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Deputy Assistant Secretary Whitman Interview with BBC TV

Presenters: Bryan Whitman, DASD PA (Media Operations)
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Q: Let talk first of all if we could about the embeds. When you designed the whole idea, what did you expect to come from it?

Whitman: Well, I think that there were a couple of things that we were looking for. First we were looking for to try to accommodate how reporters had told us that if there was a conflict that they would like to be able to cover it in this way. They wanted to be able to cover it from the front lines alongside our troops. And so that was kind of a starting point and have had many discussions with bureau chiefs and reporters and news editors alike so that was one aspect of it. Another was that, we knew that if we were going to go to war against Saddam Hussein that he was particularly practiced in the art of disinformation, misinformation, denial, deception, downright liar quite simply, and we knew that from his past behavior that the future would probably indicate that he would try to do much of the same. So one of the ways that you mitigate that, we felt, was that you put trained objective observers on the battlefield to witness what's going on and I think most reporters would consider themselves trained, and technical observers. So that was another aspect of it as we looked at it, and I guess another one was that we simply were so confident in our own military and the way in which they would execute these very dangerous duties but with the care and the precision that they would take in trying to minimize civilian casualties, and reduce collateral damage. We thought that would be important, not only for our own audiences here in the United States to see, but for the world to see, who was somewhat skeptical perhaps.

Q: Given the demand, how did you select people?

Whitman: There were some criteria that I used but in the end it was subjective, there's no doubt about it but I started from the premise that I wanted about 80% of the embed opportunities to be domestic, United States news media, about 20% international embed opportunities and then of the 80% that were domestic, I wanted about 10% of those to be local media that were from the towns where those troops were coming from and so, that was kind of the overarching framework that I used. In each one of those categories, I wanted to make sure that we had all forms of media, that we had television, radio, print, wire service, still photo and so I would continue to break those groups down from there. In the international, I wanted to make sure that we had both European, Arabic and Asia audiences that had opportunities so we could reach all those audiences out there. It was complex and we had to use some subjectivity but we used some guiding criteria that got us to where we were.

Q: And who choose the individuals?

Whitman: The news organizations. Early on I decided that I wasn't going to deal with individual reporters and that I wanted to make bureau chiefs and news managers part of the process, that they would be partners with us in this. Because who better knows what individual should go off for these very dangerous assignments than their employers, their bosses. So what we would do is, we would identify embed opportunities and I would offer them to the news organizations through the bureau chief, and then they would come back to me with who they wanted to assign to these positions.

Q: Was there a process of recommendation or could they literally just choose whomever they wanted and you had no say after they have chosen in whether that person was appropriate?

Whitman: I suppose we could have always have objected but, there was no objection that was ever interposed on this. News organizations demonstrated that they took this responsibility very seriously, they sent forward their best, their brightest, their most experienced to do these difficult reporting assignments.

Q: Embeds equal you. It's your thing isn't it?

Whitman: Well, I don't want to take too much credit for it. The embedding program would not have been possible without the strong support of Secretary Rumsfeld and Chairman Myers putting the very top of this leadership behind it, with the innovation and persistence of my boss Victoria Clarke and the strong support of the press office here that was very much involved in putting together the nuts and bolts as well as the people all the way down in the field, the people at the coalition press information center and down at CentCom that actually got individual reporters linked up with their units all the way out there to those platoons and companies and battalions that they eventually were embedded with.

Q: Just how successful was it?

Whitman: Well, I guess it depends on how you measure that.

Q: How do you measure it?

Whitman: I think there a lot of standards of measurement that you could use and maybe we could look at a couple. The first one I think would be from the reporter's standpoint. Did the reporter have the access and was he given the freedom within the framework of the ground rules that needed to establish to protect the operational security of the operation? Did the reporter feel as if he or she had the freedom and the access to be able to report well from the battlefield? By all indications that seems to be the case but, I would defer that to the reporters that are coming back out of the field and for them to speak for themselves but, the feedback that I have gotten has been largely positive.

Another way to measure it, I suppose would be, did we attain the goal that I was talking about in terms of countering or mitigating some of that disinformation out there. And I guess the image that would come to my mind would be, would be one of the network television crews that was riding through the downtown streets of Baghdad, while at the same time you had the Iraqi Minister of Information saying, "No, there are no coalition forces here. The United States, Great Britain, those forces have been repelled." That objects, oppose against a reporter, reporting live on the air as they were entering Baghdad so, that's just one example and there are hundreds across the battlefield where having the reporter out there countering the type of misinformation that was coming out of the Iraqi new agency or the Minister of Information.

