersons and everyone in between. I talked with officials from the Bush and Clinton administrations, the United Nations and relief agencies; military officers who have been in Bosnia, Somalia, Haiti and Rwanda; and journalists who have reported from those places. It is possible, of course, that they are all lying (the officials, that is). After all, who would want to admit that their authority has been usurped, their important jobs made redundant? To paraphrase legendary diplomat George Kennan's almost plaintive diary entry from the day U.S. troops landed in Somalia: If CNN determines foreign policy, why do we need administrators and legislators?

But the closer one looks at those incidents that supposedly prove a CNN Effect, where dramatic and/or real-time images appear to have forced policy makers into making sudden changes, the more the Effect shrinks. It is like a shimmering desert mirage, disappearing as you get closer.

A growing body of academic research is casting doubt on the notion that CNN in particular, or television in general, determines U.S. foreign policy the way it might seem from a quick glance at the live broadcasts from Tiananmen Square in 1989 or the image of the U.S. soldier being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu, Somalia, in October 1993 (see "When Pictures Drive Foreign Policy," December 1993). What officials told me closely parallels the findings of Nik Gowing, diplomatic editor for Britain's Independent Television Network, who interviewed dozens of British and American officials for a Harvard University study. Even many military officers, who might be expected to criticize media performance, have found the CNN Effect to be less than it is billed. But no one is arguing that CNN has had no effect on journalists, government officials, and the way both conduct their business.

**CNN White House correspondent Wolf Blitzer receives many White House leaks.**



VIRTUALLY EVERY OFFICIAL INTERVIEWED agrees that the rise of Cable News Network has radically altered the way U.S. foreign policy is conducted. Information is everywhere, not just because of CNN, but through other developments, such as the increasingly sophisticated media systems in developing nations and the explosive growth of the Internet. "It's part and parcel of governing," says Margaret Tutwiler, assistant secretary of state for public affairs under James A. Baker III. During her days at the State Department podium, Tutwiler knew that the most important audience was not the reporters asking the questions, but the array of cameras at the back of the briefing room, which sent her descriptions of U.S. policy to leaders, journalists and the public the globe over.

Baker says CNN has destroyed the concept of a "news cycle." In his days as a political campaign director, the news cycle was much longer, which meant the candidate had more time to respond to an opponent's charges. Now officials must respond almost instantly to developments. Because miniaturized cameras and satellite dishes can go virtually anywhere, policy makers no longer have the luxury of ignoring faraway crises.

These changes also affect modern U.S. military operations, which increasingly involve peacekeeping or humanitarian activities, and in which there is no vital U.S. interest at stake and thus less rationale for controlling the news media. The journalist-military debate over news media pools and other restrictions that date from Grenada and the Persian Gulf War has been eclipsed by the Somalias and Haitis, where the news media were so pervasive that reporters were often providing information to the military rather than vice versa. U.S. Army Maj. David Stockwell and Col. Barry Willey, the chief military spokesmen in Somalia and Haiti, both described this media presence as alternately helpful and annoying, but in the end an inevitable piece of what the military calls the "operating environment."

But to say that CNN changes governance, shrinks decision making time and opens up military operations to public scrutiny is not the same as saying that it determines policy. Information indeed has become central to international affairs, but whether officials use this or are used by it depends largely on them. The stakes are higher for those who must make policy, but the tools at their command are also more powerful.

HOW, THEN, DOES THE CNN Effect really work? One way to answer that question is to look at some common myths about the network, and at what government officials who must deal with it on a daily basis say really happens.

## **MYTH No. 1** *CNN makes life more difficult for foreign policy makers.*

For those government officials who know how to use it, Ted Turner's round-the-clock video wire service can in fact be an immense boon. This was seen most vividly during the Persian Gulf War, when the Bush White House, knowing that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's top aides were reluctant to bring him bad news, got into Saddam's living room via CNN. And because CNN carried Pentagon briefings in Saudi Arabia and Washington live, officials were talking directly to the American public for hours on end. A study of commentators featured on the network during the gulf war found that the majority of them were retired military officers or other "elites" who by and large supported the administration's view of the crisis. Saddam, of course, used CNN too, as illustrated by the controversy over Peter Arnett's reporting from Iraq. This challenged the administration—but also provided a useful window into what the man in Baghdad was thinking.

