



REPORTING IRAQ: AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE WAR BY THE JOURNALISTS WHO COVERED IT (PART 1)

BARD: Good afternoon. I'm Rich Bard, Deputy World Editor of the *Miami Herald*, where I manage our online political coverage, political currents, on MiamiHerald.com. I'm delighted to be here.

Obviously we have an important topic. We know why it's a major issue in the presidential campaign, and I'm glad to see so many of you here. One housekeeping chore, I've been asked to remind everyone to turn your cell phones off, as this panel discussion is being recorded.

I want to make brief mention about one of our panelists who could not be here this afternoon, Carol Rosenberg. She is Military Affairs Correspondent of the *Miami Herald*, and I've had the pleasure of working with her as her editor on a number of occasions. She called me from Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, yesterday to tell me that it was very uncertain that she would make it back in time for this panel, but of course she sends her regrets. Carol was in Baghdad just shortly after the collapse of Saddam Hussein's statue and has reported extensively from the Mideast.

It's my pleasure to introduce the moderator for today's panel, Christopher Kenneally. He is the Director of Author & Creator Relations at the Copyright Clearance Center near Boston. He is an author, has reported from the Mideast and Central Asia in the past, has also written for the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and National Public Radio. It's my pleasure, as I said, to welcome Mr. Kenneally.

(applause)

KENNEALLY: The story we're about to hear is true. The names may have been changed to protect not only the innocent and the victims, but also in some cases, the journalists who are reporting the story themselves. Hello, my name is Chris Kenneally. I am, as you heard, the Director of Author Relations for Copyright Clearance Center, and welcome to a special edition of a program we call *Beyond the Book*. We're here as part of the 2007 Miami Book Fair International.

Our program today will reflect on the contents of a single book, *Reporting Iraq*, published just last month by Melville House Publishing. It is an oral history of the war by the journalists who covered it. *Reporting Iraq* presents a side of the story we don't usually hear. It's a story of the storytellers themselves. Joining me today are Jane Arraf, Mike Hoyt, and Colonel Dan Baggio.

As ancient as war itself, writing on war is an esteemed tradition, from Homer and Herodotus to Orwell and Capa, as a photographer. In many respects, the Iraq war that began with the U.S. invasion in March 2003 is like any other in human history. But clearly the tools we use to tell its story are as fresh as video cell phones and the blogosphere.

Reporting Iraq is already being called required reading for journalism students, but I think it's ambition should aim higher. At least one of our panelists has wondered out loud why would the general public want to read such a book? When she asked me that, I was taken aback. Clearly you do want to read this kind of a book. Of course they'll be interested, I replied. Aren't we all desperate to know what doesn't make it into the paper, what doesn't wind up on air? As good as any newscast or news feature may be, when it comes to a war so charged by politics and principles on all sides, as the war in Iraq is, our curiosity is all but endless. Maybe that's right or wrong. I'm not sure. And we can ask the panelists what they think. Maybe it's morbid somehow to want to know even more detail about what is likely by history to be judged a catastrophe for all concerned. But one thing's for sure, when this hour is over, we will all have, I think, a richer appreciation for just how hard the work is to report from Iraq.

I want to start with Mike Hoyt. Mike, welcome.

HOYT: Thank you.

KENNEALLY: Mike is the Executive Editor of the *Columbia Journalism Review*, where he has worked since 1986 as a writer and editor. Before that, he was a freelance magazine writer. He has also worked for *Business Week* and for two New Jersey dailies, the *Record* in Bergen County and the *Home News*. Mike, you're here to tell us the picture of the book itself and how it evolved, and I think it's important to start with how this assignment started.

