

Follow-up Media Coverage | "Rating" of Reporters by the Rendon Group

As of 1545

(11)

Coverage on "rating" of reporters by the Rendon group continued to stem largely from Stars and Stripes reports, which were widely cited. Today's Stars and Stripes item alleged that the Army used profiles to "reject reporters," citing Maj. Patrick Seiber, spokesman for the Army's 101st Airborne Division.

Reporting continued to focus on the Pentagon's "denial" that the alleged "vetting program" continued after October 2008 and was used to determine embed selections. Mr. Bryan Whitman was widely quoted, saying, "For me, a tool like this serves no purpose and it doesn't serve me with any value." New media sources centered on an item by previously embedded reporter P.J. Tobia of True/Slant, which discussed a copy he obtained of a "Rendon report" on his work. The issue was the main topic of discussion on Twitter using the term "Pentagon" for much of the day, but entries were balanced between citing and linking to mainstream media items and blogs, and contained little commentary.

Highlights

- **AP:** Pentagon officials are on the defensive after a recent series of stories in the Stars and Stripes newspaper that said journalists were being screened by a Washington-based public relations firm, The Rendon Group, under a \$1.5 million contract with the military.
- **Empire Burlesque, Chris Floyd:** By week's end, the Pentagon was in full retreat on the story (in public, at least), pulling out the old stand-by used to cover a multitude of sins, from torture to corruption to atrocity to systematic deceit: a "review" of the program.
- **True/Slant blog: P.J. Tobia** - Most troubling by far is that when S&S asked the military about Rendon, they denied the existence of these reports. I'm holding one of these reports in my hand right now, trust me, it exists.
- **NPR:** Lieutenant Commander Christine Sidenstricker (U.S. Military Spokeswoman) - I can safely say it has never been the Department of Defense's intent to use any of that sort of information to deny or grant access as a decision point in embedding or in granting interviews.
- **Public Radio International:** Howard Witt: - Well, today they continued to insist that they're not making any nefarious use of these profiles but that they are at least acknowledging that they exist. A kind of frenzy was set off among the Pentagon reporters today. They're all demanding their own profiles, 'cause they want to see what the Pentagon has been saying about them. And the Pentagon is now conceding apparently that they are going to re-examine this whole thing.
- **Washington Independent, Spencer Ackerman:** So which reporters seeking to embed with the U.S. military in Iraq and Afghanistan have been profiled by the Rendon Group? Rendon, the CIA-linked communications firm contracted by the Pentagon's public affairs shop to evaluate potential embeds' work for its usefulness or hostility to U.S. war aims — a story broken wide open by Stars & Stripes — isn't saying.
- **Washington Post:** In some cases, however, officers have rated individual reporters in terms of how beneficial they were to the military mission. In one unit in Iraq, every visiting reporter was preceded by a document that classified him or her by assigning a color, with red for negative, amber for neutral and green for positive.

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[Military monitoring reporters' work in Afghan war](#) – 8/27

AP ...Pauline Jelinek

The U.S. military in Afghanistan acknowledged Thursday that it pays a private company to produce profiles on journalists covering the war.

But despite a report showing the company rated some reporters on their work, officials denied that the information is used to decide which media members travel with military units.

Pentagon officials are on the defensive after a recent series of stories in the Stars and Stripes newspaper that said journalists were being screened by a Washington-based public relations firm, The Rendon Group, under a \$1.5 million contract with the military.

The newspaper, which is also partly funded by the Defense Department, said it had obtained documents showing Rendon graded journalists' work as "positive," "neutral" or "negative" and suggested ways to make the coverage more positive.

"U.S. Forces Afghanistan has never denied access to any reporter based upon their past stories," said a statement issued Thursday by Army Col. Wayne M. Shanks, a military spokesman in Afghanistan.

Shanks said the Rendon contract provides a number of services, including news releases and "talking points" as well as reports on media accuracy. The information is used partly to assess how well the military is doing in getting information out, Shanks said.

He said the military gets information on journalists, including biographical details and recent topics they have covered, to prepare commanders for interviews. A sample profile released Thursday included information on reporters under the headings of professional "Background," "Coverage" and "Perspective, Style and Tone."

Rendon has said a small part of its contract involves preparing profiles of reporters preparing to travel with U.S. troops. These reviews are done only upon request and are intended to give commanders a better idea of what topics the reporters embedded with the unit are most likely to ask about, according to Rendon.

In a statement posted on its Web site, Rendon said it provides analysis of news content focused on themes such as stability and security, counterinsurgency and operational results.

"The information and analysis we generate is developed by quantifying these themes and topics and not by ranking of reporters. The analysis is not provided as the basis for accepting or rejecting a specific journalist's inquiries, and TRG does not make recommendations as to who the military should or should not interview," it said.

Rendon gave as an example: "Neutral to Negative coverage could indicate that content in stories were negative in relation to mission objectives," which it said could include kidnappings or suicide bombings.

Defense Department spokesman Bryan Whitman told Pentagon reporters that he had not "seen anything that violates any policies." But he also appeared to question why the activity was needed.

"For me, a tool like this serves no purpose and it doesn't serve me with any value," Whitman said.

A number of reporters in the Pentagon and elsewhere are demanding to view their profiles. The International Federation of Journalists also complained about the policy Wednesday.

"This profiling of journalists farther compromises the independence of media," Aidan White, general secretary of the Brussels-based federation, said in a statement. "It strips away any pretense that the Army is interested in helping journalists to work freely."

AP National Security Writer Anne Gearan contributed to this report.

Pentagon is rating reporters – 8/28

The Leaf Chronicle, TN ...editorial

Why does the Pentagon believe it necessary to use a private public relations firm to assess U.S. journalists before they embed with U.S. forces in Afghanistan?

