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Subject: FW: Transcript | PRI's The World on the Rendon Group, 8/27
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Stars and Stripes really going out of their way to hype this:

PRI's The World, hosted by Katy Clark had a segment this evening with "Stars and Stripes" editor Howard Witt discussing the Rendon Group profiles on reporters embedded with U.S. troops. Below is the complete transcript. Please refer to the attachment, which includes a link play the MP3 file. The total runtime is 4:39.

PRI'S THE WORLD (AIRING ON WAMU FM)

August 27, 2009, 8P.M. EST

TRANSCRIPT

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.

Sent with the approval of (b)(6) the Director for Public Affairs
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