

MR FLESHER

Press Minister:

You need do no
more than glance at Bernard's
note and be conclusive. The
only issue is whether the report should
now be published. Agree? Y

Yes, Mr.

You asked for my advice on the report on Protection of Military Information (or censorship, as it will be called) to which I gave evidence. See Annex I (written) and Annex II (the summary of my oral evidence). 7/12

General Beach's Committee, on which the media were strongly represented, has produced a very workmanlike report which is in many respects in line with my thinking, and reflects it at a substantial number of points.

It comes out in favour of some form of official censorship (paras 134-135).

It recommends a discretionary system of press censorship in the event of a major conventional war (para 138) - ie. one to which submission is voluntary but which carries penalties if material used contravenes regulations. (The Committee perhaps naturally places more reliance on voluntary response but it is only fair to say I moved towards their position under cross-examination).

It places the emphasis on field vetting rather than on central vetting. (I remain doubtful about this).

It very helpfully deals with such problems of close-up pictures of casualties; the problems of public morale, disinformation, briefing and taking the media more into the Government's confidence; and the difficulties of even discussing censorship in some continental countries.

The report emphasises the limited value of the Falklands experience but takes every opportunity to forward the discussion of problems which that conflict threw up.

The Government is not committed to accept all or any of the recommendations. But I am sure that the report should be published, as recommended on December 14, to further public discussion.

Action is being taken in Whitehall to consider the report's recommendations and I have been invited to take part.

B. INGHAM
7 December 1983

COMMITTEE ON CENSORSHIP

NOTE FROM THE CHIEF PRESS SECRETARY,
NO 10 DOWNING STREET

1. This note sets out some thoughts, based partly on the Falklands experience, on censorship before and during military operations.

Qualifications

2. The writer was a journalist for 18 years first on a local weekly; then in a district office for regional morning and evening newspapers (The Yorkshire Post and Yorkshire Evening Post); then as Northern Industrial Correspondent for the Yorkshire Post; and finally spent 5 years on The Guardian, the last two of which were as a Labour correspondent in London. Since then I have been successively Head of Information at the National Board for Prices and Incomes and in the Departments of Employment and Energy. I have no experience as a journalist of covering military operations.

3. As Chief Press Secretary at No 10 my responsibilities in relation to the Falklands operation were set out in written evidence to the House of Commons Defence Committee (see Annex I). In that capacity I had no direct experience of censorship - since no formal system of censorship operated during the Falklands campaign - but I was confronted daily during the military phase of the operation with the consequences of attempts to exercise some control over reportage from the theatre.

Background

4. The comments set out below are framed against a certain background:

- (i) my views on censorship as expressed in oral evidence to the Commons Defence Committee (Pg. 395, Minutes of Evidence); in that evidence I felt that the media might have been

happier with "cast iron censorship"; and I expressed the view that I did not think I could trust the press without censorship in a military operation because of the competitive pressures - "and I do not think they (the media) would want to be asked to bear that trust";

- (ii) the Defence Committee's view that there is probably only limited scope for D. Notices in war time conditions;
- (iii) the Defence Committee's belief that censorship can be justified;
- (iv) my conviction that the Falklands operation is of limited, though nonetheless valuable, use in examining censorship to protect military information. This is because the circumstances were probably unique in the extent to which first the Argentines and then the UK had control over access to the theatre of operations, and in the lack of immediate television from the front;
- (v) my regret, notwithstanding the limited value of the Falklands experience, that the responsibilities and role of the media in a democratic society at war have been given so little attention in the wake of the 1982 campaign.

Approach

5. My approach to censorship starts from the definition of Government objectives. In any conflict the clear and unequivocal policy of any democratic Government must be to secure its military objectives with the minimum loss of life while at the same time retaining the maximum public support for the operation.

6. The prime aim must be to win and safeguard life but holding and carrying public opinion runs it a close second. The two are not necessarily at all times mutually consistent.