Stars and Stripes, an independent daily covering the U.S. military, has reported that Washington-based The Rendon Group examines reporters' recent stories and rates the coverage "positive," "negative" or "neutral" compared to mission objectives.

These background reports are a part of a \$1.5 million Defense Department contract with Rendon for "news analysis and media assessment." It's been doing this kind of work since 2005.

A U.S. military spokeswoman in Kabul told The Associated Press that the Rendon reports were only used to determine what a journalist's specific interests might be.

But, the International Federation of Journalists, which represents more than 600,000 journalists in 123 countries, and its American affiliates, complained that the assessments could be used as a screening tool to find journalists who could write what the Pentagon wanted them to.

Bernie Lunzer, president of the Newspaper Guild, called the screening of journalists "over the line" and said it erodes "the ability to report the truth objectively and without government censorship."

The Pentagon contends that the reporter rating system ended last fall and that it now is interested only in the accuracy of stories. Stars and Stripes, however, has obtained documents with reporter ratings from as recently as May, which show the ratings did not cease in 2008.

The newspaper also has reported that the PR firm gives the Pentagon advice on how to manipulate the kinds of stories the reporters produce while they are embedded — a direct contradiction of the "News Media Ground Rules" issue by U.S. military officials.

It also contradicts the spirit of the First Amendment of the Constitution. Americans are in Iraq and Afghanistan fighting for the Constitution and the rights it guarantees, including a free press.

The Leaf-Chronicle has embedded reporters with the 101st Airborne Division four times in the past decade — in Iraq, Kosovo and twice in Afghanistan, and we don't want these kinds of evaluative strings attached to our reporters.

Of course, there is information that cannot be released regarding military operations in time of war. But the Pentagon should not be trying to shape the news Americans receive in order to put itself in the best light, and it certainly shouldn't be paying a PR firm with taxpayer money to further its goals.

Army used profiles to reject reporters - 8/28

Stars and Stripes, Mideast edition ... Leo Shane III

WASHINGTON - - The secret profiles commissioned by the Pentagon to rate the work of journalists reporting from Afghanistan were used by military officials to deny disfavored reporters access to American fighting units or otherwise influence their coverage as recently as 2008, an Army official acknowledged Friday.

What's more, the official said, Army public affairs officers used the analyses of reporters' work to decide how to steer them away from potentially negative stories.

"If a reporter has been focused on nothing but negative topics, you're not going to send him into a unit that's not your best," Maj. Patrick Seiber, spokesman for the Army's 101st Airborne Division, told Stars and Stripes. "There's no win-win there for us. We're not trying to control what they report, but we are trying to put our best foot forward."

Seiber, who as a task force public affairs officer in Afghanistan in 2007-08 was responsible for deciding whether to approve requests from reporters to accompany some U.S. units as "embeds," said his superior officers routinely sent the reporter profiles to him as part of the review and placement process.

In at least two instances, Seiber said, he rejected embed requests based partly on what he read in the profiles -- once because a reporter had allegedly done "poor reporting" and once because a journalist reportedly had violated embed rules by releasing classified information. The latter allegation, if true, would have been grounds for automatic denial of an embed request even in the absence of the Rendon report.

"In one case we had a writer who had taken a story out of context and really done some irresponsible reporting," Seiber said. "When I looked at that on the [Rendon Group] report, I decided if that guy is going to take that much effort to handle and correct I wasn't going to put a unit at risk with an amateur journalist."

The revelations are the latest twist in the controversy over how the military is gathering and using reporter profiles compiled by The Rendon Group, a Washington, D.C. public relations firm contracted by the Pentagon to rate journalists' work.

Stars and Stripes revealed the existence of the profiles this week in several stories documenting how a "positive-negative-neutral" reporter rating system was being employed, including advice on how to try to "neutralize" negative coverage of the U.S. military -- a practice that appears to contravene the Pentagon's longstanding policy that the embed system is "in no way intended to prevent release of embarrassing, negative or derogatory information."

Pentagon officials repeatedly denied this week that the Rendon profiles are being used to rate reporters or determine whether they will be granted permission to embed with U.S. units in Afghanistan.

"There is no policy that stipulates in any way that embedding should be based in any way on a person's work," Defense Department spokesman Bryan Whitman told reporters on Monday.

Officials of U.S. Forces-Afghanistan, who assumed control of the war effort in October 2008, said they began phasing out use of the Rendon profiles months ago.

But a Rendon representative is currently working in Afghanistan, according to Air Force Captain Elizabeth Mathias, a public affairs officer with USFOR-A. And at least one reporter who requested and received copies of her own Rendon profile this week said it rated her work as recently as July.

Another reporter, freelance writer P.J. Tobia, obtained the Rendon report compiled on him in May and posted it Friday on the True/Slant blog.

"Based on his previous embed and past reporting, it is unlikely that [Tobia] will miss an opportunity to report on US military missteps," the report read. "However, if following previous trends, he will remain sympathetic to U.S. troops and may acknowledge a learning curve in Afghanistan."

Meanwhile, Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, on Friday published an essay in a military journal that was sharply critical of the U.S. government's attempts to use "strategic communications" to shape messages directed at the Muslim world.

"To put it simply, we need to worry a lot less about how to communicate our actions and much more about what our actions communicate," Mullen wrote in the essay in Joint Force Quarterly.

"I would argue that most strategic communication problems are not communication problems at all," he wrote. "They are policy and execution problems. Each time we fail to live up to our values or don't follow up on a promise, we look more and more like the arrogant Americans the enemy claims we are."

Reporters Charlie Reed and Kevin Baron contributed to this story.

Pentagon Denies it Rates Reporters in Afghanistan 8/27

Voice of America ... Al Pessin

The Pentagon and the U.S. headquarters in Afghanistan are denying that they have ranked reporters as positive, negative or neutral, or used such analyses to determine which journalists would have access to U.S. troops and commanders. The denials follow stories in a Pentagon-subsidized publication that charge officials are using analyses provided by a private company to figure out how to influence coverage.