It doesn't take a massive confrontation and half a million U.S. troops in the desert for CNN to perform this favor for officials. "Everybody talks about the CNN factor being bad," Pentagon spokesman Bacon says. "But in fact, a lot of it is good." If the Pentagon disagrees with a report by CNN Pentagon correspondent Jamie McIntyre, Defense Secretary William Perry can and will call him to try to put his spin on events. In the good old days of the 6 o'clock evening news, officials would have to wait 24 hours. By then it was usually too late. With CNN, they get many chances throughout the day to try to shape public perceptions.

Because of its speed, CNN also provides a convenient way for administration officials to leak new policies in the hope that they'll define the debate before political opponents do. Many a White House reporter knows that CNN's Wolf Blitzer is a frequent recipient of such leaks. Blitzer is on the White House lawn, repeating to the camera what he's just been told by unnamed officials, while newspaper reporters are still fretting over their ledes.

The images of strife and horror abroad that are displayed on CNN and other television outlets also help foreign policy officials explain the need for U.S. intervention. CNN may be the last defense against isolationism. The press "makes the case of the need to be involved sometimes more than we can," says Richard Boucher, State Department spokesman under Baker and former Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger.

## **MYTH No. 2** *CNN dictates what's on the foreign policy agenda.*

Somalia, of course, is the prime example cited. There was equal suffering in southern Sudan in 1992, the common wisdom goes, but the Bush administration was forced to pay attention to Somalia because the TV cameras were there.

While journalists undoubtedly were drawn to the drama of the famine in Somalia, they had a lot of help getting there. Much of this came from international relief agencies that depend on TV images to move governments to respond and the public to open its wallets. "We need the pictures. Always the pictures," says one official who works with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). There isn't anything sinister about this. These private and intergovernmental agencies do good work under dangerous conditions. But for that very reason they are seen by many journalists as lacking the motives that most other sources are assumed to have. In the case of Somalia, these organizations were joined by U.S. government relief agencies and members of Congress interested in Africa in a campaign to generate media attention and government action.

One of the leaders of that campaign was Andrew Natsios, then an assistant administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, known for his rapport with reporters. Natsios and his aides gave numerous media interviews and held news conferences in Africa and in Washington in early 1992. "I deliberately used the news media as a medium for educating policy makers in Washington and in Europe" about how to address the crisis, Natsios says. And he says he used the media "to drive policy." Once reporters got to Somalia—sometimes with the UNHCR, the International Committee of the Red Cross and others—they of course sent back graphic reports of the famine that increased the pressure on President Bush to do something.

"It started with government manipulating press," says Herman Cohen, former assistant secretary of state for African affairs, "and then changed to press manipulating the government."

A quick look at the patterns of television reporting on Somalia also raises questions about the media's agenda-setting powers. There were very few television reports on Somalia (15 on the three networks to be exact) prior to Bush's August 1992 decision to begin an airlift. That decision resulted in a burst of reporting. The pattern was repeated later in the year when Bush ordered 25,000 U.S. troops to safeguard humanitarian aid. When they weren't following the actions of relief officials or members of Congress, the cameras were following the troops. CNN, in fact, was less likely than the networks to do independent reporting when Somalia was not on the Washington agenda.

## **MYTH No. 3** *Pictures of suffering force officials to intervene.*

Televised images of humanitarian suffering do put pressure on the U.S. government to act, as was seen in northern Iraq following the gulf war, in Somalia and in Rwanda. Part of the reason for this, officials say, is because the costs of lending a hand are presumed to be low. (The U.S. foreign policy establishment was dis-

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*images of strife and horror abroad that are displayed on CNN and other television outlets help foreign policy officials explain the need for U.S. intervention. CNN may be the last defense against isolationism.*



**The Bush administration sent U.S. troops to help end the famine in Somalia.**

abused of this notion in Somalia, an experience that probably permanently shrunk this facet of the CNN Effect.)