HOYT: Well, one of our contributing editors suggested it, and we jumped on it. One of the inspirations was a woman named Farnas Fassihi, who works for the *Wall Street Journal*. She's a Middle East correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal*, very respected reporter. She had a habit of writing an e-mail to her friends and relatives in kind of a chain letter from Baghdad to let everyone know she was OK and a little bit about what was going on and so forth. And in mid-2004, I believe, she wrote one that was more discouraged and more worried, basically, about the situation and about her situation and about how difficult it was to report. She sent it and somebody in the chain posted it and it was instantly all over the world. And it was

quite a controversy in journalistic circles and elsewhere, too, because it went beyond conventional journalism form. It was somewhat emotional. It was – actually I can read a little piece of it. “I leave when I have very good reason to, in a schedule interview. I avoid going to people’s homes and never walk in the streets. I can’t go grocery shopping anymore. I can’t eat in restaurants. I can’t strike a conversation with strangers, can’t look for stories, can’t drive in anything but a full armored car. Can’t go to the scenes of breaking news stories. Can’t be stuck in traffic. Can’t speak English outside. Can’t take a road trip. Can’t say I’m an American. Can’t linger at checkpoints. Can’t be curious about what people are saying, doing, feeling. And can’t, and can’t.”

And so obviously she was feeling that. And it was controversial because some journalists thought one, it made it sound like you can’t report in Iraq, which they thought was not true – which isn’t true. But secondly, she also voiced a little bit of political and a little deeper analysis. She thought that the mission over there was very troubled, obviously. And this goes beyond the bounds of objectivity. But others thought that it was terrific, it actually broke through. And in fact some of her readers e-mailed her to say, you know, you never told us how bad it was. And she said you’ve been reading my stuff for months. I’ve been telling you this. But there was something about the first-person that broke through. And that’s really what we wanted more of. I think we get a little numb to this war and we wanted to break through that barrier.

These people went through the full arc of this war from the beginning, when there were 400 reporters or more and they were able to go anywhere. They were able to go to Fallujah or places where now you can’t go unless you’re embedded. And –

KENNEALLY: There was a sense of euphoria even. There was an excitement that all things seemed possible.

HOYT: Actually they universally in the book call it the Golden Age or the Golden Period. You could talk to Iraqis. One reporter said not only you could talk to them, you couldn’t shut them up. They were pouring out their stories, they had been bottled up for so long. And there was a euphoria to it. Reporters go to bear witness. They go to inform the American people. But they also go because it’s interesting. It’s obviously fascinating. Here’s a country undergoing a tremendous change. It’s the biggest story in the world. So they went from that period to a period where they began to notice that Iraq was growing toxic, that there were problems, there were deep problems. And we went from a period of near chaos for a couple of months to a period where – of building insurgency and then into what looks like a civil war. So they at different points along the way noticed things. They noticed them sometimes faster than the government did – and many times faster than the government did. So we wanted to tell their story of – these people, some of them were there since before the war. They know things. They have an authority. And we wanted their perspective on Iraq, not just how they do their job, but on the war effort as well.

KENNEALLY: And to address the question I asked at the beginning about why is it important for the public to know that – you mentioned the numbing effect of story after story and report after report. If this is a book that points to the future, what kind of future for journalism do you see emerging out of the war? What kind of legacy for the media may there be?

HOYT: I think the public hears about Iraq. The public is a little numbed about Iraq right now, but I think they care deeply, and I think this is another window into it. That's one reason, to find out more about the country, about what's happening with the war effort.

I think reporters catch it from all sides. This is a somewhat divided country, and they catch it from the Left for not paying enough attention to the dire problems, to civilian casualties, to that kind of thing. They catch it from the Right for not paying attention to the good news and the successes and sometimes the valor that goes on. But I think if you read the book, you will see that – how hard it is to do. It's very, very hard. And to get it right and to not pay attention to those pressures.

KENNEALLY: And what a serious job it is. It's a job you never leave. You can't walk away from the office or the desk and ever be done. It's something that happens to you on a constant basis.

HOYT: Yeah, I mean I think early on it was one kind of job. Suddenly it became another kind of job. There are story after story here of – in a chapter we call “Turning Points” – where people began to experience things like being chased by gunmen or being threatened, gun to the head. Dexter Filkins of the *New York Times* happens upon a car bomb and the crowd turns on him and nearly kills him. And as his very large bodyguard throws him in the car and they – the crowd nearly holds the car back. A crowd that big can do that. But they get away. One after another, there are stories like that where people realize that things were turning south. Not sure where I was going with that, but –

KENNEALLY: Let me ask you. There was, at one point, a kind of glamorous image of the war correspondent. Do any of the students at Columbia that you see think of the war or reporting from a war as a glamorous occupation? How do they view it, before they ever show up?

