

BATTLEFIELD BYLINES

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Following a report on [the Pentagon's boot camp for journalists](#), Terence Smith gets two views on how reporting on a potential Iraq war could differ from the coverage of past conflicts.

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TERENCE SMITH: Late last week, the Pentagon sent reporters their marching orders. It alerted journalists who will be assigned to specific units, and posted coverage guidelines that all correspondents "embedded" with American fighting forces must follow.

Here to discuss the media's rules of engagement and how the coverage of a war with Iraq might be different are Barbara Starr, a Pentagon correspondent for CNN; and Bryan Whitman, deputy assistant secretary of defense for media operations. Welcome to you both.

Bryan, this is a change... obviously, "embedding" -- to use your Pentagon phrase -- this many reporters with military units directly is quite a change from the way things have been done in the past. Why? What are you trying to accomplish?

The goals of "embedding" journalists

BRYAN WHITMAN: Well, I think there's several good reasons to try to embed reporters with U.S. units. The first is that that's what reporters want to do. If there is a conflict-- and the president hasn't made any decision with respect to military use in Iraq-- but if there is a conflict, this is what reporters and editors and bureau chiefs tell us how they want to cover the war. They want to cover it with the troops and from the front lines.

TERENCE SMITH: But you want something out of this as well.

BRYAN WHITMAN: Well, in addition to accommodating that, we have to face the reality that truth needs to be an issue in this conflict. Our potential adversary is a practiced liar. There's no doubt about it. He uses disinformation all the time.

I can't think of a better way than to counter such disinformation than to have objective reporters on the battlefield covering the news as it occurs.

TERENCE SMITH: Barbara Starr, given both the change in access that Bryan is talking about and also the changes in technology that are so profound since the last conflict, if there is one, is the coverage going to be different, dramatically different?

BARBARA STARR: I think it's going to have to be. Fundamentally the world is a very different place than Desert Storm twelve years ago. We are now in the Internet age. Twelve years ago when I went to Saudi Arabia, my first story out of Saudi Arabia was filed by typewriter. That's not going to happen again.

We're in the Internet age. We're in satellite transmission. Things are going to move very, very fast for reporters in this battlefield. In this war, the essential thing is to be able to get your story out quickly as the battle is happening.

TERENCE SMITH: And you think this will be possible with the procedures, rules and regulations that the Pentagon is laying down?

The Pentagon's rules for frontline coverage

BARBARA STARR: Well, you know, one hates to use the cliché "time will tell," but apparently that's what we're going to have to wait for.

The Pentagon certainly has come to this with the best of intentions by all accounts. They want to facilitate access. The key issue is the individual commander out on the battlefield who is taking reporters to the front lines with him, whether or not that individual commander is going to feel comfortable facilitating access and letting reporters file their stories, their news stories, as quickly as possible.

It may vary from unit to unit, and that's a bit of a concern. We're going to have to see how it goes.

TERENCE SMITH: Bryan Whitman, you at the Pentagon have developed some ground rules to cover this sort of work, what these reporters who are traveling with, living with these units can and cannot do. What are they broadly speaking and why?

BRYAN WHITMAN: Well, clearly what we have to balance out in the field is we want to be able to protect that information that is going to determine the success of an operation, and we don't want any reporting that's going to necessarily jeopardize those individuals that are executing that mission.

But I have to tell you, that's the beauty of embedding also. I personally... there might be somebody out there, there might be a journalist out there, but I have never run across a journalist that has any interest in compromising a mission.

I also have never met a journalist, particularly one that's traveling with that unit,, that would have any interest in compromising the mission of the unit that he's with -- he or she is with.

TERENCE SMITH: Taking that as a given, there are some restrictions, are there not, on when information can be communicated and what information?

BRYAN WHITMAN: Sure, you're talking about in an information age where real-time reporting is available to reporters on the battlefield, clearly there are guidelines that will be issued so that reporters understand when certain things can be reported, not necessarily that they can or can't be reported. There may be a timing issue, though, associated with the tactical situation that we have to be sensitive to before we report something.

