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Pentagon Hires Rendon Group to Profile and Rate Journalists Covering Afghanistan War

JUAN GONZALEZ : The US Army in Afghanistan has admitted it pays a private company to produce background profiles on journalists covering the war. The Pentagon has been on the defensive ever since the Army newspaper Stars and Stripes revealed this week that journalists were being screened by the Washington-based public relations firm the Rendon Group, under a \$1.5 million contract with the military. Documents obtained by the paper reveal that journalists were evaluated with pie charts breaking down their coverage into percentages of "positive," "neutral" or "negative."

The Army insists reporters have never been denied access on the basis of past reporting. An Army spokesman told the Associated Press the military gets information on journalists, including biographical details and recent topics they've covered, to prepare commanders for interviews. A sample profile released Thursday included information on reporters under the headings "Background," "Coverage" and also "Perspective, Style and Tone." The Rendon Group gave an example of how they classify reporting saying, quote, "Neutral to Negative coverage could indicate that content in stories were negative in relation to mission objectives," which it said could include kidnappings or suicide bombings.

AMY GOODMAN : A number of reporters in the Pentagon and elsewhere are now demanding to view their profiles. The International Federation of Journalists has also complained about the policy, saying the profiling of journalists, quote, "Strips away any pretense that the Army is interested in helping journalists to work freely."

The Rendon Group was investigated by the Pentagon after some members of Congress said it was hired to create an information campaign to sway the public to support the Iraq war. The company helped form the Iraqi National Congress, the Iraqi exile group that provided much of the false intelligence to help justify the US invasion of Iraq. Rendon was also involved in an effort to have Iraqi publications print articles written by military personnel.

For more on the story, we're joined by Charlie Reed. She's the reporter who broke the story in the Army newspaper Stars and Stripes. She's joining us on the telephone from Tokyo, where she's based. And we're joined in Los Angeles by investigative reporter Jim Bamford. He has covered the Rendon Group and in 2005 published a major piece in Rolling Stone called "The Man Who Sold the War."

Charlie, talk about how you found out what the Rendon Group is doing today.

CHARLIE REED : Right. Well, in the aftermath of one of our reporters here being denied an embed for refusing, as the Pentagon said, to highlight positive information, it's something that my colleagues and I have been discussing and something we sort of deal with every day, in terms of working with public affairs officials, them trying to kind of figure out where we're going with stories. So I reached out to a source I had in public affairs and basically just, you know, asked if I could get more on this, on what was going on. They confirmed that, in fact, there were individual profiles going on and, with that, gave me Rendon's name. I took that to the Pentagon and to Rendon and said, "Hey, what's going on ?" And that's howâ€”basically how the story developed.

JUAN GONZALEZ : Now, any sense of to what degree these analyses actually determined what kind of access reporters would have to particular stories ?

CHARLIE REED : Sorry, say that again ?

JUAN GONZALEZ : I said, did you find any documentation of howâ€”whether these profiles of the various reporters had an impact on how the military granted them or what kind of access the military granted them to particular stories ?

CHARLIE REED : Right. From the beginningâ€”and I quoted a public affairs official in Afghanistan as saying, "Right, you know, we don't use these, quote, 'backgrounders' to grant or deny embeds, that these are done after the fact." So, there's no indication with what they were doing. Unfortunately, you know, a lot of media outlets went with the fact that the Pentagon was denying that they were using these backgrounders to determine the embeds, when in fact thatâ€”you know, that was reported from the beginning, you know, the military saying, "We're not using these to grant or deny embeds ; we're simply using this as a sort of way to gain situational awareness of what these reporters do."

You know, the question is, why isâ€”you know, they're an outside company. Why is an outside company needed for such work, when, you know, you can ask a reporter what he or she intends to do downrange ? And, yeah, it seemedâ€”I could never really find out why this extra information was needed or why an outside company would be needed, you know, to look up background information on a reporter.

AMY GOODMAN : Jim Bamford, you have written a good deal about the Rendon Group. Talk about its history and the significance of what Charlie Reed has reported in Stars and Stripes.

JAMES BAMFORD : The Rendon Group goes back a long way. It's very interesting. It started out as basically just a public relations company, and then the CIA hired them to do a covert operation, basically, in the Noriega case, where they wanted Noriega out of Panama. They hired the Rendon Group to sort of pave the way. They found a person they wanted to take the place of Noriega after they ousted him, and the Rendon Group was hired to take this person who was going to the next leader of Panama and turn him into a very powerful person by helping his public relations view around the world. So that's how it started with the Rendon Group.

And then Rendon was hired after that, as he told meâ€”his quote was, "Going back to Panama, we've been involved in every war except Somalia." And he was involved in helping promote the Kuwait government during the US involvement with Kuwait in the early Gulf War.

After that, then the CIA hired Rendon to do what was really extraordinary, to lead a covert operation, basically, against the Iraqi government, against Saddam Hussein. And what happened was that the CIA paid Rendon about \$350,000 a month, and he would take his cut out of that, and then he'd turn it over to Ahmed Chalabi, who was head of the Iraqi National Congress. And that's a group that Rendon actually created when he was originally sent to Iraq to help formulate this covert operation against Saddam Hussein. Rendon pulled together all the sort of disparate groups in northern Iraq that were the anti-Hussein people, pulled them together and then had a sort of a conference with all those people. And he came up with the name Iraqi National Congress. It sounded very democratic. And then he took this really charismatic character, Ahmed Chalabi, and pretty much made him the guy in charge. And throughout the 1990s, Rendon and Chalabi were pushing for the war in Iraq.