7. However, it is important not to have one's thinking circumscribed by the Falklands experience. For a substantial period the Falklands Task Force was the unused strong right arm of diplomacy. A number of the most senior political correspondents either did not believe or were very sceptical that the UK would ultimately use force. I was forced once to remonstrate with a most senior broadcaster, who was seeking Government help in attempting to strike a deal with the Argentines over television facilities, that the UK Government was not in the business of journalism but of winning. War was never formally declared.

8. Once again the Falklands experience is shown to be atypical. We need to put ourselves in different circumstances, ranging from immediate invasion of NATO territory (or that of an ally) to a build up of tension leading to the likelihood of hostilities - both in areas which are easily accessible to the media - ie. press, radio and television.

9. But, whatever the circumstances, the questions which arise are:

- (i) can censorship be justified?
- (ii) if so how is that censorship to be defined?
- (iii) how and when is it to be introduced - should there be consultation or decree?
- (iv) how is it to be operated in the case of:
 - (a) press;
 - (b) radio;
 - (c) television; and
 - (d) film?
- (v) will the chosen method of operation be effective (and therefore fair)?

10. I discuss each point in turn below, recognising that there are probably no finite answers and that timing, extent, method and presentation will vary with circumstances.

Discussion

11. Can censorship be justified? In my view, there is no doubt that it can be justified and that censorship would probably soon come to be demanded by the public in circumstances where military operations were being conducted. It should be noted that the general public are probably far more disposed to censorship than the media. Censorship is in any case practised in peacetime by, for example, a refusal to discuss the activities of the SAS, SBS, etc.

12. The need for and extent of censorship should turn primarily on military requirements and the safeguarding of life. Its justification will be more readily accepted if these are seen to be the motivating forces for its introduction. Of course, military objectives will be likely to be more easily achieved with the minimum of loss of life if public opinion is solid at home. It is difficult wholly to divorce military requirements and public relations. And censorship will be widely recognised as necessary - indeed not merely desirable but essential - the clearer the threat to the country or its interests is perceived. But censorship introduced - or believed to have been introduced - primarily for public relations reasons will be less acceptable.

13. This last point however raises a particularly acute problem in relation to television and film. It was a problem left entirely unresolved by the Falklands campaign because of the inability to satellite out immediate film. Pictures of operations which might pass the censor in purely military terms may nonetheless have serious implications for public support in the UK - the so-called Vietnam consequence. What for some may be questions of taste will for others be a matter, to say the least, of military moment. This issue needs to be faced in any consideration of censorship.

14. I for one do not believe that television - any more than the press and radio - can be left to be the sole arbiters of taste or impact on the public in circumstances of war. A democratically elected Government is entitled to identify the public interest and prosecute

it. I write as one who believes that pictures from the Falklands of soldiers on the battlefield with limbs freshly blown off were unhelpful, offensive, unnecessary and to be deplored. That view will conceivably not be shared by all members of the Committee on Censorship. I am however no more impressed with the argument that pictures of war, among other things, can safely be left to television men than I am with the idea that power can safely be left to Governments. Pictures, like power, corrupt the practitioner.

15. In short, I believe that censorship is essential in military conflict; and that it should be exercised openly and unapologetically, and according to as clearly defined principles as possible.

16. What is more, it is my conviction that the media, while conceivably grumbling or even actively opposing censorship, would actually prefer it to a hit or miss system of interfering with coverage. It is my contention that what the media found objectionable in the Falklands situation was the lack of uniformity of control - used as a term indicating mild censorship - and apparent inconsistencies in vetting, rather than censorship per se.

17. It would in fact be odd if the media objected to censorship when their universal protest throughout the Falklands campaign was that they would, of course, do nothing to damage the national interest - without, of course, being able to demonstrate conclusively their reasonable ability to identify that interest.

18. To summarise: in circumstances of military conflict the Government has a duty to identify the national interest and where that requires censorship to exercise it, recognising the need at the same time to carry public opinion with it. The Government's objectives will best be served the more openly censorship is exercised according to clearly defined principles.

