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Why Embed?

Explaining the Bush Administration’s Decision to Embed Reporters in the 2003 Invasion of Iraq

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This article explores the sources of the Bush administration’s decision to embed reporters in military units to cover real-time, frontline combat for the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In doing so, the authors have two primary goals. First, the administration’s embrace of the embedded reporter program is explained by reference to events transpiring during the war in Afghanistan, the communication technologies at the disposal of the media, and the policy-making context in which the U.S. Department of Defense determined its media-management strategy. Second, the structure of the embedded reporter program is delineated, and it is shown that the administration sought to provide domestic and international media from coalition and noncoalition countries with as much frontline access as possible.

Keywords: military–media relations; embedded reporting; Iraq War; Bush Administration

One key element of the Iraq War has gone unexplored: the sources of the unprecedented decision by the U.S. military to embed more than 600 domestic and international reporters within individual U.S. military units between the commencement of military action and President George W. Bush’s declaration of “mission accomplished” on May 1, 2003.¹ This “embedded reporter program,” which enabled media representatives to cover real-time, frontline combat by being placed in individual military units, represents a significant change in U.S. military–media relations. Strained relations between the military and the media characterized the post-Vietnam period, as the Pentagon responded to the media’s negative coverage of the Vietnam War by seeking to control and curtail media coverage of subsequent U.S. military campaigns (see Porch, 2002; Prochnau, 2005). Given the potential negative ramifications of the

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¹One key element of the Iraq War has gone unexplored: the sources of the unprecedented decision by the U.S. military to embed more than 600 domestic and international reporters within individual U.S. military units between the commencement of military action and President George W. Bush’s declaration of “mission accomplished” on May 1, 2003. This “embedded reporter program,” which enabled media representatives to cover real-time, frontline combat by being placed in individual military units, represents a significant change in U.S. military–media relations. Strained relations between the military and the media characterized the post-Vietnam period, as the Pentagon responded to the media’s negative coverage of the Vietnam War by seeking to control and curtail media coverage of subsequent U.S. military campaigns (see Porch, 2002; Prochnau, 2005). Given the potential negative ramifications of the
embed program, from breaches of military secrets to compromises in U.S. military forces’ image with national and international audiences, it is puzzling why the Bush administration opened combat coverage to domestic and international reporters, including those from noncoalition countries.

We argue that the answer to this puzzle derives from events transpiring during the war in Afghanistan, from communication technologies at the disposal of the media, and from the policy-making context in which the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) determined its media-management strategy. Following the events of September 11, 2001, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld charged his assistant secretary for public affairs with figuring out how best to handle media relationships in the changed security arena. Yet, as action in Afghanistan commenced, the DoD limited the media’s access to the conflict. Media reports soon challenged the DoD concerning both the campaign’s success and the number of civilian casualties resulting from U.S. military activity. DoD officials concluded that they needed to enable the media to cover that campaign, and a subsequent campaign in Iraq, if the U.S. military were to win the war in the eyes of the national and global public and embraced a strategy advocated by Pentagon national bureau chiefs. These bureau chiefs, who were engaged in ongoing discussions with DoD public affairs officials throughout the period regarding the appropriate mechanisms for media coverage of U.S. military actions, had advocated an embedded reporting strategy soon after the Afghanistan War began.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section explains the administration’s embrace of the embed program. We begin by identifying the central elements of the military–media relationship, by highlighting the impact of technological developments. The third section provides a detailed investigation of the sources of the decision to embed reporters first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq. The fourth section delineates the structure of the embedded reporter program, evaluates the original allocation of embed slots for the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and shows that the Bush administration sought to provide the domestic and international media with as much access as possible to the front lines, including reporters not associated with coalition countries. The final section assesses the program’s sources and meaning.

**Military–Media Relationship**

In democratic regimes, the media are presumed to provide an unofficial check on the government. In this respect, the military and the media are generally seen as hostile institutions thanks to their contrasting institutional missions. For example, Douglas Porch (2002, p. 86) notes that the military must rely on the public for its support, but the nature of its work is often “shocking to the sensitivities of the public.” The press, on the other hand, envisions its role as a conduit to expose “the actions of the government—including, especially, the military—to public scrutiny.” Yet Porch (p. 93) also suggests that this relationship may be more symbiotic than contentious: “Press reports of success and progress strengthen and extend public
support” for foreign policy goals. The press “needs the military’s cooperation” to fulfill its mission. Margaret Belknap (2002, p. 101) describes the media as at once a “strategic enabler” and “operational risk” for the military. The media, Belknap (p. 110) explains, provide the military with a mechanism to communicate its objectives to a global audience as well as contribute to intelligence gathering and psychological operations. Yet, she continues, the media’s “inaccurate depictions of operations can have a devastating effect on . . . the will of the American people, as well as on the decision-making process at the strategic level” (p. 111). Without a supportive media, the scholarly literature concludes, military intervention can pose deleterious consequences for the standing of elected officials overseeing the action (see Jentleson, 1992; Oneal, Lian, & Joyner, 1996).

