

The media embedded

Tom Engelhardt

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On the war coverage to come, you really don't need to know much more than the term "embed." Not so long ago, the Pentagon announced that, having kept reporters away from war, dead bodies, combat, more or less the works in the Gulf in 1991, this time everything would be rectified. Reporters would be trained in "boot camps" of their own and then "embedded" in units for the duration of the war to come. Now, these lucky journalists are being referred to as "embeds" (in sound, remarkably close to in-beds, as in: "in bed with"). Why does "embed" not have that independent-journalist ring to it? I just don't know. Maybe it's me.

Or maybe it's the fact that ever since Pentagon planners, still reeling from Vietnam (and blaming the media for the defeat), watched the Brits "embed" their journalists on navy ships off the forbidding Falkland Islands in 1982 while the Argentinean military was decimated elsewhere, they've been planning and testing control techniques for the media. Each American war since has been both a high-tech weapons lab and a media-control lab. After each, weapons and control techniques were further refined.

Until now, all these techniques involved keeping journalists away from the action. Now, the Pentagon evidently feels confident enough to take another step forward with what I think might be called a new "band of brothers" approach, well described by Carol Brightman on the *Los Angeles Times* Sunday Opinion Page. If, however, you want to see the most hopeful take on the new Pentagon media policy ("a sharp about-face from the restrictive news policies the Pentagon has maintained since the Vietnam War") -- unrealistically upbeat I would say -- check out, "Journalists Are Assigned to Accompany U.S. Troops" in yesterday's *New York Times*. Read complete *Times* piece

In the meantime, both the Pentagon and the media have been busy little bees as they approach their moment of embedding. Here, for instance, is part of a journalism school announcement for an "AP [*Associated Press*]-sponsored military workshop for media" for about 65 print and broadcast journalists:

"With the nation preparing for another war, including the deployment of thousands of California-based military personnel, The *Associated Press* is again presenting Training Day workshops to help AP print and broadcast members throughout the state deal with military coverage issues in their areas.

"Home-front issues to be discussed will include who to contact at your local bases; access protocol; credentialing requirements; regional deployment activity; reserve mobilization procedures, including location of armories and other likely staging areas; coverage of training exercises and other preparation; imbedding protocol (accompaniment of deployed units); access to rank-and-file personnel and their families; local units' response to domestic terrorism; release of casualty information; coverage of local funerals; homecoming coverage."

As a reminder of how the government dealt with coverage in the last war, I'm including below a warning piece from journalist Peter Arnett ("the Goebbels of Saddam's Regime"), which appeared in the Israeli paper *Ha'aretz*. One of the wild cards of media coverage of any new Iraq war, by the way, could be Al-Jazeera, the TV network that operates out of Qatar, which could offer war imagery that might not fit the Pentagon's idea of good publicity. I've seen little written on this in recent months, nor on whether the Bush administration will put pressure on our ally, the ruler of Qatar, to embed *Al-Jazeera* somewhere else than Baghdad.

Tom

U.S. Military Plans the War of Words

By Carol Brightman
The Los Angeles Times
16 February 2003

The Defense Department recently fleshed out its plan for "embedding" members of the press with military units during the impending invasion of Iraq. But the plan still doesn't address a crucial question: Will the technique really bring journalists any closer to the facts of war?

As envisioned by the military, chosen reporters and photographers will be positioned inside military units -- not for a few days or a week but for the duration of the conflict. "Embedding for life" is how Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Bryan Whitman portrayed it. At a recent orientation meeting with Washington bureau chiefs, Whitman described the ideal "embed" as one who follows a unit (ground, air or sea) from load-out to deployment through combat (subject to field approval) to the "march on whatever capital we happen to march on" to the return trip home and the "victory parade."

Carol Brightman is the author of the biography *Writing Dangerously: Mary McCarthy and Her World*.

Read Brightman's article

"The Goebbels of Saddam's regime"

By Peter Arnett
Ha'aretz
18 February 2003

It all started with the baby-milk plant story. Up to then, the Bush administration had been enthusiastically supportive of CNN's coverage of the 1991 bombing of Baghdad. Our live reports from the ninth floor of the al-Rashid Hotel suggested that the numerous cruise missiles and bombs daily hammering the Iraqi capital were finding their designated targets, namely command and control centers, military barracks and Saddam Hussein's palaces and bunkers. Our reports seemed to confirm Pentagon assessments that civilian casualties were nil.

But on Day 4, bombs rained down on an industrial plant on the outskirts of Baghdad, and the honeymoon was over. I was driven to the location by my Iraqi "minder" along with a WTN film crew. We pulled off the highway past a large, faded poster of Saddam Hussein comforting a distressed child. The entrance bore a crudely lettered sign reading "baby milk plant" in English and Arabic.

Read Arnett's article.

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Tomdispatch.com is researched, written and edited by Tom Engelhardt, a fellow at the Nation Institute, for anyone in despair over post-September 11th US mainstream media coverage of our world and ourselves. The service is intended to introduce you to voices from elsewhere (even when the elsewhere is here) who might offer a clearer sense of how this imperial globe of ours actually works.

An editor in publishing for the last 25 years, Tom is the author of *The End of Victory Culture*, a history of American triumphalism in the Cold War era. He is at present consulting editor for Metropolitan Books, a fellow of the Nation Institute, and a teaching fellow at the journalism school of the University of California, Berkeley.

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