The international newspaper for U.S. troops, Stars and Stripes, reported on Monday that the U.S. command in Afghanistan was using media analysis provided by a Washington-based public relations firm to screen reporters requesting to travel with American forces. The Pentagon denied the report.

Then on Thursday, the newspaper, which is guaranteed editorial independence by U.S. law, printed another story, quoting from analyses that describe coverage as "positive," "negative" or "neutral." It also published a chart it says came from one of the analyses, which rates 16 months of one unnamed reporter's coverage as 83 per cent neutral and 16 per cent negative. The story also quotes a recommendation about how to "neutralize" any possible "negative" coverage by a reporter by providing him with quotes from military officials.

Speaking from Kabul, a spokeswoman for the U.S. command in Afghanistan, Lieutenant Commander Christine Seidenstricker, told VOA the analysis provides biographical information and copies of reporters' stories, but is not used in making decisions about access to newsmakers.

"The way they are never used is to make decisions on whether or not to allow a reporter to embed [with U.S. forces], or whether or not to grant an interview," said Christine Seidenstricker. "We do not, have not and are not going to make decisions on access based on positive or negative coverage."

Seidenstricker says the information gathered by the contractor is used for what she called "very legitimate and very innocuous purposes" to help officials prepare for interviews and see how their policies, actions and statements are perceived.

But the command in Kabul distributed samples of the analyses of several reporters, which include a section called "Perspective, Style and Tone." Various reporters' coverage is described as "newsworthy," "straightforward," "nuanced" and "unbiased." The reporters' names have been deleted. One analysis says the reporter often includes statements from U.S. officials, but also covers "multiple viewpoints and perspectives."

The command did not provide any particularly negative analyses of reporters. But it did distribute a chart from this past Monday showing "positive," "negative" or "neutral" ratings for a variety of stories from many news organizations. The chart includes one VOA story about three NATO troops who were killed in Afghanistan, and rates the story as negative.

In a statement on its website, the company that prepared the material, The Rendon Group, said its ratings do not refer to reporters, but rather to "themes and topics" as they relate to the U.S. mission in

Afghanistan. For example, it says coverage of suicide bombings would be rated negative, while reports that reflect improved stability would get a positive mark.

One of the senior Pentagon spokesmen, Bryan Whitman, says analyses of reporters' work based on what might be "positive" or "negative" for the military "serves no purpose," and says it is not done on a department-wide basis.

"I've told you what I think is the only metric [measurement] that I use, that I think is of any value, that we convey to our principals [senior officials], is whether or not a story is accurate or inaccurate," said Bryan Whitman.

Still, the Brussels-based International Federation of Journalists condemned the Afghanistan headquarters' media analyses. Its General Secretary is Aidan White.

"There's a real possibility of discrimination against journalists who are not willing to sign up to a solely positive view of how the American military is performing in Afghanistan," said Aidan White. "And that is really a threat to press freedom."

White says while claiming to fight for democracy and human rights in Afghanistan, the U.S. military appears to prefer "propaganda" to "honest reporting." But he acknowledged there is no information indicating the military ever used the analyses to deny any reporter access to U.S. military units or commanders.

Military Prepares Profiles on Reporters Visiting War Zones – 8/28

Washington Post ... Ann Scott Tyson

The U.S. military in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere regularly assesses the content and tone of the work of individual reporters to prepare for trips and interviews by those reporters, according to defense and military officials.

But the officials denied that the analysis has been used to exclude journalists from embedding with U.S. military units in combat zones or to bar them from interviewing military personnel.

A controversy has arisen in recent days over media work performed for the U.S. military command in Afghanistan by the Rendon Group, a contractor that classifies the content of stories by reporters as positive, negative or neutral in relation to military objectives.

Rendon has disputed reports that its media analysis, under a 2009 contract to support the public affairs office of the U.S. command in Afghanistan, is based on ranking reporters or aimed at manipulating their coverage. Rendon's role in compiling background profiles on reporters for the military was first revealed this week in articles by the Stars and Stripes newspaper, which said the profiles were being used to screen reporters.

In a statement, Rendon said its analysis "is not provided as the basis for accepting or rejecting a specific journalist's inquiries" and is not developed by "ranking reporters."

The company has been investigated by the Defense Department after some members of Congress said it was hired to create an information campaign to sway the public to support the Iraq war, but the investigation did not support the allegations. Rendon was also involved in an effort to have Iraqi publications print articles written by military personnel.

Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman said that Rendon's work in Afghanistan is not used to exclude reporters from embedding with the military and that the only standard the Pentagon uses to measure a news story is accuracy.

He acknowledged that gathering background data about reporters is common. "Everyone does a certain amount of media analysis in order to prepare individuals for interviews," he said.

Military public affairs officers who have worked in recent years with reporters in Iraq, at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and elsewhere said they had personally prepared such analyses.

Lt. Col. Jose Garcia, senior team leader for the Public Affairs Qualification Course at the Defense Information School at Fort Meade, said that while working as a public affairs officer in Iraq he regularly gathered information on reporters' backgrounds, their likely questions and "angle" in advance of interviews with his unit. Garcia said he gathered the information by surfing the Web for the reporter's articles or biography, or by enquiring with military headquarters.

But Garcia said such information was used only to anticipate questions and possibly build rapport with the journalist. "I never turned anyone away," he said. "I encouraged my boss to talk to everyone."

In some cases, however, officers have rated individual reporters in terms of how beneficial they were to the military mission. In one unit in Iraq, every visiting reporter was preceded by a document that classified him or her by assigning a color, with red for negative, amber for neutral and green for positive. Another unit prepared a map with the same color-coding for articles written by embedded reporters.