Those are two ways in which you could measure success. I think there are probably two more that I would touch on. One is, was it successful from the standpoint of the military? In other words, by having those reporters out there, did it do anything to jeopardize the safety of the personnel that were out there or the ultimate success of any given operation that was taking place? And by and large, I don't think that we have had any instances reported where that was the case, where that the reporter out there compromised significantly anything that was occurring or endangered personnel out there.

And the last one I guess I would measure in terms as of measurement of success is did the American people and the people that were watching the BBC overseas did they get a true and accurate account of what was occurring on the battlefield as it was going on? And I think that will be discussed in the days and weeks, months and years ahead but from my perspective the feedback that I have gotten is that while narrow in its look because there were so many of these narrow looks out there that the American people as well as the rest of the world's audience got a pretty good idea with respect to the professionalism and the dedication of the coalition forces that were out there and the care that they were taking to minimize civilian casualties and to minimize collateral damage on the battlefield.

Q So far as the Pentagon is concerned, as far as you personally are concerned, it was a successful venture?

Whitman We are going to do an in-depth after action review of this, and we are going to do a lessons learned process but, I would have to tell you that if you take those four criteria, by in-large I think to date, one could say that the embedding process has been quite successful.

Q Is it now established as a template for future conflicts?

Whitman Well, only time will tell, I suppose. I find that it's not very useful to compare conflict to conflict or reporting situation between conflicts. If you just take a look at 1991 and the Gulf War, look how much has changed in your own business since 1991. As we entered the 21st century and the technology and the capabilities that reporters have from the field to report in real time has changed dramatically since 1991. And if you look at the conflicts, they are all uniquely different in their own way, even if you compare recent conflicts like Afghanistan. Afghanistan was a very different kind of war than what you have going on in Iraq today. Afghanistan was largely small numbers of special forces for a very long time, so you didn't have the same type of opportunities to embed reporters like you did in this conflict here, e.g. I hesitate to draw comparisons between conflicts because they are uniquely different and so much changes in the news business over time also.

Q I'm talking of cooperation and of the Pentagon facilitating. Your Secretary signed off on the project "Profiles from the Front Line," which have been added recently. Describe that to me if you would, and how successful you think that was, and what the purpose behind that was?

Whitman Well again, what Profiles does again, it gives another in-depth look at what forces are doing from the ground and it presents a type of reality that perhaps viewers don't often get if you are only hearing about these conflict from briefing rooms like we have next door or from the Ministry of Defense in the U.K. It provides a very human look at the challenges that are presented when you are dealing in these very difficult situations.

Q Is there a sense of this kind of cooperation increasing in the future do you think?

Whitman Well, I hope so. One of the reasons that this was successful to the extent that it has been, was that news organizations were willing to come into the tent with us, to discuss how it is that we could accomplish both missions. The mission of allowing reporters on the battlefield and the military mission that had to be conducted and coming together with us to fashion a set of ground rules, parameters that we could live with and that they could live with that would allow them to have the kind of access they wanted and still would not endanger what we were trying to do out there.

Q One thing that I think is quite striking is that one of some of the reporting, especially the 24 hour reporting in what seems commercially quite interesting is to what extent Fox has increased its market share with its very patriotic form of reporting. What conclusions do you think people should draw from that?

Whitman I don't know, I watched all the networks from the beginning of this conflict and I think that they all had at any given time, they were all, what I call, the center of gravity where the main military action was occurring. I think that a lot of people watched television during the past 4 or 5 weeks because they cared about what this nation was doing and they cared about their sons and daughters that were out there, their brothers and sisters and their spouses, and this gave them a way to stay connected to what was going on. So I think that the networks did their very best to provide that kind of balanced overview from not only the embedded reporters but, then giving it context by making sure that they covered it from places like capitals, like London, Qatar, the Pentagon here, so that you got the full picture of what was going on because sometimes those individual slices of life, as we call them, didn't provide that kind of context.

Q But it is interesting that the drier, more detached form of presentation, which some of the more established networks had at the beginning of this war, seemed eventually to be overtaken by a much more forthright form of reporting and presentation. Do you not think?

Whitman I think it's difficult not to be enthusiastic about what you're doing if you are out there with our soldiers and sailors and Marines and airmen out there, it's inescapable the level of professionalism and dedication that the coalition forces had out there. So if enthusiasm seeped into their reporting, I'm not sure that that's bad, I think the reporters were very careful to remain objective though about what they were doing. I think that we saw not only the good being reported from the battlefield, but we saw the bad things that happened too. We saw the unfortunate incidents when civilians were fired upon. We saw and heard and read about the unfortunate incidences when there was friendly fire so I think that we got balance coverage in that respect.