But something interesting happens when the pictures suggest an intervention that is potentially high in costs, especially the cost of American casualties. Images of civil wars, no matter how brutal, simply don't have the same effect as those of lines of refugees or malnourished children at a feeding station.

In the summer and fall of 1992 the Bush administration was under intense pressure from Congress and the U.N. to do something to stop the outrages perpetrated against Bosnia's Muslims. In August, *Newsday* reported the existence of a string of detention camps where Bosnian Serbs were torturing, raping and killing. Within a few days, Britain's ITN confirmed the worst when it broadcast images of emaciated men trapped behind barbed wire. Yet by this time President Bush and his aides had concluded that intervening in the Bosnian civil war would take thousands of troops who might be mired down for years. CNN and its brethren did not change this calculation.

"It wouldn't have mattered if television was going 24 hours around the clock with Serb atrocities. Bush wasn't going to get in," says Warren Zimmermann, the last U.S. ambassador to Yugoslavia. Former Secretary of State Eagleburger confirmed this, saying: "Through all the time we were there, you have to understand that we had largely made a decision we were not going to get militarily involved. And nothing, including those stories, pushed us into it.... It made us damn uncomfortable. But this was a policy that wasn't going to get changed no matter what the press said."

The pressures that Eagleburger spoke of were very real. But rather than alter firmly held policy, in Bosnia and many other places,

officials, in essence, pretended to. They took minimal steps designed to ease the pressure while keeping policy intact. These responses probably account for much of the perception that CNN and television in general change policy. Bush administration concern with the media "only extended to the appearance of maintaining we were behaving responsibly," says Foreign Service officer George Kenney, who resigned publicly to protest the lack of real U.S. action to save Bosnia. Roy Gutman, who won the Pulitzer Prize for his reporting from Bosnia for *Newsday*, concurs. "What you had is a lot of reaction to reports, but never any policy change."

Images of the brutal slaughter of half a million people in Rwanda in 1994 did not move governments to intervene with force. This was true despite the fact that there was more television coverage of the slaughter than there was of Somalia at any time

in 1992 until Bush actually sent the troops. According to officials at the Pentagon and elsewhere, once the slaughter in Rwanda ended and the massive exodus of refugees began, what had seemed like an intervention nightmare became a relatively simple logistical and humanitarian problem that the U.S. military was well-equipped to solve.

Interestingly, the public reacted the same way as the Pentagon did. According to a top relief representative, private relief agencies "got virtually no money whatsoever" from the viewing public when television was broadcasting images of Rwandans who had been hacked to death. Contributions began to pour in when refugees flooded across Rwanda's borders and there were "pictures of women and children... innocents in need."

#### **MYTH No. 4** *There is nothing officials can do about the CNN Effect.*

To the contrary, whether or not the CNN Effect is real depends on the actions of government officials themselves. As ABC News' Ted Koppel puts it, "To the degree...that U.S. foreign policy in a given region has been clearly stated and adequate, accurate information has been provided, the influence of television coverage diminishes proportionately." In other words, the news media fill a vacuum, and CNN, by its reach and speed, can do so powerfully and quickly.

But this gives officials a lot more sway than Kennan thinks they have. The officials I interviewed did not identify a single instance when television reports forced them to alter a strongly held and/or well-communicated policy. Rather, the media seemed to have an impact when policy was weakly held, was already in the process of being changed or was lacking public support.

There is little doubt that the image of a dead U.S. soldier being desecrated in October 1993 forced President Clinton to come up with a rapid response to calls in Congress for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Somalia. Often forgotten, however, is that by September 1993 the Clinton administration already was making plans to extract U.S. troops. Just days before the images of the dead soldier were aired, Secretary of State Warren Christopher had told U.N. Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali of Washington's desire to pull out. Congress had withdrawn its approval, and public support for the mission, documented in opinion polls, began falling well before the gruesome video started running on CNN.

