

REPORT

A NOTE ON THE STATEMENT

The Statement of Principle on Press Access to Military Operations that appears here is a result of a special committee of representatives of print and broadcast journalism organizations including SPJ,SDX. The committee, organized by William C. Marcil, president of ANPA, and Creed Black, president of ASNE, was formed to review the events before, during, and after the American military action in Grenada, and to begin work on a statement of principle regarding press access to future military operations. It met initially on November 30 in Washington.

During the following weeks the committee members realized the need for a coordinated response from print and broadcast media. To that end they invited representatives of the two broadcast journalism organizations, along with the magazine editors' group, to join them.

The statement was written by Edward R. Cony of The Wall Street Journal and issued January 10 following the committee's second meeting in New York.

The statement has been sent to General John Vessey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who has appointed retired major general Winant Sidle to head a panel to study the Grenada issues. The committee is awaiting the government's response.

A Statement of Principle on Press Access to Military Operations

This statement was developed by a special committee of senior representatives of these organizations: American Newspaper Publishers Association; American Society of Newspaper Editors; The Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi; Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press; Associated Press Managing Editors; The Associated Press; United Press International; National Association of Broadcasters; Radio-Television News Directors Association; and American Society of Magazine Editors.

Because a free society's press is not — and should not be — monolithic, no statement can ever be said to be "the position" of "the press." What follows is the carefully considered work of the experienced individuals serving on a special committee from the above organizations, formed after the government denied to the public independent press reports about U.S. military operations in Grenada.

I. We strongly believe that:

First, the highest civilian and military officers of the government should reaffirm the historic principle that American journalists, print and broadcast, with their professional equipment, should be present at U.S. military operations. And the news media should reaffirm their recognition of the importance of U.S. military mission security and troop safety. When essential, both groups can agree on coverage conditions which satisfy safety and security imperatives while, in keeping with the spirit of the First Amendment, permitting independent reporting to the citizens of our free and open society to whom our government ultimately is accountable.

Second, the highest civilian and military officers of the U.S. government should reaffirm that military plans should include planning for press access, in keeping with past traditions. The expertise of government public affairs officers during the planning of the recent Grenada military operations could have met the interests both of the military and the press to everyone's benefit.

Third, the military study group — appointed by General John Vessey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and headed by retired Major General Winant Sidle — which is to make recommendations to the government about media-military cooperation, should closely consider the above two points.

The study group also should consult with

military operations experts and make recommendations on how to assure both mission security/troop safety and prompt media access.

Fourth, appropriate committees of the Congress should hold hearings to: develop the historic record of media-military relations more fully, including accumulation of relevant documents; develop the facts of the government's handling of media access in Grenada more fully; and demonstrate how wise leaders can satisfy always the joint imperatives of effective military operations and of a timely flow to a free citizenry by a free press of independently obtained information.

II. We believe these things because:

Since the Revolutionary War, American journalists traditionally have been allowed to accompany American troops on military operations, even when those actions depended upon the element of surprise.

Such access has furthered the vital interest of the public in having independent accounts of the actions of our uniformed men and women in combat, beyond those reports issued by government officials.

Mission security and troop safety interests have been protected — when essential — by limiting the number of journalists accompanying the troops, by

voluntary reporting restraints, by limited censorship of information that might aid the enemy, or by delay in the filing of dispatches; but *not* by exclusion of all journalists. Exclusion of journalists never has been deemed appropriate except in small, clearly covert, intelligence or commando-type hit-and-run operations.

We recognize the presence of two requirements: the requirement that the government conduct effective military operations, and the requirement that the public, via a free press, be independently informed about the actions of its government. Accommodations, representing good faith cooperation between the government and the media, have wisely avoided a direct clash in the courts or in the Congress between these two imperatives.

Unfortunately, such historic accommodations were neither sought nor achieved by the government during the recent Grenada operations. Rather than allowing a small pool of reporters to accompany American forces during the initial phase of an operation involving several thousand U.S. military personnel, the government excluded the American media from the island for more than two days. Thus, during the crucial, early days of the operation, when public concern and interest was most intense, the public was denied an independent source of information. The government's shifting justifications for this unprecedented exclusion — the need for surprise, the safety of reporters, too many reporters, or danger to the troops — either were unfounded or could have been met by proper planning and execution of traditional news-coverage practices.

III. In conclusion

We believe prompt media access to U.S. military operations can and should be allowed by the government. And we strongly urge government officials to assure that historic free press reporting to the American public about military activities will be a planned part of future operations under conditions which also assure mission security and troop safety.

Our society remains healthy and free primarily because our public has an independent source of information about its government. Preservation of this principle is essential to the proper functioning of our constitutional democracy and to our national well-being. Without this open flow of information, our system of self-government would not work. □

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