Even Critics of War Say the White House Spun It With Skill
By Elisabeth Bumiller

The second Persian Gulf war was not only a runaway victory for the United States military, but for another aggressive force that fired off round-the-clock verbal cruise missiles: the White House communications operation.

That is the assessment of the Bush administration's wartime public relations campaign by both its supporters and critics, who say the spin operation was extraordinarily successful in shaping a positive battlefield narrative, at least for American audiences. They say the effort floundered in the Arab world.

Its success at home can be traced to three major factors.

First was the repeated use of phrases that critics branded propaganda, like "coalition forces" and "death squads," that became part of the accepted language of war. Second was the powerful cinéma vérité journalism of reporters and photographers, whose words and pictures humanized the American soldiers they were with. Third, but not least, was the message discipline of a White House that plotted appearances by top officials on a daily "communications grid," ensuring that in the first half of the day there was a news briefing by an administration official every two hours, and that everyone was saying more or less the same thing.

"As far as how you justify a war, they've pretty much done it by formula," said Robert L. Ivie, a professor of communication and culture at Indiana University who has spent his career studying the rhetoric of war. "You construct the image of the enemy as savage and barbarian. Then there are all sorts of efforts to show that the good guys represent the forces of civilization freedom, democracy, human rights. And of course there's the implication that we fight on the side of God."

Supporters of the administration say the narrative worked because it reflected the truth.

"Spin is useful in politics, but war is real," said William Kristol, the editor of the conservative magazine *The Weekly Standard* who long advocated an invasion of Iraq. "I think reality trumps spin and communications strategy. We won the war pretty quickly and impressively, and the Iraqi people are liberated, and those facts dominate everything."

The first important element in the communications strategy, the repeated use of phrases that promoted administration policy, started before the war even began. As early as last summer, President Bush's principal advisers carefully planned a campaign to characterize the war as a blow for freedom.

"We would look at the question of how might you have regime change thought of as liberation rather than occupation?" said a participant in one of the long meetings where officials polished their strategy over the months leading up to the war. "That was a question put before the principals, and then there would be a paper done on it."

The Clinton-era policy of "regime change," or the euphemism for the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, led to another important word. From the start of the conflict, administration officials consistently called Mr. Hussein's administration the "regime," a pejorative version of the neutral "government." Jesse Sheidlower, an editor at the *Oxford English Dictionary*, described the nuance: "Government is the catch-all term, administration makes you sound more organized and regime makes you sound more despotic."

Dan Bartlett, the White House communications director, readily agreed. "It better describes what they are," he said. "It's a ruthless, self-appointed dictatorship."

Similarly, he said using the term "death squads" to describe Iraq's paramilitary fedayeen, was no accident.

"Because fedayeen means something like `dying for a noble cause,' it has a positive connotation in the Arab world," Mr. Bartlett said. "It's not a positive thing they were doing."

Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld and Gen. Richard B. Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, were the first in the administration to use the phrase, on March 28 and 29, and by March 31 the president had employed it to describe Iraqis "ordered to fight or die by Saddam's death squads."

Mr. Bush also regularly referred to Mr. Hussein's troops and fighters as "thugs," most notably at a meeting of Iraqi exiles in the Roosevelt Room on April 4, when the president said the United States was "slowly peeling" the hands of Mr. Hussein and his thugs off Iraqi throats.

Many critics say the most blatant use of loaded language was the term "coalition forces," repeated on television and in the pages of newspapers, including this one, to describe what was principally a coalition of only two armies, from the United States and Britain, with help from small numbers of Scud-hunting Australian commandos in western Iraq and Polish troops assisting Navy Seals in the south. Though it was only Americans who advanced to Baghdad (the British had the task of securing the southern city of Basra), Mr. Bartlett said the term, in use since the first gulf war, was used because it was "just obvious."

The second major factor in the successful communications strategy, the Pentagon decision to "embed" more than 500 reporters and photographers with invading troops, produced first-hand accounts for Americans that generally pleased editors and television news directors. The bottom line for the White House was that it was helpful.

"It served the Bush administration by providing more sympathetic coverage, by being understanding of the soldiers and therefore of that slice of war that each reporter saw," said Marvin Kalb, the veteran CBS News correspondent who is now a senior fellow at the Shorenstein Center for Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard. "If a reporter were to take a critical tone toward the administration, there were all these other reporters balancing that negative thrust."

The third factor in the communications strategy, the message discipline, began in December 2002, when the top communications officials from the White House, the Pentagon, the State Department and Britain instituted a daily 9:30 a.m. conference call about the theme of the day and who was delivering it. By the time the war started, the call was generally led by Tucker Eskew, the director of the White House office of global communications, which was created to spread the American message on the war in Iraq. Mr. Eskew made sure that the president, the defense secretary and the secretary of state or their press officers were briefing at regular intervals.

As a result, cable television viewers could watch a steady stream of the administration's message starting at 7 a.m. Eastern time in the United States, when Brig. Gen. Vincent K. Brooks briefed at the $250,000 set created at the United States Central Command's forward headquarters in Doha, Qatar.

The briefing was deliberately timed, White House officials said, to run live on the morning news shows and to put the administration's stamp on overnight battlefield developments. General Brooks, a telegenic West Point graduate who never veered from the administration's message, was prepped beforehand by James Wilkinson, a former deputy in Mr.

Bartlett's White House communications office who had been dispatched to oversee communications in Doha.

As each day progressed, Ari Fleischer, the White House spokesman, would hold three sessions with reporters, who could also be briefed at the Pentagon, the State Department and from time to time at special sessions, such as those held for foreign reporters in Washington. British officials held their own briefings in London.

White House officials acknowledge that the communications effort in the Arab world largely failed, and that they have an onerous task ahead in promoting the reconstruction and relief efforts that are to begin in Baghdad. Margaret Tutwiler, the ambassador to Morocco, the State Department spokeswoman during the 1991 gulf war and a longtime Bush family loyalist, was dispatched last week to handle the task.

"It's going to be a challenge," Mr. Bartlett said.

April 20, 2003
The New York Times