"The bottom line was: We think that this visit will be positive, negative, or neutral," said one military public affairs officer who served at Guantanamo Bay, where the military prepared such assessments on each visiting reporter.

"If we thought a reporter was negative, we'd do more training to prepare for a combative interview," said the officer, who served in Guantanamo in 2007.

Pentagon probes reports of reporter-screening in Afghanistan – 8/27

Xinhua General News Service

The Pentagon said Thursday that it is probing into reports that the U.S. military in Afghanistan has been rating reporters according to their degrees of sympathy to U.S. objectives.

"I am learning about aspects of this as I question our folks in Afghanistan," Pentagon spokesperson Bryan Whitman told the regular Pentagon news briefing.

"If I find something that is inconsistent with Defense Department values and policies, you can be sure I will address it," he added.

The probe comes three days after The Stars & Stripes first uncovered the screening of reporters on Monday.

According to the newspaper, the U.S. military hired The Rendon Group, a private public-relations company to screen the journalists.

Under such a screening system, reporters who request to be "embedded" into U.S. military units in Afghanistan will be rated as "positive," "negative" or "neutral" towards U.S. strategy.

When the practice was first reported, the U.S. military denied it.

However, as more evidence popped up and facing growing protests from journalists, the military finally acknowledged it and agreed to launch an informal investigation into the issue.

BROADCAST

Pentagon Rates Reporters' Work In Afghanistan - 8/27
NPR, All Things Considered 8:00 PM EST

MELISSA BLOCK, host: A private contractor has been providing the U.S. military in Afghanistan with reports on media coverage and profiles of individual journalists. The contractor has also been giving commanders a daily briefing that rates news stories as positive, negative, or neutral.

NPR's J.J. Sutherland reports.

J.J. SUTHERLAND: One of the journalist profiles obtained by NPR starts with a statement of purpose. It ends: To gauge the expected sentiment of her coverage while on an embed mission in Afghanistan. I called up Lieutenant Commander Christine Sidenstricker to get her take on the language. She's a spokesperson for the U.S. forces in Afghanistan.

Can you see why someone - you know, reading that as a journalist, I would be concerned, and why people would be concerned about that kind of language?

Lieutenant Commander CHRISTINE SIDENSTRICKER (U.S. Military Spokeswoman): Again, unfortunately, that particular sentence does create the wrong impression on how they're being used. All I can do is tell you that that's not how they're used.

SUTHERLAND: How they are used, she says, are for basic background of a journalist: some of their stories, what their interests are, not for determining access. The reports are compiled by the Rendon Group. It has a contract to provide these profiles, among other things. It also writes press releases, speeches, talking points - oh, and Rendon also rates stories for the military: positive, negative or neutral. On a recent day, a positive story was headlined: Canadian Helps Afghans Create First National Park. A negative one: Three NATO Troops Killed in Southern Afghanistan.

Commander Sidenstricker says she doesn't know why stories are categorized that way - before her time. She does say, though, she doesn't pay any attention to it.

Lt. Cmdr. SIDENSTRICKER: I can safely say it has never been the Department of Defense's intent to use any of that sort of information to deny or grant access as a decision point in embedding or in granting interviews.

SUTHERLAND: Then why collecting information at all?

Lt. Cmdr. SIDENSTRICKER: It's entirely - again, I can't tell you why it was started. I can just tell you how we use it and how - or more importantly, how we don't use it.

SUTHERLAND: Sidenstricker says they didn't start the contract, and says to contact the unit there before hers, the 101st Airborne Division.

So I called up Major Patrick Seiber. He's the press officer for the 101st. He says during his time in Afghanistan, he dealt with 62 different news agencies and 143 different reporters, and he had to rely on the Rendon reports.

Major PATRICK SEIBER (Press Officer, 101st Airborne Division): Well, you know, you got to have something, because we just don't have enough public affairs guys that can go through and do it, you know, our own self to figure - you know, to - you got to know what you're dealing with. You know, our soldiers are at risk each day. There are dangers with fires (unintelligible). Information is also a risk.

SUTHERLAND: And Seiber says that unlike Sidenstricker, he did pay some attention to negative ratings. If someone had a bunch of them, he'd want to know why.

Maj. SEIBER: This didn't happen very often. I mean, out of all those news agencies, I can only remember maybe a couple of times where there was somebody that we wouldn't take from, you know, that journalist because of their bent.

SUTHERLAND: Both times, he says, the news agencies sent a different reporter. A statement from the Rendon Group says they are very proud of the work they've done for the U.S. military.

J.J. Sutherland, NPR News.

PRI's The World - featuring Stars and Stripes editor Howard Witt on the Rendon Group

Katy Clark: For many news organizations, including this one, covering the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan means sometimes sending reporters to be embedded with U.S. military forces. It turns out that those reporters are being reported on themselves. The Pentagon has hired a Washington-based public relations firm to profile the work of journalists seeking embed assignments. These profiles examine the work of individual reporters and they evaluate them on basis on whether they're positive, negative or neutral stories. "Stars and Stripes" broke the story and Howard Witt is an editor there. Howard, in my own experience covering the military, I have just come to expect some kind of screening as par for the course. Does this vetting process we're talking about here go beyond straight-forward due diligence?

Howard Witt: Well it does appear it to. It is certainly the case that the Pentagon says they're just doing ordinary screening. But in fact, the real question is, what are they doing with this information? They're not really reviewing the work of reporters and rating it according to how positive it is towards the military. But they also are getting advice from this Rendon Group that they've contracted with as to how to use that information to basically shape the embeds - the information that they're going to give reporters access to - to try basically manipulate the outcome of their stories.

Katy Clark: And the Rendon Group, this P.R. firm we mentioned, has a bit of a controversial track record. Doesn't it?