New technologies have further complicated the relationship between the military and the media. Although the military now has access to technologies that enable wars to be prosecuted far from the battlefield and quite covertly, “technological advances are likely to make information increasingly available to the press and independent of military control. . . . Journalists can file directly from the field, anywhere on the globe, with cell phones, the Internet, and remote-area network data systems transmitting compressed video signals. Satellite, microwave, and fiberoptic systems are becoming miniaturized and increasingly mobile. Reporters have access to commercial satellite images that can reveal such things as troop deployments—making refusals for reasons of security to guide press pools to deployed units less credible and effective” (Porch, 2002, pp. 102-103). Ben Mor (2006, p. 165) states that “the same media technologies that make global, real-time reporting possible—and now increasingly so from every location on the globe—also make effective media management a difficult proposition. . . . Thus, although governments may continue to try to separate, through media management, the actual application of force in the field from its portrayal in the news media, attempting to do so increasingly runs the risk of credibility loss because of coverage by competing sources of information.” As a consequence, the military’s capacity to limit access of the media may be effective for only those members of the media who are willing to be restrained. Members of foreign media outlets, in particular, can transmit images of war instantaneously to publics across the globe, which shape public support for the military campaign and its ultimate success in the eyes of domestic and foreign publics.

These technologies have evolved since CNN’s live coverage in Panama and its subsequent 24-hour satellite coverage in the 1991 Gulf War. U.S. military officials have recognized the power of the media in light of new communication technologies, especially the media’s capacity to transmit information in real time, which can have adverse consequences for the success of a military campaign. For example, as Colin Powell reflected on his experience as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Panama invasion, “This was a new, tough age for the military, fighting a war as it was being reported. We could not, in a country pledged to free expression, simply turn off the press. But we were going to have to find a way to live with this unprecedented situation” (as quoted in Belknap, 2002, p. 104). The military has sought to manage the
media’s wartime coverage through several procedures aimed at limiting the media’s role, including sequestering (Grenada and Panama), the use of pools (Gulf War), deception (Gulf War), escorts (Gulf War), “televised spectacles” (Somalia), news blackout (Haiti), limited embedding with Army units (Bosnia), or gag orders (Kosovo) (see Belknap, 2002; Kurtz, 1992; Moskos, 2000; Porch, 2002). These strategies often have been coupled with the right to censor information in individual reports. The common justification for such control has been operational security and the success of the military mission (Belknap, 2002, pp. 1-3; Moskos, 2000, pp. 9-17; and Porch, 2002, esp. pp. 100-102).

The Bush administration’s decision to embed reporters on a large scale with military units to provide real-time coverage of the Iraq War represents a dramatic shift in U.S. military–media relations. An understanding of this decision first necessitates a focus on the institutional context affecting military–media relations and the preferences of those individuals empowered by this institutional context. Political scientists among others have long focused on how the structure of the state and its relationship with societal groups affect policy making and policy choices. In particular, these structures and processes affect the ability of different groups to advance their preferences and often determine actors’ understandings of their preferences (e.g., Thelen & Steinmo, 1992). This literature emphasizes two domestic structural elements in terms of their impact on policy making: the organization of decision-making authority and the linkages between state and societal actors in an issue area (e.g., Katzenstein, 1978; Risse-Kappen, 1991).

In what follows, we show how the close links between media representatives, particularly the Pentagon national bureau chiefs, and DoD officials, particularly public affairs officials, enabled media representatives to make the Bush administration aware of their desire to adopt embedding for coverage of Iraq. These links, primarily the defense briefings, provided the national bureau chiefs with institutionalized access to DoD planners, who enjoyed much discretion to act on their preferences in the issue area. This institutional context created an opportunity for ongoing negotiations between government and media officials regarding the most appropriate wartime media coverage. This institutional context also reinforces what W. Lance Bennett (1994, pp. 177-178) explains is a hallmark of the U.S. foreign policy process: “Journalists and political officials [are] engaged in a process of symbiosis or mutual dependence, in which each side used the other to promote particular organizational (press or government) goals. . . . The bureaucratic interdependence of reporters and officials places some obvious boundaries around policy debates in general, making them heavily structured by elite cues, official information, [and] policy options considered viable by insiders.”