HOYT: That's interesting. In doing this book, I had the privilege of meeting some of these people, and I had dinner with a young reporter, formerly *Boston Globe*, who – I had dinner with her and her father. And her father talked about getting a phone call from her as she was riding on some armored vehicle behind the troops heading for Baghdad at the very beginning of the war. And he said that he and her mother were – their first emotion was deep worry, of course. Their second was worry about the effects on her. She was obviously going to see devastation. And then the third emotion – and her father is an old CBS reporter – the third emotion was

jealousy. He felt a twinge of jealousy. He wanted to be there. And of course it is interesting. I think as the war has gone on, it's obviously changed character. And I think it's become just extremely difficult now. There's a psychic price to pay. Some people talk about that. And I would not advise any student to go over there now. I actually had a student who ended up in the book, who went over there, unbeknownst to me, but he went over there and started stringing early on, named Andrew Butterworth. He did stuff for *Time* magazine and some others and he's quite good. But he's back and I don't think he'll be going again. I think now it's a – I don't know what your bureau is like, but I've heard described at the *Times* bureau, for example, which has machine guns up top and guards all over the place and – much of the work is done by Iraqis, many of whom have paid for it with their lives. So it's not a job to send a student.

KENNEALLY: There's the story that ends the book, I wonder if you can tell us about it and perhaps – I'd encourage you to read from it. It's too bad we can't hear all the various voices. There are something like three dozen reporters and photojournalists involved in this project, at least, right? How many were interviewed?

HOYT: Forty-six we (inaudible).

KENNEALLY: Forty-six, OK, so there are that many voices and they come in and out and tell a story that adds up at the end of the book with one very dramatic story. Can you tell us about that and perhaps choose a section from it?

HOYT: Yeah, there is a section at the end of the book. Chris Hondros, who's a really wonderful reporter – I mean a photojournalist – sorry. And he tells a story that really, to my mind – I put it at the end because I thought it said something about the mission. The basic story is he went on patrol with a group – I forget who they were. But –

KENNEALLY: Apache Company, I think.

HOYT: Yeah, it was in Talafar. This is in January 2005. And they got in a firefight and a few shots were fired and he hung around, and he had something of a camaraderie with them and they worked together. A couple of days later, they went out on a later afternoon patrol – and I'll just read a little bit. It's a long section, so I'll pick a chunk here.

“Finally, on Tuesday, the same guys, the Apache guys who were in the firefight, were going out in a late afternoon patrol. So I said all right, I'll go on that. But they got delayed, so finally at 6:00 we went out, and it was the same kind of thing, a little smaller, like a small group of 20 men or so patrolling, and it was dark by this point. So they're out on the streets and it's after the curfew, which is about 6:00. And as we were patrolling on a darkened boulevard, in the distance, a car, maybe 100 yards down at least, turned toward the boulevard and started coming

toward us. And already I had a bad feeling, you know, because these are camouflaged soldiers. They don't patrol regularly and they don't call much attention to themselves because if they have lights and sirens and things like that, they'd be seen or be easily attacked. So here's a bunch of testy men with guns running around and a car coming towards them and they don't have their – they don't let cars come toward them.

I had a feeling the situation was going to end up badly, so I moved over to the side, because I feared at least some warning shots would be fired. The car kept coming. It was dark. And sure enough, somebody fired some warning shots. The car kept coming. And then they fired into the car. And it limped into the intersection, clearly no longer under its own power, just on its own momentum, and gently came to rest on a curb. I was kind of paralyzed, and then slowly walked to the car, and sure enough, I hear children's voices inside the car and I knew it was a family."

Well, you get the picture.

KENNEALLY: You get the picture. And in fact, he got the pictures, and that becomes part of this story, sort of fast-forward to that, there was an entire family of Iraqis. They were going home. Nobody really keeps track of 6:00, 6:01. Now it's curfew and you shouldn't be out there. And they were wrong place, wrong time.

HOYT: Wrong place, wrong time, which happens more than it should. And –

KENNEALLY: But the photos.