Q What role did the unilateral reporters have to play? Because there seems to be an ever diminishing role, because of their lack of access and because of the danger that they were in.

Whitman Well clearly they were in greater danger. There's no safe place on the battlefield and we lost embedded journalists in this conflict to, some to combat casualties, some to accidents and some from natural cause also. But the unilateral journalists out there were even at greater risk, particularly when he or she was operating between lines or in areas where there were very few coalition forces. Your own news organization experienced some of that when you had a journalist, very tragically run into a mine and was killed and some others that were injured and some that were actually injured in a friendly fire type incident too. So there is no safe place on the battlefield. I suppose there was some skepticism perhaps that how well the embedding system might work at the beginning, and so there was a certain amount of unilateral reporting that news organizations did. They assigned unilateral reporters to ensure that they got that robust coverage. But I think that over time, what they learned is that they weren't getting anything significantly different or better from unilateral reporting than they were able to get from being embedded with our forces. And they were putting their journalists at greater risk being out there. So there were several news organizations that through the conflict came back to me and told me that they were going to pull their unilateral reporters and request if to have some more embed opportunities so I think there will always be unilateral reporters and it's like any other battlefield condition, reporters will be treated on the battlefield like any civilian. But remember even with this adversary that we had, we saw that he did not hesitate to use civilians for his own means and that in itself put journalist out there in greater risk too.

Q So the logic of what you are saying and the success of the embeds, which was not assured at the start of the war but, now that it seems to have been a successful venture, the logic seems to suggest there'll be more embeds and fewer unilaterals in the future.

Whitman: Well personally, I believe that embedding is the right way to go. A journalist establishes a relationship with the unit where he or she knows what type of information will compromise a mission. He or she knows and learns about what that unit's mission is. They learn about the capabilities of that unit, they are able better to report on it because they are more knowledgeable about that unit and they are afforded a certain amount of protection by being with the military force and not on the outside. So I would like to think that in the future, that this is demonstrated that embedding can work and given the right conditions and provided that future conflict is similar in nature to what we are dealing with here, I think that we will be looking at embedding in the future.

Q Talk me through Secretary Rumsfeld's criticisms of media coverage in this war?

Whitman: Well I think that to some degree those criticisms are exaggerated when they reported on. It is sometimes frustrating at the attention span and with the need to move a story forward everyday and I think in some aspects the embedded reporting can contribute to that if you are not careful because you are getting those little glimpses of life that's occurring in a particular unit or at a particular time and with the advent of 24 hour news particularly in television, you need pictures to support the 24 hours of news coverage that you are doing. So you see a lot of repetition of the same images, for example when there was looting that took place in certain portions of Baghdad, there were the same images that we would see over and over again as correspondents were trying to tell that story but, at the same time that has a tendency to give a false perception of what is occurring across the whole of Baghdad or across the whole of Iraq and so I think that in that regards, perhaps some of the criticism is justified.

Q In a broader context, he seemed frustrated at the extent of criticism and skepticism in some quarters.

Whitman: Well it is the media's job to be skeptical and to be questioning. The media is not good at being patient though, let's face it. There is that desire to, at every new cycle or with each new report to try to move the story and sometimes combat operations don't lend themselves to that and because there are certain aspects of a military operation, that must be protected in order to maintain a certain amount of tactical surprise, quite often that lack of ability to report on what's actually going on when there may be much activity that is invisible or can't be reported on from an embedded reporters standpoint because of what the unit is doing. That can be perceived as a pause in the operation perhaps when there isn't a pause so I think that the media did a good job, I think in reporting this war but certainly, they'll be taking a look internally too as to the job that they did and looking for ways to make sure that fair and balanced and comprehensive coverage is delivered in any future conflicts to.

Q How important was the Jessica Lynch story to the coverage and to the national mood?

Whitman: Well I think that anytime that you have a successful POW snatch, return of a POW that's been held in enemy hands, that there is certainly much to be happy about, to be excited about and I think you saw that kind of elation. The United States military just like the British, it's part of the warrior ethic not to leave your comrades behind so these are big events when they occur so I think that the coverage that was given to it, while it was extensive, was because it is so important to the American people and to the American military when you have those individuals that are taken captive in particular, when you are up against an adversary that has demonstrated complete disregard for the Geneva Conventions and so there's very much a reason to be concerned about those people that are held in captive.

Q But how important was it to have pictures? To have that Army cameraman going in with the forces, freeing her?