The president enjoys much autonomy over the development of U.S. foreign policy, particularly with respect to the use of the military. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, President Bush asked Congress for statutory action enabling him to use U.S. troops to protect the country. The Use of Force Act authorized the president “to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the 9/11
attacks” (Fisher, 2004, p. 209). In October 2002, Congress granted the president the
authority to use U.S. troops against Iraq. As head of the primary bureaucratic agency
involved in designing national security policy, the secretary of defense oversees mil-
itary planning and deployment. The discretion accorded to the secretary of defense
has varied across different administrations, particularly with respect to his role in relation
to that of the secretary of state and national security advisor. Dale Herspring
(2005, p. 379) observes, “[George W.] Bush’s leadership style allowed Rumsfeld to
dominate the formulation of national security policy. . . . As far as the DoD was con-
cerned, Rumsfeld left no doubt in anyone’s mind that the armed forces worked for
him.” Given the need for surprise in military action, operational security, and the dif-
ficulties associated with ensuring the safety of noncombatants, members of Congress
and other executive agencies tend to give the DoD much latitude with respect to deter-
mining the media’s role in covering a war. Media representatives, however, have
sought to make certain that DoD officials do not forget that the Constitution provides
freedom of the press, including the media’s coverage of military campaigns.

Equally significant, the political science literature draws our attention to the role
of crises and how they open windows of opportunity for those who desire a change
in the status quo (Kingdon, 1984). Crises are unforeseen events that can discredit
existing institutions or policies by showing that they are incapable of dealing with
the challenges the country faces. Such events include wars, among others, but do not
guarantee a change in a policy or institution. Instead, they offer an opening for those
who prefer an alternative course of action, by reducing the attractiveness of an exist-
ing course of action and simultaneously decreasing opposition to embracing an alter-
nate course.

A similar dynamic applies to the embed program’s creation. Failures in the DoD’s
handling of media relations in Afghanistan created an opening for a new strategy,
which empowered those media representatives and DoD public affairs officers who
advocated a change in military–media relations. Their ideas eventually resonated
with others in the Bush administration. Secretary Rumsfeld was not committed to a
particular relationship with the media and was open to alternatives, so long as these
options would advance operational security and operational success. In this respect,
Rumsfeld eventually embraced embedding because it resonated with his recognition
that new communication technologies made it possible for those less supportive of
the Bush administration’s mission to transmit instantaneous messages that could
inhibit successful prosecution of the war. This latter concern was especially salient
given the previous experience with Saddam Hussein during the Persian Gulf War.

**Decision to Embed**

To understand the Bush administration’s decision to embed reporters within
military units to cover the front lines of the Iraq War necessitates a focus on the institu-
tional context affecting military–media relations and the preferences of those individuals
empowered by this institutional context. An important element of the institutional context affecting this decision pertains to the briefings held between the 40 or so national bureau chiefs and the DoD’s primary public affairs officer, Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs Victoria Clarke. The ongoing briefings, often biweekly, provided a forum for the military to disseminate information about war developments and for national media representatives to voice their preferences to government officials regarding how they should be allowed to collect and receive this information. In effect, the briefing room became the negotiating table around which the media and the Bush administration developed the parameters of their relationship.

Clarke, who Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld had made responsible for establishing the department’s relationship with the media in the post–September 11 world, indicated that she intended to develop the relationship in partnership with the media:

Let me say at the outset we want this very much to be a conversation and a discussion and a dialogue, the first of many. Because I don’t know if you heard the secretary say this last week and the week before I think from the podium or you’ve heard some of the things we have said, but we are in a whole new world here. We’re trying to figure out the rules of the road. We are trying to figure out how to work with you, how to make sure you get what you need, you access the means to do your jobs which we think are vitally important while protecting the national security and the safety of the men and women in uniform (DoD, 2001a). These briefings provide a window into the national media’s evolving relationship with the DoD. Certainly this relationship did not begin and end with the briefings; the dialogue continued in the corridors of the Pentagon as well as in the offices of public affairs staff. Clarke welcomed the media to visit her in the mornings and circulated her home phone number in case the media needed last-minute clarifications (see DoD, 2001a). Yet, the briefings remain unique in offering an on-the-record indication of the views and preferences of a host of media representatives and military officials.

