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From: Wilson, Douglas HON OSD PA
Sent: Tuesday, January 18, 2011 11:06 AM
To: Cullin, Brian SES OSD PA
Subject: RE: Embeds

Brian, thanks -- let's discuss the premise behind the Opiel remark you quote. It was for that reason that SecDef wanted to make sure that key embed reporters (from major national and regional publications) got the opportunity to go in and/or out of Kabul for briefings before and/or after their embeds so they would "know what has been going on nationwide while they were embedded", as he put it. Interested in your views on this, we can discuss offline.

-----Original Message-----

From: Cullin, Brian SES OSD PA
Sent: Tuesday, January 18, 2011 9:48 AM
To: Wilson, Douglas HON OSD PA
Subject: RE: Embeds

Doug, I think this is a rich subject that deserves an organized response -- both to reaffirm OSD's commitment to the embed program and how it is operated -- and to respond to the allegations of re-routing journalists to more successful areas -- unless of course that is true. I think clarity is needed on reminding the public on who owns the program and what is in place to ensure balance and fair access. My sense is the public would benefit from this reminder. It also raises the subject of who is consistently providing oversight for the program and process. When we designed the first embed program for the first Iraq war -- it was done with the understanding embedded reporters would be offering more "tactical" and un-varnished perspectives because of their exposure to small units and more junior service members. This was balanced with elements of the program that offered more strategic - larger picture views from the more senior elements. Opiel's remark that - "Embeds suffer significant limitations, as critics rightly point out, and for any news organization they should never be anything more than one sliver of a much larger portfolio of reporting." -- is a notion I know we embrace -- to best ensure the most accurate reporting. This is indeed an untidy process that OSD supports just for that reason -- it is the foundation for accurate and fair reporting. Thank you for soliciting a response. I am constantly reminded you are in the right place at the right time. Best, BC

-----Original Message-----

From: Wilson, Douglas HON OSD PA
Sent: Tuesday, January 18, 2011 8:52 AM
To: Whitman, Bryan SES OSD PA; (b)(6) OSD PA; (b)(6) (b)(6)
Cullin, Brian SES OSD PA; Pittman, Harold E RDML MIL USN USCENTCOM CCCI/AA; Smith, Gregory J RADM USN ISAF DCOS COMM; Beck, Victor M, RDML, DCOS COMM Dir PAO; (b)(6) COL US ARMY COMISAF PAO
Subject: Embeds

Assume you all saw this one in today's EB. I'm expecting questions -- any thoughts or comments?

At War (NYTimes.com)
January 17, 2011

Embedistan: Outside The Wire, Off The Message

By Richard A. Opiel Jr.

AUSTIN, Tex. - At the end of his trip to Kabul in late March, President Obama declared after a high-profile military offensive that the Marines had pushed the Taliban out of the Afghan region of Marja, one of its major strongholds. But even as the president spoke those words, the Marines in Marja were telling a different story to an embedded reporter: The Taliban had retaken the momentum in much of Marja and stymied the troops' strategy to win hearts and minds. Soon, high-ranking American officials began to acknowledge that Marja was not going nearly as well as hoped.

There are justified criticisms of embedding with the military, mainly that articles written from operations with Marines and soldiers cannot possibly include the perspective of the Afghans who bear the brunt of the fighting and sometimes wrongly become the targets of troops themselves. Even among the self-selected group of locals who are willing to talk to troops, and reporters accompanying them, those who have strong feelings against the occupation often won't say that. In many cases the only way to get those perspectives in bloody war zones is from stringers - local reporters who speak the language and are paid a retainer by news organizations - but even they often will, understandably, not want to travel to areas of fighting and will do their reporting over the phone.

Yet, as the experience of Marja suggests, these legitimate qualms also ignore the highest utility of embeds: reporting the perspectives and emotions of the troops on the ground, who despite risk to their careers go well out of their way to describe, often bluntly, the failings and mistakes that have so often plagued the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Their comments often impeach the official line from Washington and serve as an important check on the influential opinions of others - including politicians, politically appointed officials, and many commentators - who, taken as a group, have tended to be far more optimistic, and incorrectly so, than troops doing the actual fighting.

There are few problems that troops on the ground won't discuss: An Afghan government and Army that doesn't bother to show up for a major offensive; a detainee seized and locked away with no evidence (but released after an Army reservist went public in *The Times* with his concerns); officers condemning widespread corruption that has made their mission impossible; young but highly experienced Marines describing the skill and tenacity of the Taliban; or, in Iraq, troops describing how one Iraqi Army division operated in league with Shiite death squads (whose commander was removed after these concerns were publicized in *The Times*).

It's important to understand what embeds are not: flying around with generals, or spending time only at large bases. Done properly, an embed requires at least one week with a small unit, usually a platoon or company, and going out with them every day. Since many units in Afghanistan rarely use vehicles on daily patrols, that typically means hiking for 20 miles or so, and possibly much longer, over the course of a week, in parts of the country too dangerous for an unembedded reporter to visit. Reporters wear body armor and Kevlar helmets and carry water, notebooks and pens - photographers the same, with their cameras. The troops normally are in their late teens and 20s. The oldest might be a 25-year-old sergeant leading a 10-man squad, or a 23-year-old lieutenant commanding a 30-man platoon. Most of these men have lost friends in Afghanistan or during deployments in Iraq, and they have little interest in hewing to a "party line" - if they even know what the party line is supposed to be.

David Halberstam, who before becoming a best-selling author was a Vietnam correspondent for *The Times* who wrote so critically of the war that President John F. Kennedy lobbied the newspaper to remove him, explained to an interviewer from *Powell's*, the Oregon bookseller, a few years before his death why he approved of embeds: "It was a good idea to get journalists out there. I had a lot of faith, because of Vietnam, in what happens when young American journalists are with young American fighters, that each will tell the truth and be respectful."

That's not to say that the military always tolerates the stories that result from embeds: In more than 20 embeds of mine in Iraq and Afghanistan, almost half led either to protests from military officials, or to the castigation or even "investigation" of troops whose truthful observations displeased hind-covering superiors. And some generals - even those who claim to embrace the work of journalists - are only fond of stories that make them, or their strategy, look good, and can resort to hysterics and tantrums after those that do not.

Nor is it clear that the integrity of the embed program will be maintained. Earlier this year, according to one account, the military was so concerned about negative coverage from embeds driving down support for the war in Afghanistan that

they considered what appeared to be a blatant plan to manipulate coverage by reducing embeds in the Pashtun-controlled south - where the major fighting is - and diverting reporters to embeds in places where the military believed things were going better.

It is distressing that such a proposal - which may also have been seen as an attempt to telegraph to officers in the field that negative observations will be less tolerated - was even discussed, as it would have placed military officers who are supposed to be non-partisan in the role of actively working to create a more favorable political environment for the war. Ironically, the embed ground rules for Afghanistan describe the need to "encourage the democratic ideals of open reporting and transparency" and emphasize that they are "in no way intended to prevent the release of negative coverage or embarrassing information."

Embeds suffer significant limitations, as critics rightly point out, and for any news organization they should never be anything more than one sliver of a much larger portfolio of reporting. But not doing them would eliminate one of the most important ways of truth-squadding the White House, the Pentagon, and other wartime leaders, especially as senior military officers have sought to exert tighter message control on reporting the unvarnished views of the troops on the ground, who have far more at stake than the elected officials and their political appointees who in recent years have gotten us into the wars - but who with rare exception ever served in combat themselves