19. Given that censorship can be justified, how is that censorship to be defined? In the light of the Falklands experience, and recognising that confusion is an inevitable concomitant of war, I

regard definition as a key to acceptability. The media, like all humanity, like to know where they stand. Like all free born individuals, they object to being messed around. Like all of us, they respond better to a sense of fairness than to a feeling that they are being treated unfairly. Thus I believe the Government's duty in circumstances of armed conflict is not merely to act on censorship, but to act decisively.

20. It follows that clear guidelines need to be established at the outset as to what is and what is not permissible and these need to be communicated both to media and all concerned with communications in Government - eg. Ministers and officials not actually involved in censorship. Given that it is not possible to cater for all circumstances and that judgement will always need to be exercised, the objective should be to set out the principles as clearly as possible. These principles should err on the side of restriction rather than flexibility, if the overall objective is to be served. And they should cover film and sound as well as words. But they should be framed on a practical and commonsense basis rather than a theoretical one, and take due account of the need to carry public opinion (which to repeat may be easier to carry than that of the media).

21. How and when is censorship to be introduced? This is inevitably a political decision based upon military advice. It will be necessary for the Government to be able to demonstrate convincingly that censorship is in the national interest. This will conceivably occur well before the outbreak of any actual hostilities.

22. I do not believe it should be introduced after consultation. It follows from my view that the Government needs to act on censorship decisively (para 19 above) that the Government should do just that. But it should show itself ready to keep the principles, method and operation under review and to receive and take account of representations

23. How is censorship to be operated? This will depend in part on the degree of censorship which will presumably depend in turn on the nature and degree of hostilities. But it is in this area above all that we

need to divorce ourselves from the Falklands experience. Instead, we need to recognise the possibility of conventional war in an area from which it is difficult to exclude journalists who, whatever their nationality, will feed a news-hungry media with news and pictures as red hot as they can get or make them.

24. That reality inevitably will condition the method of censorship. In my view, it is unrealistic to expect effective censorship to be performed at the front. And censorship is only of value - and indeed acceptable - if it is effective. In my view there are three basic requirements:

- dissemination of ground rules/guidelines/principles at the front;
- requirement on all media in the UK to submit their coverage to a censor before use; this will require consideration of the regional and local dimension, given the spread of local radio; do the powers exist?;
- concentration of censorship in London, or the centre of Government.

25. It follows from this that if censorship is to be effective correspondents should be accredited and that the censor should disqualify copy/sound/tape/film from unaccredited correspondents.

Conclusion

26. Censorship is essential - and acceptable- in connection with military operations. Censorship only serves its purpose if it is effective. It is in the public interest, not to mention that of the Armed Services, that if it is introduced it is operated effectively. That also goes for the media who can have no use for an ineffective system which does not mete out uniform treatment. But any system of censorship should be openly introduced and operated according to publicly defined guidelines. Government can confidently introduce censorship in connection with military operations on this basis safe in

the knowledge that, assuming victory is achieved, it will be made to answer for its stewardship in Parliament. And that is where it should answer; not in the press, on radio or on the television screen.

CHIEF PRESS SECRETARY

No 10 DOWNING STREET.

TUESDAY 9 NOVEMBER 1982
[AFTERNOON SITTING]

Members present:

Sir Timothy Kitson, in the Chair

Mr Bernard Conlan
Dr John Gilbert
Mr Michael Marshall

Mr Michael Mates
Mr Chris Patten
Sir Patrick Wall

MEMORANDUM SUBMITTED BY THE CHIEF PRESS SECRETARY,
No. 10 DOWNING STREET [DF 49, 1981-82]

The Government's objective during the crisis can be simply stated: to recover the Falkland Islands and the Dependencies by negotiation, if possible, but if necessary by force of arms, making every effort to minimise the loss of life.

This overall objective, and the recognition from the outset that the use of force might become necessary, set the broad policy framework within which information staff conducted their operations on behalf of Ministers.

