

# AMERICA RALLIES ROUND THE TV SET

## WATCHING THE WAR HAS STIRRED OUR EMOTIONS AS NEVER BEFORE

By Jeff Greenfield

It is different from anything that has happened before. There are familiar fragments, pieces of a puzzle that we have seen in other times. But there has never been anything like the way that television has colored, shadowed, illuminated and distorted the war in the Persian Gulf.

Yes, there have been other times when we sat transfixed by what we were seeing on our screens. It happened when television showed us something we had never seen before, like the first televised debate between Presidential candidates in 1960.

It happened when we needed to connect with an overwhelming event, like



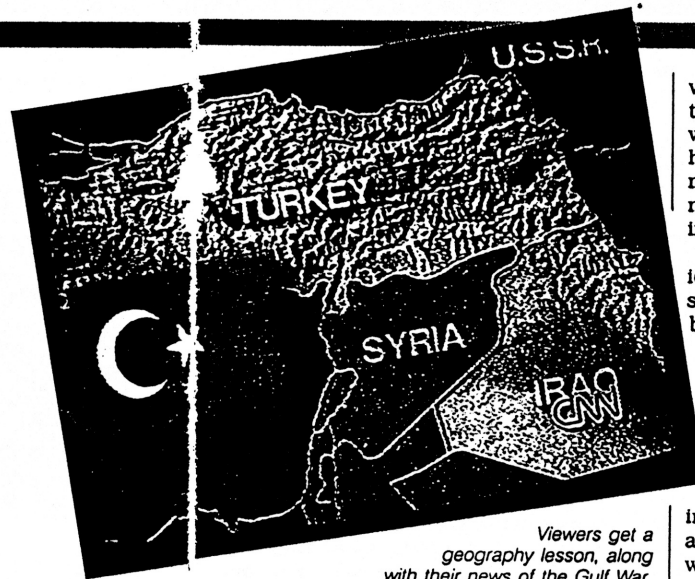
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the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963, or the Challenger space-shuttle disaster in 1986. It still happens, to a greater or lesser extent, with the World Series and the Super Bowl.

All of these events, however, were sharply defined, sharply limited; we watched them as an act of celebration, or education, or catharsis. Now, however, we watch a story—the very word “story” almost seems an obscenity—with no shape, no structure, no end time.

It is a story that combines all the elements of high drama—conflict, up-

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Viewers get a geography lesson, along with their news of the Gulf War.

heaval, destruction, life and death itself—with one quality that has stirred the passion of nations from the days of papyrus to the advent of newspapers to the satellite era: the commitment of a nation to war.

No matter what our ideology, no matter what our view about the war's wisdom or necessity, it is impossible to forget that it is our children, our parents, our neighbors whose lives are now at risk. Drive through any town, any neighborhood, and you will see the yellow ribbons, the flags, the attempt of people to link themselves with the fate of the men—and women—in the Gulf. And because it is a story about our country, and our men and women, we gather around the screen, and we watch.

We watch almost hypnotically; a Times-Mirror survey re-

vealed that half of us literally cannot turn the TV set off. And yet we watch with a growing sense of frustration, a hunger to hear every fragment of information linked with the knowledge that much of what we learn we will unlearn in the next half hour.

And this, perhaps, is the most significant, most troublesome aspect of television's first “real-time” war: the uneasy blend of instant, immediate, round-the-world, round-the-clock access to information that is inherently incomplete, fragmentary or downright wrong. Both in terms of what we are learning, and what this kind of access may be doing to us, it may well prove to be immeasurably more important than any other question about television's impact on the war—and on ourselves.

In one sense, what happened in the first days of the Persian Gulf War was no different than TV's performance in any crisis: the capacity to “go live,” to wire the nation, or the world, involves a clear trade-off between speed on the one hand, and accuracy and context on the other. →

Iraqi president Saddam Hussein (center) reviewing his troops in Kuwait, shortly before the Allied bombing of Baghdad began.



In normal times, a correspondent might call in an unconfirmed rumor to his news desk. That correspondent, along with researchers, editors and producers, could spend hours tracking that rumor down. By nightfall, the story would wind up either on the evening news—or in the wastebasket.

In a crisis, however, the editorial function often collapses. Correspondents will tell an anchor about a rumor on the air. The viewer learns about it at the same time the anchor does. Remember during the 1981 assassination attempt on President Reagan, when the three broadcast networks reported the death of press secretary James Brady, and one reported that the President was undergoing open-heart surgery? Neither report proved true.

This process is inevitable; it has already happened more than once in the Gulf War's opening phase. "Sources" reported that Israel was under a nerve-gas attack; "sources" reported that Jerusalem had been hit by an Iraqi Scud missile. Traditionally, the debate over instant reporting has involved the danger of these sorts of inaccuracies, set against the speed with which inaccuracies can be corrected.