The decisions reached through these negotiations had the capacity to affect policy outcomes; they did so because Clarke’s superior, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, enjoyed the policy-making capacity to set the procedures for the media coverage of military campaigns. From the outset of the conflict, Rumsfeld did not have a strong opinion regarding how best to manage the relationship in the aftermath of September 11. Yet, he recognized that the relationship with the media would affect the success of the administration’s foreign policy:

You all know your business an awful lot better than I do, and the business I’m supposed to know about is something that’s evolving as we go along, and the Pentagon has a piece of it and only a piece of it. . . . It is a very intellectually challenging process that we’re going through. I spent most of my time on it not trying to figure out how you fit into it, to be very honest. Torie [Victoria Clarke], on the other hand, keeps tugging and pushing at me on it, and as a result I’ve had several meetings with members of the
Pentagon press corps on the subject where we have addressed it, and Torie and her associates and I have addressed it several times. I have read through the materials, and I now have it clear in my mind that it’s important that how we do this makes a difference to the country. Not just to the people in this room, but to the country, and it makes a difference unquestionably to the success of this. So we intend to spend whatever amount of time it takes to think it through (DoD, 2001b).

In that respect, Rumsfeld delegated responsibility for ironing out the military–media relationship to Assistant Secretary Clarke. Clarke (DoD, 2001a) indicated in an early briefing that in “trying to figure out the best rules of the road for going forward,” her “fundamental philosophy [was] to get out as much news and as much information as possible in as complete and total fashion as possible, with security and safety concerns built in.” However, as U.S. operations in Afghanistan commenced, Clarke, as Rumsfeld, did not offer a concrete procedure for how the media would help to achieve those objectives. Although the media welcomed this openness, media representatives remained worried. As Knight Ridder Washington editor Clark Hoyt remarked, because “we’re this far along in the preparation for hostilities and the DoD didn’t appear to be very far along in their thinking about how the press is going to be accommodated” (Jurkowitz, 2001, p. D5).

To understand why the administration opted to embed journalists, we first must explain why the administration did not do so at the outset of the Afghanistan conflict. Embedding had been used on a limited scale for U.S. military deployments in Bosnia and Kosovo. Both media and military representatives deemed the strategy effective, especially with regard to producing positive stories about members of the military, so much so that bureau chiefs had expected some form of embedding procedure to be devised for the next campaign (see Belknap, 2002). Yet, such a procedure was not implemented when U.S. military operations began in Afghanistan in early October 2001. One reason reflects the DoD’s understanding that the unfolding war against Afghanistan was different from previous wars. In responding to a reporter’s question about how the media should cover the war, Secretary Rumsfeld (DoD, 2001b) explained:

What you have to do is to recognize that the way you’re currently arranged may or may not be appropriate for what is happening, just as I’m finding that the Pentagon arrangements may or may not be appropriate and the U.S. government arrangements may or may not be appropriate because this is something that is different, it is not your Mark 1, Mod 2 war where you pull off the shelf a plan and say okay, execute it or tweak it and execute it. It is very, very different. . . . If we had a war that was traditional, if we were engaging a country directly across a front of some kind, we would do what you said, and we would just take out the old rubber stamp and say okay, cool, all the rules apply, everything’s the same, go. Simply put, Afghanistan was not Kosovo or Bosnia. New rules applied; embedding was not an option, given concerns about “host country sensitivities,” the reliance on Special Forces, and the related need for surprise (see DoD, 2001b, 2001c).
A second reason reflects the prior experiences of those Bush administration officials who directed the country in the Persian Gulf War. These officials’ belief that media coverage of that war helped make it a success influenced the parameters for coverage of post–September 11 conflicts. During the first Gulf War, pools were the government’s preferred mechanism by which media representatives covered the troops. Media representatives in the pools were escorted at all times by public affairs officers, media reports were subject to review by military censors, and details regarding the war were presented to the press by DoD briefers. As then-Defense Secretary Dick Cheney recalled in a 1991 interview, “There’s a huge gaggle of reporters out there, and the press has absolutely no capacity to police itself. There was no way we were ever going to put 100% of the reporters who wanted to go cover the war out with the troops” (DeParle, 1991, p. 20).