Information officers, as servants of policy, sought to help secure the Government's objectives while at the same time preserving their integrity and longer-term effectiveness.

The task of informing the media and, through them the public, of developments in policy, measures and operations rests primarily with the responsible Department. Only that Department is equipped by background, expertise, flow of information and resources properly and fully to inform the media and public, taking account of all the circumstances.

The responsibility cannot be delegated to or assumed by another Department or by the Prime Minister's Press Office. But No. 10 Press Office can and does assist individual Departments to get over their message. It did so during the Falklands crisis on the basis of information supplied by the lead Department which also provided guidance on its presentation. In this case the two main sources of information and guidance were the FCO and MoD.

One of the tasks of the Chief Press Secretary to the Prime Minister is to co-ordinate at official level the presentation of Government policy and measures. In doing so he seeks to ensure that Departments are aware of wider considerations and events in making announcements or conducting information exercises.

During the Falklands crisis the main instrument of co-ordination was a daily meeting lasting some 30 minutes generally attended by representatives of the FCO, MoD, COI, Cabinet Office and the office of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Paymaster General under the chairmanship of the Chief Press Secretary or his deputy. The purpose of the meetings was to take stock of developments and their implications for the public; to bring the Departments and Offices up-to-date with events; to anticipate, in so far as this was possible, events over the next 24 hours; and to agree on or make recommendations about the action required.

In addition, No. 10 Press Office maintained hour by hour contact with those of Departments to keep abreast of events and developments and to secure guidance on the information to be disclosed and its presentation. Where possible, a No. 10 Press Office representative attended Departmental press conferences or briefings.

The Chief Press Secretary and his staff brief a large number of journalists, both British and foreign, in the course of the normal day, both individually and in groups. The demand

The cost of printing and publishing this Minutes of Evidence is estimated by Her Majesty's Stationery Office at £2,802.

for group briefings greatly increased—and was met—during the crisis. The prime sources of information presented in such briefings were the policy Departments—predominantly FCO and MoD. No. 10 Press Office did not take the lead in making announcements about the progress of hostilities or losses and casualties.

After the decision to dispatch the Task Force the Chief Press Secretary came under heavy direct pressure from editors (who believed they would not be represented on board) to make more media places available. He urged MoD Public Relations staff to:

- increase the small number of media places initially set aside; and
- accredit to the Task Force a media team representative of press, radio and television.

The MoD responded by increasing the number of places on offer. But it remained clear that, because of the constraints on the number of media berths available, the heavy demand for places and the marked reluctance of individual newspaper groups (as distinct from BBC/ITN) to contemplate pooling even within their group, MoD was never going to be able to satisfy everyone.

September 1982

9 November

MR BERNARD

1664. Good. Thank you for the evidence you've given by putting to me that the Press Committee lacks credibility and that the lack of trust in it would you call (Mr Ingham) necessarily in on whether it with the media given time, the Taylor, provided operate and do having read it put before whether indeed some of the claim that the difficulty because three Services position is that tion with each on top having would have the help—and the experience of ordinating funding of overall policy.

1665. Could the liaison between during the Falkland (Mr Ingham) about liaison with MoD but as between people. The point No. 10 tried departments to department is ourselves of the I held meetings between 8 April meetings were FCO and other evidence. At each of the participation, and, may we met for made their contribution to the events of the

Item 3: Evidence by Chief Press Secretary, No. 10 (Mr Ingham)

References: (a) CSG(83)29 - Note by Chief Press Secretary,
No. 10.

(b) HCDC Minutes of Evidence, pp 385-397.

16. Mr Ingham began by explaining that the thesis of his paper was that if there were to be censorship it should be effective.

17. His experience during the Falklands conflict was that, while the media might grumble, they would prefer to know where they stood. We needed to make no apologies; where peoples' lives were at stake, censorship was entirely justified. If the war was won, the Government stood to be judged in a democratic Parliament for the way in which it had discharged its responsibilities.