In fact, the real impact of such ru-

mors may be on the psyche of the viewer. Again and again, we have seen reporters caught in the act of trying to gather the news, often under the most trying of circumstances. In other times, we saw film of reporters and cameramen in Vietnam, interrupting their reports to take cover as a firefight broke out. But never before have we flipped around the dial to see reporters, live, reporting with their gas masks on, their voices clearly, understandably, reflecting a sense of danger. Never have we seen so many news gatherers trying to separate fact from rumor, interrupting themselves to ask a colleague for the latest scrap of information.

Indeed, given the fact that computers now link the world with instant information, we have at times seen anchors in their offices in New York or Washington tell their colleagues in Israel and Saudi Arabia what has actually been happening in those countries—before their eyes and ears on the scene even knew about it.

News gathering is an inherently messy business. It's been said that no one who loves laws or sausages should ever watch either one being made, and the same can be said of journalism. In normal times, journalists get to present



U.S. Air Force tape of a direct hit made on the headquarters of the Iraqi Air Force.

their product with all the leavings neatly swept away. The Gulf War coverage has shown viewers exactly how disorganized, sloppy and unappetizing the process can be.

Viewers have been able to see reporters asking questions at live military briefings—questions that are sometimes repetitive, impolite, or just plain stupid. They have seen and heard early, wildly optimistic assessments of the war qualified by later, harder-edged reporting—particularly by print journalists, who have the enormous advantage of talking to sources without the need for cameras or microphones, without the need to rush to air.

And, for all the debate about the highly restricted information being supplied to the press by all governments, including the United States, television has inundated viewers with information: military assessments by former officers and intelligence analysts, background reports on the history and geopolitics of the Middle East, live reports from the capital of the nation with which we are at war, reports on how the weapons work, reports about what chemical warfare would mean, reports about the impact of war on the American economy, reports on the environmental impact of a massive oil spill in the Gulf, advice from psychologists about how to deal with the supposed stress that all this news is causing our

children. And maybe it is all too much.

Concerned as Americans are with the safety of the troops and the course of the war, there may simply be more information available than most of us can possibly deal with without succumbing to an overwhelming sense of stress and confusion and frustration and exhaustion.

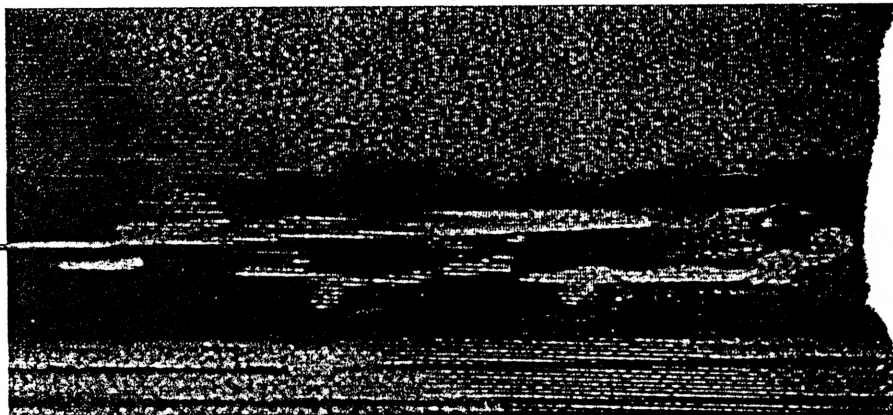
In one sense, it just may be that the best thing the TV net-

works can do for the viewer is to cut back on these reports; to put away their dramatic graphics and promotional ads, to scale the news back to normal times, to keep their eyes and ears on the other stories—the potential re-Stalinization of the Soviet Union, for example—and to hunker down for a war that may go on for some time. (Ask yourself: can the networks really stay on this war footing for three months? Six months?)

But that may be asking the impossible—of the networks and the public. Even though the information we are getting may be incomplete, censored, sometimes wrong, even though it has made millions of us feel more vulnerable than we need to be (those TV reporters with gas masks are, after all, 6000 miles away), millions of us have become hooked on this story that is both incredibly dramatic and genuinely important.

If that is the case, then the networks need to cover this war with one thought that stays in the forefront of the minds of every reporter, every anchor, every analyst, every producer. Perhaps it should be cast in bronze and put up in every newsroom.

What is that thought? Sometimes, the most important thing you can tell the viewer is encapsulated in three little words: "I don't know." (END)



A television image seen often in the last few weeks and guaranteed to arouse viewers' emotions: a B-52 takes off, carrying bombs for Saddam.