Howard Witt: It does indeed. That was the group that helped establish an Iraqi opposition group in the run-up to the Iraq invasion in 2003. The group is called the "Iraqi National Congress." That group ended up supplying a lot of the information which subsequently turned out to be false regarding the alleged weapons of mass destruction that Saddam Hussein was supposedly hiding, and which gave the Bush administration a lot of its pretext for launching the invasion.

Katy Clark: So Howard, the implication here is that the Pentagon might be influencing coverage of the military and its conduct in Iraq and Afghanistan. Do you have some evidence of that?

Howard Witt: Well, we have first hand evidence of what happens if you don't write stories that please the military. We ourselves had a reporter, named Heath Druzin, who was refused permission to embed with an Army unit in Mosul, Iraq several months ago. And the stated reason was because he was not writing stories that were highlighting positive, good news that the Army wanted highlighted.

Katy Clark: So, was he eventually able to go? Were you able to work that out or send another –

Howard Witt: No, we sent him elsewhere. But this particular unit he was not able to join this unit despite our strong protests over this.

Katy Clark: So, what has the Pentagon's response been to your reporting?

Howard Witt: Well, today they continued to insist that they're not making any nefarious use of these profiles but that they are at least acknowledging that they exist. Kind of frenzy was set off among the Pentagon reporters today. They're all demanding their own profiles, 'cause they want to see what the Pentagon has been saying about them. And the Pentagon is now conceding apparently that they are going to re-examine this whole thing. So we'll have to see where it goes.

Katy Clark: I find this odd because the idea of an embed was designed initially to improve news coverage in the first place; and this changing the way your news organization is covering the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Howard Witt: Well, you're exactly right. And in fact when these embeds were originally invented under the Bush administration under previous Secretary Rumsfeld, they were explicitly described by the Pentagon as not being subject to any kind of interference in the type of coverage or tone of coverage. It was strictly to facilitate U.S. reporters to cover the on the ground action of the U.S. Armed Forces. But something happened between then and now apparently where the military seems to be treating these now somewhat differently.

Katy Clark: Do you know when this type of screening of reporters first began?

Howard Witt: We don't know when it first began, although we have seen some of these profiles dating back to at least October of last year. There's suggestions that this has been going on a lot longer than that. But we don't know for sure.

Katy Clark: I understand that you've actually seen some of these files that the Pentagon has on reporters. What's in them?

Howard Witt: Well they contain, they all are kind of a similar form, they have a kind of bar graph or a pie chart which looks at the stories the reporters did and rates them according to them, are quote on quote, if they are positive, negative or neutral. And then there is the narrative section for each person in which the Rendon folks described the tenure of that reporter's coverage, whether it's been positive or negative or neutral; and make recommendations as to the ways to what they call, neutralize negative reporting.

Katy Clark: Howard Witt is an editor at "Stars and Stripes." He spoke to us from Washington. Thank you.

Howard Witt: My pleasure.

The FOX Report With Shepard Smith ENC 08/27/2009 19:22:59

Jennifer Griffin, correspondent: "Well, we have been able to confirm...that, in fact, the military did hire a P.R. firm based in D.C. called the Rendon Group and they provide the military with assessments like the ones you see here of journalist work. This one was written on August 14 and it was based on the work of a freelance journalist based in Jordan. And the accusation by 'Stars and Stripes' and others is that they were using this assessment of the journalist's work to basically engage them and possibly influence the way their stories would turn out in the end...The military is not denying that they hired this group, the Rendon Group and that they were getting information about stories and ratings of stories. But they say that there was no mal intent that they weren't trying to influence the reporters. They weren't stopping the reporters from going on embeds with the military based on the rating of these stories that they were receiving. So, they are still planning to use this group - the Rendon Group? The contract lasts until next January. They say that the 'Stars and Stripes' is reading too much into the analysis being done by the P.R. group...I asked them [if they rated me] and they won't tell me what my rating is...They did rate some of my colleagues and, in fact, you don't want a high rating with them because it would suggest that your stories were mostly positive. It would be curious to find out what one's rating is but I do know they have rated some of my colleagues here."

BLOGS

Big Brass Bull: Pentagon Deceit on Media Manipulation Confirmed - 8/28

Empire Burlesque ...Chris Floyd

A few days ago, we noted the revelations by Stars and Stripes that the Pentagon was using a shadowy PR firm to identify the political leanings of journalists trying to cover the "Good War" in Afghanistan (as well as the "Forgotten War" in Iraq). The idea, clearly, was to encourage and reward "pro-war" reporters while planting a big red flag on the backs of any writers considered less than gung-ho about the imperial bloodshed in Muslim lands.

Naturally, the Pentagon denied that the vetting program operated by the Rendon Group - which was hired by the Bush gang to help instigate the mass murder in Iraq - was in any way a sinister, slimy attempt to manipulate the news in order to make the endless slaughter of the Terror War more palatable for the folks back home. Perish the thought! declared the brass. Why, goodness mercy me, the only aim of the program is to help reporters tell the truth, and let the chips fall where they may. As Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman put it after S&S first broke the story: "It's a good article if it's accurate. It's a bad article if it's inaccurate. That's the only measurement that we use here at the Defense Department." Makes you want to puddle up, don't it?

Well, Stars and Stripes has done something almost unheard-of in modern journalism - followed up on a story with a skeptical stance toward the bland assurances of authority - and guess what they found? Go ahead, try - you'll never guess. They found that the Pentagon was lying! From S&S:

Contrary to the insistence of Pentagon officials this week that they are not rating the work of reporters covering U.S. forces in Afghanistan, Stars and Stripes has obtained documents that prove that reporters' coverage is being graded as "positive," "neutral" or "negative."

