



If You Call Games *Wars*, What Do You Do When You Get Real One?

By [Kenn Finkel](#)

Some 18 hours after finishing a writing/editing workshop for editors at the American Press Institute's Copy Editing Boot Camp in Reston, Va., Sept. 10, 2001, I got goose bumps during a follow-up workshop the next day, which was Tuesday, the day of the hijackings and terrorism that plunged the United States into crisis.

I had told the workshop participants Monday that, if newspapers trivialized war in *non-war* situations, they might be at a loss for words when they had to deal with a war. These trivial references are clichés that cheapen newspapers. They are almost always in bad taste, even the most innocuous ones.

Most important, they damage credibility, which is the one thing that newspapers have going for them as they compete with other so-called news media.

The example I had used was a reference by a newspaper that had run a large headline over an advance story on the October 2000 World Series between the Mets and the Yankees. The headline?

War!

I said the paper had lost credibility with headlines like that because, one day, it would have to use that same one-word headline over a far more serious story. It didn't occur to me that I might be proved right only a day later.

Some editors will tell you that readers understand the difference between a sports context and a hard-news context — and that war references are harmless (even healthy) hyperbole in sports stories. ***Those editors are deluding themselves.*** If you refer to baseball games as wars, you don't have much hyperbole to call on when you get a real war.

I spent some time with the API workshop participants on the subject of how the United States

has become de-sensitized because we haven't had a real war since Vietnam. I was an editor at Newsday and later the Miami Herald during Vietnam, when more than 58,000 Americans were killed. I remember that we were sensitive about references to wars, bombs, aerial attacks, etc., then, and I discussed this at the workshop.

In the 1970s, many of us had relatives and friends who were losing their lives in Vietnam, and we had cringed at the thought of referring to a long pass in a football game as a bomb in newspaper stories.

But Vietnam has been at a low point in our conscious thinking for more than 25 years, and we haven't been as sensitive as we once were.

Until Sept. 11, 2001.

There's an example that I use in my workshops, although I can't remember the exact wording of the headlines or which paper did this or when. In fact this example might be apocryphal, although it *does* make the point. It involves an explosion in Tel Aviv, a result of the constant Israeli/Palestinian fighting.

On page A-1, there was this six-column, 72-point headline:

Bomb kills 23 in Tel Aviv restaurant

On page B-1 (the sports front), there was this six-column, 72-point headline:

Bomb kills Packers in final seconds

Where was the perspective at that paper?

On Sept. 10, most of my API workshop participants discussed that example casually, but I got the feeling that they didn't think it was the highest item on their priority lists.

It moved up the next day.

Here are some examples of tasteless war cliché references that I have clipped from newspapers (in a few cases, they're examples that colleagues have sent to me):

- A threat of war hangs over the nation's capital. (Referring to a hockey game between Washington and the New York Islanders.)
- It happened to western civilization at Pearl Harbor. It happened to Mao Zedong on the Long March. And it happened to North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Carmichael Auditorium

on Feb. 11.

- The Gators had suffered casualties by the dozen — including several apparent cases of battle fatigue.
- . . . the same kind of nuclear deterrence as Georgetown.
- Eighty-five of the yards came on a bomb to Willie Gillespie in the third quarter.
- Rosburg made a Kamikaze start in an effort to beat the turbocharged Ferraris to the first turn.
- "It was a war out there," coach Ed Hayes said of his Bradford Eagles' 6-0 victory over the Bartlett Panthers.
- The Ohio State infantry attack settled in for some trench warfare before the heavy artillery came out in style.
- . . . the body count was staggering.
- There will be a race within a race at Churchill Downs Saturday: the battle between Eternal Prince and Spend a Buck for the early lead in the Kentucky Derby. As in thermonuclear war, all the combatants are likely to wind up as losers.
- War, Major Soccer League style, will continue at 7:35 tonight when the Kansas City Comets visit the Wichita Wings in Kansas Coliseum.

The latest casualty report indicates that the Wings will be able to suit up a full compliment of gladiators after their numbers had dwindled to 13 in a losing battle Tuesday night in Cleveland.

