

In Gulf War, Managing News

NY TIMES 6/21/92

By HERBERT MITGANG

Read together, "Second Front" by John R. MacArthur and "Hotel Warriors" by John J. Fialka are just about the most exciting and damning books on the Persian Gulf war to have been published thus far. Anyone who thinks that the First Amendment functioned at full throttle during that conflict will be surprised by their revelations.

Mr. MacArthur, the publisher of Harper's Magazine and a journalist, jumps right into his strongly opinionated book with a devastating scene in which the Washington bureau chiefs of ABC, CBS, NBC and CNN appear deferentially before Prince Bandar bin Sultan, Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to Washington.

They've come to his mansion in Virginia in August 1990 to seek visas for their correspondents because American soldiers are being sent to save his country from possible invasion by Iraq. The Prince's English is excellent; so is his understanding of the networks, thanks to his American lobbyist, Fred Dutton, whom the Saudis paid \$1.4 million in regular compensation and a bonus from December 1989 through December 1990.

Mr. MacArthur, who writes as if he enjoys the candor of his convictions, editorializes:

"One may ask why the media representatives of a nation of 250 million people, which had offered to spill its citizens' blood in defense of a kingdom of 16 million subjects, needed to plead for tickets to the coming conflict. The answer is simple: President

Bush, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, and U.S. Central Command wanted the networks to beg on Bandar's doorstep. It was convenient for the Administration, and would set the tone for all that was to come."

Then he says (recalling how the press was shut out of the invasions of Grenada and Panama), "From the moment Bush committed troops to Saudi Arabia on Aug. 7, the Administration never intended to allow the press to cover a war in the Persian Gulf in any real sense, and it intended to tightly manage what coverage it would permit."

"Second Front" is Mr. MacArthur's term for the other, less obvious war that was being waged against the news media — "newspaper against newspaper, network against network, and television against print" — for visas, privileges, interviews, transportation and access to the troops. The game, he says, was to manage the facts from the comfort of the official briefing front instead of showing the real war on the gritty battle front.

Mr. MacArthur has dug up censorship documents and interviewed par-

ticipants to support many of his opinions. He quotes Pete Williams, the Pentagon spokesman, as saying, "Every decision that we made during Just Cause was intended to facilitate open, timely media coverage of the operation." To which the author adds, "This, of course, was a lie."

In lively passages, President Bush is accused of "milking the flag." Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf is remembered not as Stormin' Norman, the news media star, but as the deputy commander of "the botched U.S. invasion of Grenada." Roger Rosenblatt, the Life magazine writer, is ridiculed for a sentimental column about children that the author labels "perhaps the outstanding example of big-media rationalizations for the slaughter of innocent civilians." Andy Rooney, the CBS "60 Minutes" humorist, is pilloried for a jingoistic essay in which he said, "This war in the gulf has been, by all odds, the best war in modern history, not only for

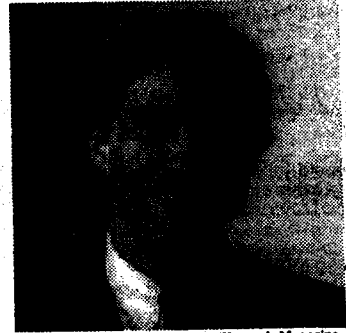
and the News Media

Second Front

Censorship and Propaganda
in the Gulf War

By John R. MacArthur

260 pages. Hill & Wang, \$20.



Vivian Selbo/Harper's Magazine

America, but for the whole world, including Iraq, probably."

In "Second Front," Mr. MacArthur insists that from the White House on down the idea was to beat the Vietnam syndrome with a winning war, blame the messenger as unpatriotic for any bad news, and keep the American press under control and the public in the dark.

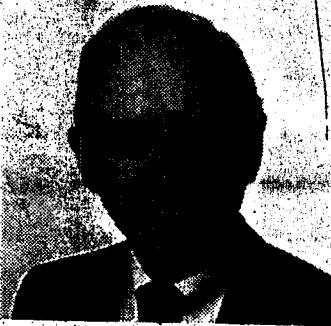
Not all the correspondents in Mr. Fialka's "Hotel Warriors" covered the gulf war in air-conditioned comfort. The author, a reporter for The Wall Street Journal, spent four and a half months in Saudi Arabia during

Hotel Warriors

Covering the Gulf War

By John J. Fialka

78 pages. Woodrow Wilson Center Press/
John Hopkins University Press. \$9.75,
paperback.



the gulf crisis and was among the 10 percent of reporters who somehow managed to accompany units in the field. His cogently written book is packed with first-hand observations and powerful conclusions.

Mr. Fialka writes that after all the experience of war coverage in World War II, Korea and Vietnam — and awareness of the Pentagon's blackout of the press in Grenada and Panama — there was "no coherent policy" in the gulf war. In the literal sense, military censorship wasn't the problem. Instead, it was access to the soldiers and the front. The pool sys-

tem (shared information by a limited number of reporters) didn't work and, despite all the fancy equipment, technology stopped at the edge of the battlefield. It took hours and sometimes days to transmit words and pictures.

In retrospect, the author makes a humorous point: the old interservice rivalries were alive and well during the gulf war. The Marines courted journalists; the Army not only blocked them but actually arrested reporters who broke the pool rules by risking their necks for news. If the public relations rivalry between the two services involved in the ground war had been a basketball game, he writes, "the score would have been Marines 149, Army 10." As a result, he says, the public received a truncated, distorted picture of the war.

The pool rules were sometimes circumvented for reporters who were willing to get on the team. "General Schwarzkopf gave many interviews during the war," Mr. Fialka writes. "He often used the opportunity as another lever of control over the media, which he watched with an ever-vigilant eye. Reporters whose stories he liked got interviews. Those whose stories didn't pass muster with the general often found the opportunity postponed, sometimes indefinitely."

"Second Front" and "Hotel Warriors" are wonderfully readable books about the news media and the war. Neither book goes into the aims and motives behind the American engagement in the war itself — the underlying reasons for the censorship and the propaganda. But that's another story.