



REPORTING IRAQ: AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE WAR BY THE JOURNALISTS WHO COVERED IT – PART 2

KENNEALLY: I want to turn now for an interesting perspective to Colonel Dan Baggio. He is currently the Chief of Army Media Relations, assigned to the Office of the Chief of Army Public Affairs at the Pentagon. He's had 24 years of active duty, including 11 overseas commands and staff positions in Korea, Japan, Turkey, and elsewhere. And Colonel Baggio, welcome and I guess want to ask you first about your relationship with the media. I think people here would love to hear what that is exactly. You told me some of your best friends are journalists.

(laughter)

BAGGIO: That's very true. Actually I knew Jane fairly well when we were over there before, and she's an excellent reporter. And I'm not saying that to try to cheese up to her at all, but the truth of it is, when you talk about honest and fair reporting, I mean honesty – live shots – I guess the thing that bothers me about reporters who come with a preset agenda and are not – and if you have an agenda, at least be open to what you see. If Jane tells something that I do like or that I don't like, it doesn't matter. I know she's being truthful. She was out there in – frankly, in some of the toughest stuff in that second battle of Fallujah, right out front with her helmet on, reporting. It was impressive to see her out there with the First Infantry Division.

But we were talking before we came in here – and really, I always view media like any other profession. You can't paint them all in one corner. It's a spectrum. And one of the things that I try to do as a military – I'm really the liaison between the media and the military.

KENNEALLY: Right, in fact, Colonel, maybe you can just give people a 30-second take on what the role is and how that works in Iraq.

BAGGIO: I'm not in Iraq now, so I can't speak for what's going on there right now. But what I really believe in is I try to facilitate the media to tell their story, to try if they got needs, they want to visit a unit, I try to get them out there to tell their story. Obviously the military, we have our talking points. We have, like any corporation

or any company, there are certain things that we want to tell – relevant information about our organization. But other than that, we want to provide access and not try to spin anybody, but give them access to things, the good and the bad – to include Abu Ghraib. I took the first group of folks out to see the aftermath of Abu Ghraib. As a matter of fact, Carol Rosenberg, who's not with us today, I think was in that busload of people that I took out there. And things like that are painful, but I, too, think it's important to get it out there because the public needs to know. For every 100 attaboys, one aw shucks kind of wipes them all out, and those are tough to live with, but I think those hard-biting things are important as well.

But I will tell you that as far as relations with the media are concerned, one of the things that I try to do, is I try to develop personal relationships with them to understand what they want, what they need. And I think that's important, because there is a natural friction between the military and the media. It's natural, and you got to understand that friction or tension because we're concerned with security. We got a mission to do. We want to save soldiers' lives. We've got certain objectives we've got to accomplish. In the same time, the media have their First Amendment rights. They've got a story to tell. And so the natural culture of the military is to keep information in. The natural culture of the journalist is to tell information. So I'm there telling guys, hey, we're trying to change the culture of engagement, say it's OK to talk to the media. It's OK to do that.

So that makes it doubly harder for me when you introduce a certain media who's on the end of the spectrum who maybe doesn't have the same sort of integrity or doesn't treat things the right way, because then when a person like that does a story that you think is less than fair, then it has effects on what the attitude of the military is. So I do a lot of massaging and a lot of work with our folks, and we try to encourage engagement.

Matter of fact, right now within the U.S. Army – I can't speak for the whole military – we've got something called Initiative Seven. But basically what it is is we're encouraging all of our folks to engage the media, talk to the media. We've got a program called Three, Two, One now, where we even have our senior leaders – and talk about a throwback, or actually just the polar opposite from the stigma of Vietnam – we're trying to encourage the leaders to once a quarter, starting with the generals, and it trickles down, to do three engagements with our – what we call community outreach, like speeches, those kinds of things – two things with the media, and then one thing with our own internal public affairs apparatus, our base newspapers, our Pentagon channel, those sorts of things.