18. Mr Ingham said that although he would prefer to proceed by consent, he had little trust in a voluntary arrangement. The press of the last war was not the media of today. Apart from the fact that there was now television and widespread local radio, the spirit of the media had changed. Parts of it had been hijacked by pressure groups, and the consequences could be seen day after day. Moreover, we now had a society which resented authority. Suspicions about Government integrity had reached a new intensity: people had seen one too many Watergates, and Government was now typically thought either to be chronically inept or else up to no good. He saw this in his work, when he was frequently treated as an inveterate liar, incapable of telling the truth. He believed that if a major war broke out, Fleet Street and television would become more responsible (the provincials and radio caused relatively fewer problems). But there would still be many grey areas. While, therefore, he would prefer a system along 1940 lines, if that were possible, his experience led him to doubt whether it would work. As to practicalities, if making the system work meant placing a censor in every newsroom, so be it. The staff were available in the Ministry of Defence - although ensuring quality could be problematical.

19. Asked about the extent of any censorship, Mr Ingham said that he would not wish to impose censorship purely for public relations reasons. But it was hard to disentangle PR concerns from concern about life and limb, since Servicemen would clearly perform better the more they felt that the public was behind them. A balance must be struck. In some circumstances, it might well be right to delay bad news until a more favourable opportunity arose. But he would not wish, for example, to stop items critical of the Government, or of the military leadership; nor should censorship be imposed for party political advantage.

20. Asked about the apothegm coined in para 14 of his paper ("pictures, like power, corrupt the practitioner") Mr Ingham explained that there were many television people who were mesmerised by pictures and were incapable of lifting their eyes to the wider problems which they could cause. The lesson of Vietnam was that the American had lost. We had been spared the problem during the Falklands conflict, but if instantaneous pictures had been coming in there would have been considerable tension between the Government and the broadcasters, as well as between the broadcasters and the public. It was his regret, as he had said (para 4(v)) in his paper, that the media still refused to face up to the question of what role they should play and what responsibilities they had in a democratic society. While accepting, for example, that it was impossible to report war without referring to its ugly side, he seriously questioned whether it was necessary to show pictures of recognisable soldiers with their limbs freshly blown off.

21. It was suggested that there might be three reasons for ruling such pictures offside:-

a. bad taste;

b.

b. distress to relatives (whether of the individual concerned or generally); or

c. the undermining of morale.

Mr Ingham repeated that he would not impose censorship on grounds of morale: one could not hide the consequences of war, and he had sufficient faith in the British political system to believe that no-one would dare try. He also accepted that the question of good or bad taste was a personal one; but he was doubtful, for reasons mentioned earlier, about leaving it to the broadcasters to decide. It was impossible to avoid distress to the general public; but distress to individuals should be guarded against.

22. Mr Ingham explained that there was one area to which his paper had given insufficient attention: control of the media at the front. It was a good idea, if there were to be war correspondents, to take them aside and explain to them carefully the ground rules. As for our allies, it was to be hoped that they would take a responsible attitude to this question; if they did not take similar action to that which we took there would, of course, be problems: it was therefore vital that NATO get its act together.

23. Asked about delaying information for Parliamentary reasons, Mr Ingham said that he did not believe there needed to be an overridingly tender concern for Parliament in wartime. It was, of course, better "news management" to ensure that a Minister's statement came out first, but the same end could be achieved by an on-the-record statement from himself. The Government could not hamstring itself with Parliamentary hours. Too much emphasis had been put on this at times during the Falklands.

24. On organisation, it was important that the Standing Committee on Information Policy should be chaired by a Cabinet Minister: this element had been lacking during much of the Falklands crisis. The need was for someone of high stature, who could "square the awkward squad". Moreover, if a Minister rather than Ian MacDonald had made the public statements, much of the Parliamentary dimension would have been made easier. Statements could either be made by the Chairman of the SCIP or devolved to the Minister in charge of the relevant department.

25. Finally, on disinformation, Mr Ingham said that this should play no part in public relations. To maintain his credibility he had scrupulously to eschew it.