Moreover, the documents - - recent confidential profiles of the work of individual reporters prepared by a Pentagon contractor - indicate that the ratings are intended to help Pentagon image-makers manipulate the types of stories that reporters produce while they are embedded with U.S. troops in Afghanistan.

Well, I never! The Pentagon -- run by honest Brother Bob Gates, who is such a straight arrow that the saintly progressive Barack Obama carried him over from the Bush Regime to keep running our "overseas contingency operations -- has been caught lying through its teeth! What next? Obama spending his vacation playing golf with sleazy Swiss bankers or something?

Back to S&S:

"The purpose of this memo is to provide an assessment of [a reporter from a major U.S. newspaper] ... in order to gauge the expected sentiment of his work while on an embed mission in Afghanistan." reads the preamble to one of the reporter profiles prepared for the Pentagon by The Rendon Group, a controversial Washington-based public relations firm.

S&S also shreds the post-revelations denials by the Pentagon and Rendon, including the lie by Gates' mouthpiece that the vetting program (that isn't a vetting program, of course) ended last October, in the bad old Bush days:

But the Rendon profiles reviewed by Stars and Stripes prove otherwise. One of the profiles evaluates work published as recently as May, indicating that the rating practice did not in fact cease last October as Whitman stated.

And the explicit suggestions contained in the Rendon profiles detailing how best to manipulate reporters' coverage during their embeds directly contradict the Pentagon's stated policies governing the embed process.

By week's end, the Pentagon was in full retreat on the story (in public, at least), pulling out the old standby used to cover a multitude of sins, from torture to corruption to atrocity to systematic deceit: a "review" of the program. Whitman, who days before had been loudly trumpeting the program's decency and goodness, was now declaring -- what else? -- that he didn't know the first thing about it, but he was sure enough gosh-dang-diddley-darn going to find out:

"For me, a tool like this serves no purpose and it doesn't serve me with any value," Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman told reporters as some of the affected war correspondents began demanding to see their secret military profiles.... "I haven't seen anything that violates any policies, but again, I'm learning about aspects of this as I question our folks in Afghanistan," Whitman said. "If I find something that is inconsistent with Defense Department values and policies, you can be sure I will address it."

And we're sure a grateful nation gives its thanks for this great diligence. Whitman, a former Special Forces op whose last wetwork was back in the bug-out from Somalia, has long shown a dogged fealty to the truth: here, for example, planting stories of Iranian "threats" to U.S. boats in the powderkeg of the Strait of Hormuz; or here, early on in the mass murder in Iraq, ardently peddling the Pentagon's knowingly false stories about the "heroic" rescue of Jessica Lynch. There is perhaps one aspect of his promised "review" that might trouble a cynic, however:

Whitman told Pentagon reporters that he was inquiring about the issue, but he added that the Pentagon is not launching any formal inquiry to the matter.

No "formal" review, then. No official inquiry. Just a couple of phone calls from good old Bryan to a few top brass and their mercenary manipulators: "You doing something dirty over there?" "Nope. Everything's

jake." "Cool."

Whitman, by the way, is not really a holdover from the Bush Administration, like his boss, Bob Gates. He is actually a holdover from the *Clinton* Administration, having ascended into the higher Pentagon PR ranks back in 1997, where he helped shape the presentations of Clinton's "good war" against Serbia in 1998, then went on to serve the the cause of imperial message message into Afghanistan and Iraq.

As we always say around here: Continuity! It's what makes America great!

Pentagon profiling U.S. reporters? - 8/27

Cafferty File (CNN.com)

U.S. soldiers from the 1st Platoon Alpha 3-71 Cavalry and Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers walk up a hill to a school during a mission in the Baraki Barak district of Logar Province, Afghanistan on August 22.

U.S. soldiers from the 1st Platoon Alpha 3-71 Cavalry and Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers walk up a hill to a school during a mission in the Baraki Barak district of Logar Province, Afghanistan on August 22.

FROM CNN's Jack Cafferty:

(CNN) - The Pentagon is profiling reporters covering the war in Afghanistan.

The newspaper "Stars and Stripes" reports that despite denials from the Pentagon, they are in fact rating the work of reporters as either "positive", "neutral" or "negative". They're contracting this work out to a private p.r. outfit called The Rendon Group, which has come under fire before for its work in the Iraq war.

Profiles of various reporters suggest these ratings are meant to help manipulate the kinds of stories that reporters come up with while they're embedded with troops. For example, one newspaper reporter is rated as "neutral to positive" in his coverage. The report suggests any negative stories he writes "could possibly be neutralized" by feeding him quotes from military brass.

Earlier this week, the Pentagon denied a story that appeared in "Stars and Stripes" saying "There is no policy that stipulates in any way that embedding should be based in any way on a person's work". Both the Defense Department and Rendon even denied a rating system exists.

Meanwhile, this latest revelation comes as polls show the war in Afghanistan is becoming less popular among the American people. Journalism groups and media ethicists are criticizing the Pentagon's efforts to rate and manipulate reporters. One military official says "it shows utter contempt for the Constitution." And contracting the work out to a civilian firm is even more odious.

Here's my question to you: What does it mean that the Pentagon is profiling U.S. reporters?

Pentagon Tracks, Rates Reporters "Neutral to Positive" - 8/27

Swampland (Time.com blog) ... Michael Scherer

Stars and Stripes, the U.S. military's independent newspaper, has a zinger of a scoop today:

WASHINGTON - Contrary to the insistence of Pentagon officials this week that they are not rating the work of reporters covering U.S. forces in Afghanistan, Stars and Stripes has obtained documents that prove that reporters' coverage is being graded as "positive," "neutral" or "negative."