So it doesn't happen overnight, but we're trying to encourage folks to engage more. I think it's very important because we have an important story to tell, even with the warts, but I think overall, there's a lot of soldiers and marines, airmen, sailors out there doing a really hard work and unappreciated and I think each one of those guys has a story to tell. And it takes people like this to tell those stories. So overall I'm always – like people say cautiously optimistic – I'm always cautiously optimistic

about the relationship. But I think it takes hard work and I think it's important for us to have a great relationship.

KENNEALLY: I would like to ask you whether you have an opinion on who needs each other more. I mean clearly the military needs the media to tell that story and the media needs the military, and if you can sort of weight that. And then, Jane, perhaps you could tell us what you think of that question.

BAGGIO: I don't know, you could almost say 50-50 on the one hand. But it's interesting. Jane mentioned briefly that we're in this global information environment now, where you have all of the things like the webs, blogs. You have YouTube. It's an environment where people get their news, not from necessarily the traditional news sources, which makes it challenging for us. And there are some who will tell me, they'll say, why do we even need the media? We can tell the story our own way. I think it is good to post our own things up there on our own websites and things but I think there's always going to be a fundamental need to engage. Because people watch TV. They pick up a newspaper in the morning and they read it. So I think it's something that we have to sustain. It's definitely important for us. I don't know about percentages. I would guess it's about equally beneficial.

KENNEALLY: And Jane, what do you think about that?

ARRAF: I think part of the reason that the military needs us is – please don't take this the wrong way. We don't believe your press releases quite so much, and I don't think the public does either. And that doesn't mean that they're wrong, and that doesn't mean you're not really well-meaning – and again, Colonel Baggio, not because he's sitting next to me, really is. I have to point out that he is kind of like the poster boy for really good media relations people. They're not all like him. They're not all as charming and articulate.

The reason that the military needs us, I think, is because if they're telling us that they are – let's see – they've launched an air strike and 15 insurgents have been killed and Al Qaeda has been routed from a town in western Al Anbar, I would hope that nobody is going to print that verbatim or put that on air without actually being out there. It's very difficult to check, and that's one of the disturbing things now about not being able to get out quite so much is when you get out there, if you're there, and you have to be there – and particularly for television, there's no substitute for being there, you will find very often that there was an air strike, that were some people killed. It's very difficult to figure out whether they're insurgents, even for the military. It's so complex there that if they're going to get across key parts of their story, they do need someone to interpret that part of the story for them.

We need them because you can't just roam around Iraq these days. In fact you can't walk across the street in some places these days. And that's why we rely on

them to essentially give us access, not only to take us to places, to talk to us, to tell us what they're thinking, to introduce us to Iraqi leaders who we also can't get. We rely on the military these days for pretty well everything when it comes to anything to do with military operations. Those days when you could actually just walk up and cover both sides of the conflict were gone a few years ago. So we're inextricably linked, I'd say.

KENNEALLY: In the book, there are at least a couple of anecdotes from reporters who resent that in some way, that they are reliant on the military. And one reporter talks about certain reporters using the Black Hawk helicopters as taxis and she seems to think that that's cheating somehow. You don't feel that way?

ARRAF: I have never understood why if you had a tool, you wouldn't use it. If I'm standing in the rain in New York City and a taxi's going by, I'm going to take that taxi. If I am in Baghdad and some general says I am flying north today. Do you want to fly with me, why in the world would I not do that? Now, I think that criticism perhaps comes from a perception that reporters who are getting on generals' helicopters are doing nothing but getting on generals' helicopters, and if that were the case, that is disturbing. But if you are using that, as any journalist does, and will, as just another tool and just another piece of a very complicated puzzle, then I can't imagine how that could be wrong.

KENNEALLY: And Colonel, a last question for you. I asked you when we were getting ready for all of this, why would a man who had been in the infantry for so long want to move over to public affairs? And you said it can be pretty exciting itself. And perhaps you have a story that illustrates that for us.

BAGGIO: I tell you, I mean it is. Next to carrying an M4 and clearing trenches and that sort of thing, the media military relationship thing, it's like I'm in a knife fight every day and my boss, General Coogle (sp?), says that all the time. It's very true. I do deal with a wide spectrum of issues, everything from good, bad, in-between, controversial, not so controversial, mundane to thrilling, I guess. But it is a very exciting business.