Whitman: Well I think pictures do a lot to help tell the story and we embedded some 100 cameras, if you take a look at it, nearly 100 camera across the battlefield and because I think images are important, I think they're even more important in certain parts of the world where language can be a barrier. I think that images and photographs and video help tell a story, that you can't tell in words or they get lost in translation so, I think that the images were important.

Q Were you here watching the feed of that coming in live and as it was happening or did you make a video tape of it?

Whitman: No, that operation was not live. Those who, our own cameramen, combat camera...

Q No, that wasn't live on television. I'm saying it was live coming into you and the press?

Whitman: No, that's what I'm saying. Those images were taken by our combat camera photographers in the field, it was not transmitted in real time. Once the raid was over with those pictures were then transmitted back to us.

Q And of that, you watched those pictures, you watched the pure feed correct, coming in and you made the video?

Whitman: Yes, and Central Command I think was the first to show those images at one of their daily briefings in Qatar.

Q Jessica Lynch herself, what injuries did she sustain?

Whitman: Well, I'm not going to get into the specific injuries that she received. That is up to her and her doctors to discuss at the appropriate time. Needless to say, she is still under medical care and that she is receiving some of the finest care that you can get in the world in the military medical system and I'm sure it won't be long before she will be out and she'll talk about those herself.

Q Was there any resistance as the forces were going in?

Whitman: I think that I will leave that story to be told in great detail when the time is right. We are still engaged in combat operations, we still have two soldiers who are missing and we may be using some of the same tactics, techniques and procedures for future operations. We are still engaged in conflict in Iraq and I don't think at this point and time, when the true story comes out, it will be fascinating. It is premature right now.

Q: Because you know that the Washington Post is reporting that the actual events did not necessarily correspond to the events as filmed.

Whitman: I understand that there is some conflicting information out there and in due time the full story will be told, I'm sure.

Q: Are you confident that the full story is the full story as shown in the video?

Whitman: Oh I think that this was a large operation. It used a number of forces, it was a very joint operation, it was well planned and well executed with many moving parts and that the complete story will still come out in days to come.

Q: But the complete story seemed to show a heavy level of resistance and great acts of heroism by the special forces that were going in and according to the Washington Post, that wasn't the case.

Whitman: Well time will tell.

Q: The issue around Terry Lloyed, the ITV correspondent, who was killed. It's alleged now that you were not cooperating in investigating that, and that the investigation is not going to be the satisfaction of his family or his company.

Whitman: I don't know terribly much about that particular case. I do know that the Central Command is looking at that. I know that is a very difficult situation for the family, it's a very tragic incident, again like I said earlier, there are no safe places on the battlefield. These were courageous journalists out there trying to do a job and I think that there's still more to be known about that particular situation and I hope in time that we'll be able to find the answers to the satisfaction of the family if U.S. and U.K. forces are able to determine all of the facts surrounding that incident.

Q: What happened at the Palestine Hotel?

Whitman: Well, I think that we have been very forward about what happened at the Palestine Hotel. This again was somewhat tragic in the fact that there were civilians that were killed and injured. Even more tragic for me, because I work with the media and there was media that we injured and killed in this particular case. I think what it really demonstrates is the extent to which Saddam Hussein again uses innocent people as he did in this particular case, when U.S. forces were compelled to have to return fire after receiving fire from not only that hotel but, also a broadcast facility that was in close proximity to it. Again tragic but, I guess not completely to be unexpected when it comes the lengths to which Saddam Hussein will go to endanger innocent civilians.

Q: Final thought: Were the media used in a way to speed up the end of this war? The reason I ask is the following, your public affair guidance says, and I quote "media coverage of any future operation will to a large extent, shape public perception of the national security environment now and in the years ahead. This holds true for the U.S. public, the public and allied countries, whose opinion can affect the durability of our coalition and publics in countries where we conduct our operations whose perceptions of us can affect the cost and duration of our involvement."

Whitman: Well, anytime that we go to war we want it to be for as short a period as possible. We want the conflict to be resolved quickly with the minimum amount of casualties both our own as well as innocent civilians out there. So, what you read was absolutely true and to the extent that the media are able to inform the world about what's going on, to the extent that having an accurate representation of the facts that exists on the battlefield. If that causes an enemy to capitulate sooner, then that's good.

Q: So the media does have a role in helping to for-shorten conflict?

Whitman: Well, I think the media have a responsibility to report accurately and honestly and objectively what they see that's going on. If that leads to an early end to a conflict, then I don't think that there's anything wrong with that.