Moreover, the documents — recent confidential profiles of the work of individual reporters prepared by a Pentagon contractor — indicate that the ratings are intended to help Pentagon image-makers manipulate the types of stories that reporters produce while they are embedded with U.S. troops in Afghanistan. One reporter on the staff of one of America's pre-eminent newspapers is rated in a Pentagon report as "neutral to positive" in his coverage of the U.S. military. Any negative stories he writes "could possibly be neutralized" by feeding him mitigating quotes from military officials.

Keep reading the whole story here. It is worth it. Among other things, the reporters, Charlie Reed, Kevin Baron and Leo Shane III, make it clear that both the Pentagon's spokesman, Bryan Whitman, and the consulting firm doing the work, the Rendon Group, have been saying things in public that do not match up with the documents the newspaper obtained.

The Pentagon has now announced that it is reviewing the practice of compiling reporter profiles.

New Files Prove Pentagon Is Profiling Reporters 8/27

ThinkProgress.com ... Amanda Terkel

This week, Stars and Stripes **revealed** that the Pentagon had hired a controversial contractor to screen journalists seeking to embed with U.S. forces. **The Rendon Group** determines whether reporters' coverage "was 'positive,' 'negative' or 'neutral' compared to mission objectives." The Pentagon's decision was especially shocking in light of Rendon's sordid past: The group personally set up the Iraqi National Congress and helped install Ahmad Chalabi as leader, whose main goal — **"pressure the United States to attack Iraq** and overthrow Saddam Hussein" — Rendon helped facilitate.

Military officials immediately went about furiously refuting the reports. "We have not denied access to anyone because of what may or may not come out of their biography," said public affairs officer Air Force Capt. Elizabeth Mathias. "It's so we know with whom we're working." Other officials for the Pentagon and Rendon went even further:

"They are not doing that [rating reporters], that's not been a practice for some time — actually since the creation of U.S. Forces-Afghanistan" in October 2008, Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman told reporters Monday. **"I can tell you that the way in which the Department of Defense evaluates an article is its accuracy. It's a good article if it's accurate. It's a bad article if it's inaccurate. That's the only measurement that we use here at the Defense Department."** [...]

The Rendon Group declared in a statement that "the information and analysis we generate is developed ... **not by ranking of reporters.**"

But new files prove otherwise. Stars and Stripes obtained profiles produced by Rendon. They clearly calculate the percentage of "positive" stories written by a reporter and offer ideas not about how to get the reporter to produce more accurate stories, but how to get more "favorable coverage" for the military. Fox News also obtained a slide from a Rendon PowerPoint presentation, where headlines from major newspapers are rated with "a plus sign, a negative sign or a capital 'N,' presumably for neutral." Images from the profiles and PowerPoint:



This pie chart was extracted from a report by The Rendon Group, evaluating the focus of coverage by a reporter for a major U.S. newspaper. It indicates the firm's conclusion that the reporter's coverage was 83.33 percent neutral and 16.67 percent negative in relation to the military's mission objectives.

Source: Stars and Stripes

Stars and Stripes also notes that one of the profiles looked at a reporter's work as recently as May, indicating that the ranking did not stop in October 2008, as Whitman claimed.

What remains unclear is how extensively this ranking affects whether the military allows certain reporters to embed with troops. At least one reporter, Heath Druzin with Stars and Stripes, was barred for refusing to highlight more good news from the military. Fox News also obtained a Rendon memo that "showed that past coverage is at least taken into account during the process."

US Military Investigates Afghan Desk – 8/28

True/Slant ... P.J. Tobia, Afghan Desk

This article from Stars and Stripes has a lot of journalists talking. It is about The Rendon Group, a company that puts together background briefs on reporters who apply for embeds with the US military in Afghanistan.

Most reporters in Afghanistan know about these reports. I obtained a copy of my Rendon report about three months ago from a friend in the military and I've posted excerpts below. I don't really think the reports are some kind of violation, in fact, I think the military is smart to look into the background's of people who will be writing about them. Rating the coverage that reporters give the military—"positive," "neutral," "negative"—seems a bit silly and slightly Orwellian, but if thousands of reporters were covering my organization, I would want a simple shorthand to identify them as well.

I do think the reports are creepy though. These guys have read almost everything I've written in the last few years, even interviews I've given to local news blogs. Reading this report is like perusing the diary of your stalker. Rendon also classifies certain publication as "left leaning" which I find odd.

Most troubling by far is that when S&S asked the military about Rendon, they denied the existence of these reports. I'm holding one of these reports in my hand right now, trust me, it exists. I've also met people who work for The Rendon Group in Kabul. In conversations, they deny that there is any nefarious objective to what they do. "We just help the military figure out what embed is right for a particular

Democratic System— Daily Afghanistan
 (N) Slippers on Patrol in Wake of Afghan Poll— ABC News (Australia)
 US / Canada
 (-) Three NATO Troops Killed in Southern Afghanistan— AP, VOA
 (N) Afghan Vote Fraud Allegations Increase— LA Times, Toronto Star, USA Today. Officials cautioned it was too early to question the legitimacy of the results.
 (N) Afghan Cabinet Minister Claims Karzai Victory— NYT
 (N) Afghans Move Toward Reconciliation with Taliban— AP reported that leaders in Helmand, along with Gen. Conway, are planning talks with moderate Taliban fighters in the province.
 (-) Afghan Elections Seen as a Setback for Women— AP cited poor security and the lack of women election workers as reasons behind Afghan women not voting.
 (+) Canadian Helps Afghans Create First National Park— CP
 (N) Alex Troops Helped Prepare for Election— Philadelphia Inquirer
 (N) Afghanistan Is Worth the Fight— Washington Times editor

Source: Fox News

reporter," one Rendon employee told me over drinks. "If a reporter is classified as "negative" they are less likely to go where the action is and more likely to be covering a platoon that guards sandbags in Herat."