One thing I just do have to comment. The one thing that I have is my integrity – and it's just a piggy back on Jane's. And I appreciate the kind comments from Jane on that. But the folks that I have worked with, as far as being a public affairs professional, I can lie to you once. Then once I'm caught, I'll never be effective again. I might be effective once and then that's it. So I'm all for telling the truth. There's obviously certain things that involve operational security that we can't talk about, but engagement within bounds is very important. On the contrary, I think one of the things that concerns me – and I can give you just an anecdote – not about Iraq – but it's an anecdote when I was in Korea that I saw once, not as a public affairs officer, but it's one of the reasons that I wanted to become a public affairs officer relative to this question – is there's an old exercise we should do called team

spirit, which was a big return of forces to Korea and it's a big logistics thing, a maneuver exercise – it's huge.

So at that time I was a infantry battalion personnel officer and we had two new lieutenants who came in theater. I had to pick them up and bring them to the maneuver box. Anyway, long story short, we got lost in the middle of Seoul and we're driving on an overpass, and I notice one of the little universities there, and they're like a little clamshell shaped sort of a structure, and there's a group of protesters, which is kind of the spring ritual that happens every year there, with a line of these Seoul riot police there. And then there was news cameras back there taking pictures of this little riot. But across the street there's a grandma and a granddaughter eating ice cream cones, people going to shops, people just going about their business. But the funny thing is you watch the news that night and the camera picks up – you'd think all of Korea was on fire and there was a huge riot, because I remember my Mom and Dad called my – and it doesn't matter – I'm 48-years old, I'm still my Mom and Dad's little boy. But at the time they called me and said man, you got to be careful in Korea. The whole place I – I said, it is? (laughter) I don't know. I didn't see that.

But that's one of the things. I paint that example as that sometimes those folks who want to blow up a story, make it bigger than what it is, that's also dangerous. And so there's – and all people aren't like Jane on the media side of the house. And so I just think it's something that it's very important to nurture the relationship. It's an exciting business. I have no regrets. Well, sometimes I have regrets. But generally speaking, I have no regrets for getting in public affairs. I tell you what, I think probably it's rewarding, but very frustrating, but probably some of the hardest work I've done since I've been in the military.

KENNEALLY: Mike, just finally, before we go to questions from the audience – and we want to encourage you to stay to ask questions of anyone here that you'd like to – for *Columbia Journalism Review*, are you following through on this? Will there be more looking at the reporting in Iraq and the way that Iraq is changing reporting itself? Do you have any projects?

HOYT: Yes, certainly, we're actually sending one of our staff writers to Iraq, probably in January, partly to look at something that the Colonel mentioned – or somebody mentioned. There are a lot of what they call Mil Blogs out there, which are sometimes soldiers, ex-soldiers, and that kind of thing. And talk about a range – some of them are very good and – very, very good – and some of them are really not good. And he wants to take a look at them. And he's going to go, actually, with a couple of them and see what they report versus what is real, or what he sees from his perspective.

I just wanted to mention one thing in response to something earlier. In the book there's incidents of military-press tension in the book, certainly, but it didn't come through as the theme that I expected it to. And what does come through, strongly,

to me, is the tension between the – especially when Mr. Bremer was in charge – the Coalition Provisional Authority – between the politicians and the press. They seem to see – they painted a picture in their press conferences of something that was totally different from what the reporters who were going around and actually seeing with their eyes were seeing. And it got almost comical to some of them, because a new reporter would come in and express frustration and ask a question – this isn't what I'm seeing – and they'd say, there's the fresh eye.

KENNEALLY: Right, all the old hands would kind of roll their eyes.

HOYT: And there's a story in there of a guy from the CPA who was complaining about – the reporter was complaining about the gas shortage, and the guy in the Green Zone didn't know about it. And all of Baghdad knew about it. And it's just – that tension was much more pronounced.

KENNEALLY: I want to thank our panelists, Colonel Dan Baggio, Jane Arraf, and Mike Hoyt.