Eventually, in the mid-'90s, the CIA discovered that Chalabi couldn't be trusted. They got a good accounting of the money that was going to him and so forth, and they basically declared him a fraudster in the middle of 1990s and warned anybody else against having anything to do with him. But that really didn't deter the Pentagon, who went on toâ€”despite the CIA's warning about Chalabi, went on to basically use Chalabi as their key man inside Iraq.

So, that's sort of the background of how John Rendon got into this whole world of covert operations.

One of the other things he used to say quite a bit was that "I am an information warrior and a perception manager." And that was pretty much what he tried to specialize in during most of his career and what he currentlyâ€”according to the most recent reports, what he's still doing is this perception management.

JUAN GONZALEZ : Well, James Bamford, what is different about the role of the Rendon Group, for instance, from what the military has done historically ? I think back to World War I and the famous journalist George Creel, who then went and created a government propagand apparatus to wage the war and plant stories in newspapers and radio stations, not just in the United States, but around the worldâ€”that what is different in terms of the Rendon Group from these past efforts ? Also, World War II, the same thing, the government had a major campaign to change public opinion or influence public opinion in terms of the war.

JAMES BAMFORD : Well, I think, in those respects, it sort of follows a pattern. What makes John Rendon and the Rendon Group really different from any other type of private organization or private company is that he's been used, and he, for all I know, could still be used in covert operations areas. In other words, he played a major role in overthrowing the Saddamâ€”or trying to overthrow the Saddam government. It's sort of like if John Kennedy had hired a public relations firm to overthrow Castro and the Cuban government during the Bay of Pigs operation. So that's what really is extraordinary about the Rendon Group, was the fact that the CIA began using them regularly in a covert operations capacity.

The whole idea of this judging journalists and deciding who's a good journalist or who's a favorable journalist and who's not a favorable journalist, I mean, that happens all the time. And I've been writing on CIA and NSA and all these other agencies for many years. And when I was writing on the CIA, for example, it was very hard for me to get up on the seventh floor to interview senior officials, because they knew I was a very critical writer of the CIA. Yet if there was somebody from one of the major newspapers that was writing very favorable stories about the CIA, they would have no problem getting into Tenet's office, George Tenet's office, to interview the director. This sort of Pavlovian approach, you know, if you want to get up to the seventh floor, you want to get up to the more senior officials, then, you know, the way to do that is to write positive stories. And I think what this latest story, the very good reporting from Stars and Stripes, indicates is that it's becomingâ€”you know, it's not just informal now, it's becoming sort of a formalized report card system.

AMY GOODMAN : And this kind of reporting is critical for President Obama right now, as public opinion is turning against the war in Afghanistan. Charlie Reed, if you could wrap up with where thisâ€”your investigation has gone in Stars and Stripes. You have the Pentagon spokesperson, Bryan Whitman, telling Pentagon reporters he has not seen anything that violates any policies, though it is illegal to propagandize the American people. He also, though, appeared to question why the activity was needed, said, "For me, a tool like this serves no purpose, and it doesn't serve me with any value." But Rendon Group is continuing to be paid, is that right ? The Pentagon first denied and now is starting to say they may investigate this ?

CHARLIE REED : I'm not sure. From the latest we're gathering is, I don't think the Pentagon ever denied that Rendon was doing these profiles. I think they denied that it was, you know, individuals that were being reported. And, in fact, we've, you know, got proof that that was in fact the case. Right now it seems likeâ€”you know, Rendon and the Pentagon say this is but a smallâ€”these backgrounders, these profiles of reporters are but a small piece of what Rendon does for the military. So, I mean, I think the question now is, you know, what elseâ€”what else are they doing, and how else are they trying to, you know, steer coverage towards their, quoteâ€”towards, quote, "positive" stories ?

You know, one would think that it would just be a matter of trying to ensure accuracy, which the public affairs person I spoke to in Afghanistan for the original story said, "While we are looking at, you know, positive, negative, neutral, we've begun to shift toward accurate versus inaccurate." But at the same time, you know, they said they need to

know who they're dealing with. And if they've been, you know, quote, "burned" in the past, it's something that their commanders need to be aware of. So, I mean, again, I think that the question now is, what else is Rendon doing, and how elseâ€”in a big picture way, not necessarily individual reporter way, how else are they trying to steer coverage of the war in Afghanistan ?

AMY GOODMAN : Well, for now, we'll leave it there, but we will certainly continue to investigate this story, as you have done, Charlie Reed, in your excellent report in the Army newspaper Stars and Stripes, your ongoing reporting. Charlie Reed is based in Tokyo, speaking to us from Japan. Jim Bamford, speaking to us today from Los Angeles, the investigative reporter and author of three books about the National Security Agencyâ€”his latest, *The Shadow Factory : The Ultra-Secret NSA from 9/11 to the Eavesdropping on America*â€”published a piece on the Rendon Group in 2005 in *Rolling Stone*, "The Man Who Sold the War." And we will link to that at democracynow.org