

CGSC Hosts Media Panel

Story Compiled by Maj. Enrique T. Vasquez, Class PAO

Fort Leavenworth, Kan. – For decades since the end of the Vietnam War, American military officers have distrusted the media. Even with the recent media embed program during Iraqi Freedom, some U.S. officers remain skeptical about the media's role during combat operations. On March 4, more than 1200 U.S. military and international field grade military officers who are attending the Command and General Staff School at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., received a rare opportunity to query a panel of four foreign journalists on the role of the media.

Moderating the panel was the renowned Fred Frances, former senior correspondent for NBC News. For most of his 30 years at NBC News, Francis focused on national security, military and diplomatic issues. He has been a staple of the NBC News with Tom Brokaw, the TODAY show, DATELINE and MSNBC, serving as a White House correspondent.

The four member panel consisted of foreign journalists Patrícia Campos Mello, Washington Correspondent of O Estado de São Paulo (one of Brazil's leading daily newspapers), Misha Solodovnikov, Washington bureau chief for RTR TV; Joyce Karam, Washington correspondent for Al-Hayat newspaper; and Matthias Rueb, Washington Bureau Chief of Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.

The purpose of this panel was to enhance the military's understanding of the media's role by allowing panelists to answer questions according to Frances.

“The more exposure young field grade officers have to international reporters or reporters like me, the more they can understand the media,” said Frances.

Getting used to the media on the battlefield can remain hard to digest but it is something that members of the military will face in the future.

“Officers don’t have to agree with our profession or how we cover the news, they just have to understand the media will get their job done with or without them,” he said.

Although Frances often spoke frankly he also let everyone know the importance the media plays in mass communications.

“I thought it was unique that both Frances and Solodovnikov (Russian international journalist) confirmed the media as having a strategic communications role. They said, ‘the media allows for the message of the Secretary of Defense and the military to be on the same plane,’” said Maj. Christopher Kuzio, CGSC student.

The media panel itself provided more insight on what the limits of the media are in some parts of the world.

“The media in the Arabic world is not like the media in the United States. We do not have the infrastructure American media has. In my country I cannot publish certain things which are politically sensitive -- many of my stories are edited,” said Karem.

“I once published an article that angered the Syrian people, as a result I could not travel by car through Syria,” he said. “ ... In the Middle East there are many sensitive issues we cannot write about.”

Although, the panelists presented a clear message that news in foreign lands is often censored, the media in the U.S. remains a viable outlet for the military to tell its story. In addition, the media must be dealt with by leaders at all levels.

“Media engagement is a management responsibility, it is not going away, so get used to dealing with the media,” said Frances.

Frances and the accompanying panel members let the audience know that governments often have an agenda and the media is often used as the tool. To paraphrase Frances, in Washington ‘The leak is the coin of the realm.’

Frances and his colleagues spent time educating the audience on how the media is used and why military officers should engage the media.

“Military officers have to be able to craft a message and interact with us [the media], somebody has to talk to us and if we are in the field with them, they send the best message to the American people,” said Frances.

“The American people want to hear from the Soldiers. The more they talk, the less I have to talk. My mission here is to get them to understand they have to talk to the media,” he said.

The importance of the panel and the learning value of the event were evident to one of the CGSC cadre.

“I think it is a very good opportunity for students to hear from international journalists so they can view what is important to foreign media and compare that to

what is important to U.S. media ,” said Lt. Col. Justin Kidd, chief, CGSC U.S. Student Division.

“I think this is a positive event and the school should continue having these panels because it allows our officers to learn about the media by asking hardball questions,” he said.