HOYT: The photos – it ends up that both parents are dead. The little boy is shot and, I think, paralyzed, and the little girl survives, but she's bloodied and of course hysterical. And he quietly takes pictures and they go back to the base and then the PR people from the military begin to think about this. They realize something tough is going to go out and there's a conversation. You kind of have to read it, because it's a little confusing. But there's a conversation. They said we'd like to do a little investigating before you send those out. He says yeah, yeah, sure, sure, and he runs back and he says, but I have to send them to my boss and you can talk to my boss. He looks. He wasn't sure what he had, because it was low light. And when he saw what he had, he was shocked, because they were very powerful pictures. And he hits send as fast as he can, sends them out, walks back to tell the guy to talk to his boss. They agree they'd talk in the morning. The colonel goes to bed. The captain, I think, takes over and talks in the morning. And there's a confusing conversation. We don't hear it. But all we know is the captain – actually, the captain goes to bed thinking the pictures are not going to be sent. They are. And big trouble in the morning. The colonel – steam's coming out of his ears and so forth. They didn't really want those pictures out, or, if they did, I guess it depends. Maybe you can shed light on this. They didn't want them out, but they – at the least, they wanted warning that they're coming out, and they didn't get either. And it was – he ends, his last line is it was a confusing situation. But to me

it says something – whatever happened – I’m not sure what happened in those conversations. But the mission of the journalist is to show what happened. And the mission of the military – they can speak for themselves. But the mission of the journalist is to show the story, even when it’s a rough story.

KENNEALLY: And it’s interesting, and we’ll talk about that with Jane right now, but thank you, Mike. Jane Arraf, welcome. Jane is a freelance NBC News correspondent, and before joining NBC, she was the Edward R. Murrow Press Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. That followed her eight years as CNN’s Baghdad Bureau Chief as well as Istanbul Bureau Chief and Senior Baghdad correspondent. And Jane, I want to just sort of go right to that about your two years, or nearly so, as an embedded reporter in Iraq and the mission of the journalist and the mission of the military and where they overlap and where they conflict. And just share with us your thoughts on that.

ARRAF: Thanks. That is sort of an essential question, I suppose, and where they overlap – where you would hope they overlap – and sometimes they do, actually, oddly enough – is that I feel it’s our job to go out there, take those risks, and come back and, if I’m doing television, show you what we’ve seen and put it in context so you can actually decide how it’s going. It’s not up to us to do that. Where those things don’t overlap is that very often the military, with the exception of Colonel Baggio here, will feel that the reason journalists are there is to help them win the war. The reason journalists are there is to be cheerleaders for them. I’ve been asked to put on uniforms. I’ve been asked why we’re not helping more with the war effort. And when I try to explain that as a longtime journalist I feel that one is a journalist first and your nationality second, it’s shocking to many of them. I’m not saying that everyone has to feel that way, but that is the way a lot of us feel, and it’s a difficult thing to get across to young men and women who are out there risking their lives for various reasons. But there is still a big difference there between how we see ourselves and the job we should be doing and how the military sees us.

Now having said that, just to again very briefly, there are enlightened commanders, enlightened soldiers, non-commissioned officers, who have made it possible for most of the reporting that you all would have seen from the war, whether it’s the battle for Fallujah, the fall of Baghdad, and everything else. It can’t be the only thing that you see. It can’t be the only thing you use to decide how things are going, but it has been an essential part of being out there reporting on Baghdad and on Iraq in general.

KENNEALLY: Mike said that he wouldn’t send anybody to Iraq. But you told me you think there should be more, not fewer, journalists in Iraq. Why is that?

ARRAF: Correct me if I’m wrong. I think what Mike is saying is that he wouldn’t send a journalist student or a recent journalist student to Iraq?

HOYT: No.