What was most important about the imagery, however, was that it could not be explained by U.S. foreign policy makers. The Clinton administration had casually allowed the mission in Somalia to evolve from humanitarian relief to nation-building without explaining to the public and Congress the new costs, risks and goals. The images were the coup de grace. "The message was not handled properly from the administration," says one U.S. military officer who served in Somalia. The images were "a graphic illustration of the futility of what we were doing."

This ability of CNN to alter a policy that is in flux was graphically demonstrated again just a few months later in February 1994 when a mortar shell slammed into a marketplace in Sarajevo, killing 68 people and wounding many more. The images of the "market massacre" caused outrage around the world. The United States abandoned a year-old hands-off policy toward the Balkans and, a few days later, persuaded NATO to declare a zone around Sarajevo free of Bosnian Serb heavy weapons.

But what looks like a simple cause-effect relationship looked different to those making the policy. Here again, just days before, Christopher had presented to his senior government colleagues a plan for more aggressive U.S. action in Bosnia. He and others had become alarmed at the way U.S.-European disputes over Bosnia were debilitating NATO.

A senior State Department official was in a meeting on the new Bosnia policy when the mortaring occurred. He recalls worrying that the new policy would be seen, incorrectly, as a response to the massacre. The images did force the Clinton administration to respond quickly in public and ensured that an internal policy debate that might have lasted for months was telescoped into a few days. But the episode also provides additional evidence that CNN helps officials explain actions they already want to take. The images provided a moment of increased attention to Bosnia that could help justify the administration's policy response. "It was a short window. We took advantage of it. We moved the policy forward. And it was successful," then-White House spokeswoman Dee Dee Myers recalls.

## MYTH No. 5 *The CNN Effect is on the rise.*

Sadly, there is at least preliminary evidence that the public and officials are becoming inoculated against pictures of tragedy or brutality coming across their television screens. "We are developing an ability now to see incomprehensible human tragedy on television and understand no matter how horrible it is, we can't get involved in each and every instance," says White House spokesman Michael McCurry. "We are dulling our senses."

When a mortar again struck the Sarajevo marketplace in August 1995, the images were familiar: pools of blood and shredded limbs. For that reason, McCurry says, they had less impact. The policy response—bombing Bosnian Serbs—was driven instead by NATO's pledge a few weeks earlier to use air power to protect remaining U.N.-declared safe areas. NATO knew it had to make good on the pledge if it was to have any credibility left at all. McCurry's point about the dulling of our senses can be heard in what a viewer told an NBC audience researcher: "If I ever see a child with flies swarming around it one more time, I'm not going to watch that show again."

As with any new technology, people are learning over time to adapt to real-time television. While the danger remains that officials will respond to instant reports on CNN that later turn out to be wrong, several current and former spokespeople say that governments are becoming more sophisticated in dealing with time pressures. "As often as not, we buy ourselves time when things happen," Boucher says. "If we think we need the time to decide, we take the time to decide."

Pentagon spokesman Bacon says, "We do not have a big problem with saying, 'Yeah, this looks really awful, but let's find out what the facts really are.'"

On that day last May when I interviewed Bacon, media images had not pushed the United States further into the Balkan tangle. Rather, NATO bombing and the prospect that U.S. troops might go to Bosnia to rescue U.N. peacekeepers had sent journalists scurrying back to Sarajevo. The story was heating up again.

The CNN Effect is narrower and far more complex than the conventional wisdom holds. In a more perfect world, the news media—especially television—would be a more independent force, pointing out problems and helping set the public agenda. In reality, CNN and its brethren follow newsmakers at least as frequently as they push them or make them feel uncomfortable. The struggle between reporters and officials continues as before—just at a faster pace. ●

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