I've quoted the best parts of my Rendon report below for your reading pleasure. This was my second report, generated after my second embed (in Wardak) and before my third (in Kandahar.) I bolded some of the good parts and put links to the stories they reference.

Memorandum

FROM: The Rendon Group

Date: 5 May 2009

RE: UPDATE P.J. Tobia Journalist Profile

The purpose of this memo is to provide an updated assessment of P.J. Tobia, and give a profile of his work, both through a summary of content and analysis of style, in order to gauge the expected sentiment of his work while on an embed mission in Afghanistan...

UPDATE to analysis below:

Tobia's work resulting from his most recent embed was an in-depth article for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* on joint US, French and ANA operations in Wardak. The article followed Lt Eric Schwirian and his efforts to train ANA soldiers who, if properly strengthened, are the coalition's ticket out of Afghanistan. His article for *Philadelphia Inquirer* was more straightforward than his previous work.

Tobia was more sympathetic and less critical of the US Military in his most recent report as evidenced by his quote selection: "We're here to keep the Afghan people safe."

Tobia continues to humanize US soldiers by quoting mainly US Military personnel and detailing the soldiers' backgrounds, homes and reaction to fighting in Afghanistan.

His most recent article is neutral-to-positive while his previous work has been neutral or neutral-to-negative.

In an interview, he decried the acid attacks and human rights violations toward Afghan women in particular...

Background

[Tobia's] articles on Afghanistan focused on multiple topics that included, narcotics use, detainee abuse, the 'hearts and minds' mission, the development of the ANSF as well as the overall cost of the US mission in Afghanistan. He produced two articles that were originally published in *The Washington Post* and *Nashville Scene* but were later picked up by New York's left leaning *Village Voice* and Florida's *New Times*.

...It should be noted that his [*Village Voice*] article was titled "Afghaniscrewed: How I Spent My Fall Vacation."

Perspective, Style and Tone

Tobia tends to write lengthy feature articles that are highly narrative. His articles are often written in first person and may be considered commentaries rather than hard news pieces. His articles are thought provoking as he often asks questions rather than making conclusions.

He writes with an outside observer's perspective, but his articles show he can identify and empathize with US troops.

Expectations for Embed

Based on his previous embed and past reporting, it is unlikely that he will miss an opportunity to report on US military missteps. However, if following previous trends, he will remain sympathetic to US troops and may acknowledge a learning curve in Afghanistan.

Considering his previous embed, it is likely that he will produce articles that may be picked up by a number of publications.

In light of his previous style and previous coverage, it is likely that he will write long feature articles that address several current Afghan issues in relation to troops he has contact with.

I Want My Rendon Group Profile! – 8/28

The Washington Independent ... Spencer Ackerman

So which reporters seeking to embed with the U.S. military in Iraq and Afghanistan have been profiled by the Rendon Group? Rendon, the CIA-linked communications firm contracted by the Pentagon's public affairs shop to evaluate potential embeds' work for its usefulness or hostility to U.S. war aims — a story broken wide open by Stars & Stripes - isn't saying.

Writing at True/Slant, P.J. Tobia managed to acquire his Rendon-derived profile. It's impressively nuanced. Not only does it evaluate the political leanings of the publications that publish P.J., it distinguishes between his "highly narrative" style and hard news, judging that his "thought provoking" pieces often "as[k] questions rather than making conclusions." The verdict?

Based on his previous embed and past reporting, it is unlikely that he will miss an opportunity to report on US military missteps. However, if following previous trends, he will remain sympathetic to US troops and may acknowledge a learning curve in Afghanistan.

Backhanded compliments? I don't know. But I do know that I'd like to see my profile. After all, I've embedded with troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, and earlier than that I took a military-escorted tour of Guantanamo Bay. So, thinking I'd first try to go in through the in door, I called Rendon.

I'll make a long story short. The woman I spoke with wouldn't acknowledge if they've profiled me; wouldn't clarify if they'd give me my profile if they have; referred me to a statement on their Website as their only comment at this time; wouldn't provide me with her name; wouldn't allow me to speak to a different person; and took my email to keep me posted if and when they'd tell me more.

Ah well. Here's that statement, issued Aug. 26:

We are happy to provide more information with regard to recent reports that discuss the scope and nature of our support to the Public Affairs Office of US Forces in Afghanistan. The Rendon Group (TRG) competed for and was awarded a contract in 2009 to support US Military Public Affairs in Afghanistan. As part of the media analysis requirement for the contract, TRG provides relational analysis of news content specifically focused on themes of critical importance defined as US interests - stability and security, counter-insurgency, operational results — to name a few. The information and analysis we generate is developed by quantifying these themes and topics and not by ranking of reporters. The analysis is not provided as the basis for accepting or rejecting a specific journalist's inquiries and TRG does not make recommendations as to who the military should or should not interview.

The media analysis provided at the request of the public affairs office, was constructed from open source information with the intent to enumerate and quantify key aspects (topics, subjects) of coverage relevant to the Afghanistan mission. Any reference to positive, negative or neutral in our analysis is derived by quantifying the content in relation to mission objectives. Example: Positive to Neutral coverage could mean that it contains stories that are either neutral to or positive to a specific military objective (stability, security, captures, etc). Conversely, Neutral to Negative coverage could indicate that content in stories were negative in relation to mission objectives (kidnapping, suicide bombing, etc). This is commonly referred to as content analysis and is a key component of media analysis.

The value and expertise that our team brings to the client is our long standing experience and innovation in providing real-time analysis of the global information environment — in this case real-time quantitative analysis of key themes and topics deemed critical to the Afghan mission and defined by the client. In the field of public affairs our first principle is that information should be communicated in a timely, truthful and transparent manner. TRG has been a pioneer in the field of real-time analysis of traditional and social media. We are very proud of the work we have done helping customers, and in particular the US Military, understand and communicate in today's real-time global information environment.