Able-bodied men are essential when facing the Comets, who have used muscle and physical intimidation in sweeping their three conflicts with the Wings this season. They used the same tactics to take a playoff series, three games to one, at the end of last season.

In those games, the Wings' response to Comets aggression and pressure was only slightly stronger than Saddam Hussein's response to the Allied blitz.

- All week long Marvin Hagler had been saying he was preparing to fight a war against Thomas Hearns. Monday night Hagler dropped the bomb. HALT — the Hagler Arms Limitation Talks — may begin as soon as the world powers can agree on a meeting place.

(Later in the story) . . . Referee Richard Steele stopped the war at 2:01 of the third round.

- Bodies were flying in the Laker-Clipper skirmish last night — as if both teams had marched into a minefield.

After being repulsed for years like Cossacks charging a machine gun nest, the

Clippers were good and ready to change dog tags with the Lakers. But, though they've lost some comrades to boot hill in this battle of a basketball season, the Lakers still run this neighborhood.

- (This ran in a Texas newspaper — Nov. 29, 1963:) Tommy Wade, as anonymous as a Secret Service agent this season, stepped in and foiled an assassination plot that almost took the life of another of America's No. 1 citizens, the University of Texas, Thursday at College Station.

(From the same story:) ... the Aggies amazed the 39,500 fans by the ruthless way they went about their assassination plot.

(And more:) ... Senior Aggie quarterback Jim Keller drew the sniper's job.

(And more:) ... Keller fired only three shots before he had the Longhorns apparently mortally wounded.

Here are some tasteless lighthearted references to guns and shooting people:

- (Quoting a coach on what sort of defense he planned for the star player of a team that was coming to play the home team:) "I guess the only way to stop her is to put someone in the stands with a rifle and shoot her."
- Given two more days to consider Blackman's doings, Drexler claimed the best defense would be "to get a gun and shoot him."
- . . . took his finger off the trigger Sunday.

These are some offensive comparisons — and other bad taste:

- Tonight's game to determine the NCAA championship didn't need another character to make it a thrilling show. But it got one, a fanatic threatening to kill Patrick Ewing.

. . . There will be hundreds of policemen, roaming the arena looking at fans. A national television audience might think it's viewing a remake of Black Sunday.

- . . . Tanana, wearing the expression Gen. James Dozier must have had when the Red Brigades tried to pump him for military secrets. . . .
- The last time the Cyclones got a bid, the German army still had France.
- To say that Toronto's season was strife-ridden would be akin to calling the Vietnam war a restricted military exercise.
- If Taiwan was Japan and this was the 1600s, Hsieh Yih-Chien would have been obligated to commit hara-kiri after booting a routine grounder in the sixth inning of Taiwan's Little League opener.

- Chicago forward Scottie Pippen will attend his father's funeral today, but Sunday his teammates all but closed the casket on the Philadelphia 76ers season.

This 12-year-old example *should have been* the last word:

- Always on the lookout for great entertainment, the Meadowlands marked the 50th anniversary of World War II Thursday with a startlingly authentic reenactment. Playing the part of Poland: Virginia.

Actually, Germany needed a couple weeks to overrun its smaller, weaker opponent. Notre Dame, with a combination of power and speed once called blitzkrieg, settled matters within minutes. ...

(Later) . . . Irish coach Lou Holtz, nicer and funnier than Germany's head coach. ...

(And later) . . . Michigan, which lies in wait Sept. 16, is no Poland.

But the message does not always get out. This cutline appeared Sept. 23, 2001, above a story on memorial services that were to be held at football stadiums around the country that day:

- Former Denver Broncos quarterback John Elway throws a bomb against the former NFL All-Stars during a 'Say Goodbye to Mile High Stadium' event Saturday night.

Kenn Finkel, an editor for 33 years and now a newspaper consultant, is a longtime discussion leader for the [American Press Institute](#). For more than 25 years, he has railed at editors about insensitivity and lack of perspective in the use of war terms and other tasteless hyperbole. He called on material in some of his handouts for this article, which he produced for the API Internet page a few days after leading several workshops at a seminar in September 2001.