TERENCE SMITH: And the commander is going to make that decision, not the reporter.

BRYAN WHITMAN: The unit commander and the reporter together will have a common understanding, I believe, of what is necessary out there.

I truly believe that mature reporters in the field and experienced commanders and mature commanders will be able to resolve these differences at the unit level.

TERENCE SMITH: Barbara, what do you think of that? Do you believe that those are rules that correspondents can live with in the field and still do their job?

BARBARA STARR: I do think it's going to... I agree with Bryan.

It's going to depend on individual unit commanders and reporters having a relationship that allows this to happen. I think the litmus test will be when it starts to possibly go wrong: When there is an incident involving potentially friendly fire, when there is an incident potentially involving civilian casualties. If U.S. troops go all the way to Baghdad and start getting fired upon in significant numbers by Iraqis in Baghdad, when the kinds of pictures that perhaps the Bush administration isn't that anxious to have Americans see start getting broadcast on a regular basis, you have to be careful and make sure that the unit commanders don't become full of some sort of battlefield anxiety about letting their missions be covered, that everything doesn't become a question of unit security.

We'll have to see how that goes, but sometimes that has been a problem in the past. There are reporters who operated throughout Afghanistan who will tell you when they came across military units engaged in operations that they would rather not have reported, those operations weren't reported upon. Reporters were escorted out of the area. We'll have to see how it works.

Reporting on sensitive events

TERENCE SMITH: Bryan Whitman, what about some of the examples that Barbara just cited -- in other words, when the news is not so good?

BRYAN WHITMAN: Well, you know, there are some risks associated with putting these numbers of reporters out there in the field. But the other side of the coin is that the American people really get an opportunity to see the dedication and the professionalism of their military and the care in which their military takes in executing these very lethal and dangerous operations if it comes to combat. So clearly there will be reports from the field. There will be people that make mistakes in war. There are always casualties. And it's just something that comes with taking the opportunity to put reporters out there in the field.

TERENCE SMITH: You said unit commanders and journalists would work it out together, but I'm assuming that the final decision, the word goes to the unit commander.

BRYAN WHITMAN: Well, clearly there's going... there is a need to protect any operational security out there. Reporters will be pre-briefed. They'll be debriefed if they come in contact with sensitive information on what it is that is inappropriate to either report on or inappropriate to report on at this time because it will affect the outcome of the operation or endanger the personnel that are engaged in that operation. I don't think that reasonable people will be... will disagree. I think the disagreements on that type of information will be rare. And if necessary, they'll be adjudicated not only through the news organizations' chain of command but also through the military chain of command.

Potential pitfalls for journalists

TERENCE SMITH: Barbara, do you imagine or can you envision any professional pitfalls for reporters who do go with units?

BARBARA STARR: Absolutely. This is as big a test, unprecedented test for the American and world news media as it is for the military.

You know, the Pentagon press corps has complained and whined for years that we've had no access to the battlefield, that we don't get sufficient access to troops.

Well, now they're taking us right to the front lines with them. So reporters are going to have to live like soldiers.

It's going to be very, very challenging.

I think there are two key challenges for reporters on the front line in this type of operation. One of them is you will see what's going on right in your soda straw vision of the battlefield, right where you are. But you may not have a good picture of what's going on 500 miles away. But maintaining context, being able to communicate the full picture will be very challenging. I want to come back to one other point. The Pentagon wants us, of course, to tell... you know, to offer the full truth to the American people. That goes without question. But the world is a different place after 9/11. There is a reality to the Arab world that is not reality to the United States of America. And, yes, there are people out there who engage in disinformation. If we can prove that, we need to report it. But we must not simply become spokesmen for the U.S. military....

TERENCE SMITH: "Cheerleaders."

BARBARA STARR: "Cheerleaders" as it were. We have a responsibility to try and articulate and communicate the view of the Arab world to our viewers and to our readers. We have to make sure it's accurate.

TERENCE SMITH: Thank you both. We'll stay tuned and see how it works out in practice if, in fact, it comes to pass. Thank you both.

BARBARA STARR: Thank you.

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