ARRAF: And I do think there has to be more reporting on Iraq, simply because we're hearing fewer and fewer voices. And part of that is because there are fewer journalists. Part of it is because it's harder to get out there. It's become more dangerous. Part of it, I have to say, is because there is a feeling that the American public has tuned out. I don't know if you all realize how hard it is to get on air with an Iraq story, but get a Britney Spears story up there and we do not have a chance. And for all the talk that journalists only want to show bad news, in all the years that I've covered Iraq – and I've covered that war from the start – the stories that really get a lot of play are the ones with the most explosions. I covered the entire battle for Fallujah, live coverage, RPGs going off, mortars – very dramatic stuff. And then when it came time to rebuild Fallujah, and there were I think equally compelling stories, with fewer explosions, there wasn't a whole lot of interest in seeing a family move back into their house and buy the bricks to build their house again.

KENNEALLY: You mentioned all the years that you've covered Iraq, but it wasn't just the war that brought you to Iraq. You were in Iraq for 15, 16 years, really. So when you returned there – and you were most recently there in September – you return and see it almost – I will say this – almost with Iraqi eyes. What is it like to be in Iraq today for someone who remembers it from 10, 15 years ago?

ARRAF: It's absolutely heartbreaking, and I think the longer that you've spent in Baghdad, the more heartbreak there is inherent in that – heartbreaking because a lot of the people that I knew are gone, whether they have left the country, whether they've died, whether they've had relatives killed. The cumulative effect of this war – and I think we're only coming to grips now with the effect that this war will have on America – that the effect in Iraq is that there has not really been a family that has been untouched. And in Baghdad, that means it's very difficult to find a family that has not lost a relative, that hasn't had somebody die in a sectarian killing or killed in a crossfire or died in some other way, or hasn't had their home confiscated, hasn't had something truly terrible happen to them.

So I almost envy reporters who come in and see things with that fresh eye, where they don't know all the baggage that comes with looking around a city that you knew and seeing it destroyed and seeing the ghosts of people that you knew. But at the same time, I suppose what I'd like to see is more people who knew Baghdad, and more Iraqis reporting. And I have to say – I won't take too long – but I do think one of the positive things, if there is a positive thing, of the danger and difficulty in Westerners reporting in Iraq, is that it has produced a new generation of Iraqi journalists. And when I first went to Iraq, the only Iraqi journalists worked for the Iraqi government. And no one really believed that you could be an independent journalist who didn't work for some government. And now we're actually seeing them, and it's amazing. And they are incredibly courageous. And at some point, we are going to have to hand the torch even more to these Iraqi

journalists. And that's how you're going to be able – and hopefully be able – to get news about what really is going on in the places we can no longer go to.

HOYT: If I could just add, there's a remarkable man in our book who's named Ali Fadeel (sp?), who was a physician. He was a doctor, and when the war started, he wanted to witness, and he became a translator, and then he slowly became a journalist. Now he does documentaries. But he had many interesting things happen to him and many frightening things happening to him. But he made an interesting comment that he now thinks that the picture he sees in the daily newspapers from Iraq is more true to him, more recognizable, because so much reporting is done by these Iraqis who have now, as Jane said, done this reporting for years.

KENNEALLY: Jane, you mentioned the legacy for America of the war, and when one thinks of the Vietnam War, it had multiple legacies. It had a legacy for the media. It probably was the moment when a mistrust or a distrust or a questioning of the media began in earnest. Do you have any thoughts on what the legacy for the media will be of this conflict? Will it just be to completely end any sense that everyone doesn't have an agenda or do people always question what it is you're up to?

ARRAF: One of the things I grapple with, and a lot of us grapple with, is the polarization of American society. And when it comes to how they see the news, how they evaluate the news, generally what I've found is that whether people believe my reports or not – and again, I've done a lot of live television, so the wonderful thing about live television is, it's there, it's happening in real time, and it's hard to put a spin on it quite so much. But whether people believe it or not tends to be determined by what they think of the war. And I think that that has been fueled partly because of the questions that we should have asked before the war in the run up to this war. And I think it's partly because of the rise of the Internet and all those other things – the blogs, the fact that Americans who don't like what they're reading in their newspapers or seeing on TV can go onto the Internet and find out what Sergeant Jones from Alabama thinks the war is – how the war is going. And all of that, I think, has fragmented what used to be a pretty cohesive viewership to the point where it's really harder not just to get people's attention, it's harder to get people to trust you.

KENNEALLY: Thank you, Jane.