In response to the media’s concerns about the constraints on their capacity to provide independent wartime coverage, Cheney agreed in 1992 to a new set of principles for media coverage of the future use of U.S. forces. Among the nine principles negotiated with media representatives were that “open and independent reporting” would be “the principal means of coverage” and that “pools should be as large as possible and disbanded at the earliest opportunity—within 24 to 36 hours when possible” (Kurtz & Gellman, 1992). However, the DoD would not agree to rescind its right to review all stories from the battlefield prior to publication. In one of Rumsfeld’s early briefings with the national bureau chiefs, he reported being surprised that the media agreed to have their reports censored but that it did not bother him to have that authority (see DoD, 2001b). Media representatives did not share the same recollection; although the DoD insisted on the right to review all stories from the battlefield, this right was not included in the nine “principles of wartime news coverage endorsed by the Defense Department and a coalition of news organizations” (see Kurtz & Gellman, 1992).

It was with these understandings that the Bush administration developed its initial wartime relationship with the media at the outset of the Afghanistan conflict. Reporters were denied access to U.S. troops in Oman, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan; to the U.S. naval station on Diego Garcia, where long-range aircraft raids originated; and to Navy ships that were centrally involved in the operation, such as the aircraft carrier *Kitty Hawk* (see Hickey, 2002). No media pool was established until late November, more than a month after the first U.S. military actions in Afghanistan. At that time, a single pool lasting for 5 days was created to cover the deployment and operations of about 1,000 Marines at Camp Rhino, a remote airbase in southern Afghanistan (Morello, 2001). When the pool was created, it did not reflect previously agreed upon procedures for media participation (DoD, 2001e). The 12 pool reporters “were not permitted to accompany troops on expeditions from the base, were prohibited from reporting much of what they saw, were diverted toward feature stories such as church services and promotion ceremonies, were not allowed to speak to senior commanders (except one produced in their final hour with
the Marines) and were barred from reporting details even after they were leaked—and announced—by the Pentagon” (Morello, 2001, p. A43). Prior to this pool operation, the Pentagon provided the media access to the theater, whether to U.S. troops in action or to field operations headquarters, only through a handful of short-term assignments on AWACS flights and four ships (DoD, 2001c).

There was much consternation on the part of the U.S. media regarding the obstacles to its ability to cover the conflict, particularly their ability to gain first-hand access to information about American military actions. As one reporter remarked, “There are American soldiers in action, and the media is not there” (DoD, 2001c). In addition, the media were displeased with the information they received about U.S. combat actions. Most of this information was gleaned only indirectly through briefings with DoD officials, who restricted the flow of information in the interests of operational security and who were located in the Pentagon, thousands of miles from the battlefield (Hickey, 2002).

In a briefing following the initiation of hostilities in Afghanistan, one bureau chief queried Clarke about “the so-called embedding system” and wondered “why reporters couldn’t be embedded as part of some of [the] military operations” in Afghanistan (see DoD, 2001a). Clarke responded that a pool might be as good an option as embeds but made clear that no firm plan had been designed. Moreover, she indicated her interest in soliciting advice from the bureau chiefs: “We all need to get our heads wrapped around the notion of we need to be thinking about new things. . . . What I am saying to you all, we’re really looking for ideas and suggestions. . . . [W]e are not the end of the line here, we’re not the experts on this, are there other things we should be thinking of?” (DoD, 2001a). The bureau chiefs reiterated their desire for embedding with U.S. troops, yet Clarke did not “have a date certain for you [the bureau chiefs] on when something is going to happen” (DoD, 2001b). In response to the growing frustration of the bureau chiefs, Clarke (DoD, 2001c) explained, “It’s very hard to put reporters on a plane dropping guys into Afghanistan in the middle of the night, so we brought footage back. We have not found the circumstances yet in which the national media pool is appropriate. . . . In some places the concerns are operational security and some places it’s host nation sensitivities, but we are working on it. I know we’re not giving you what you want, not giving you the success you want, but we are working on it.” This last observation reflected Clarke’s (DoD, 2001c) belief that “providing as much news and information and access to that war is our business and we’re trying very, very hard to make that happen.”

As the war ensued, several bureau chiefs pressed Clarke on the merits of the current strategy, by asking if it achieved its aims. Owen Ullman from USA Today declared:

The president has talked about losing the war for public opinion; the secretary has talked about it; I know the secretary even consulted a lot of PR people in town to find out how to improve kind of the image. I would suggest to you that there is a linkage between perhaps losing the PR war and not allowing American news media to have greater access
to cover the war and perhaps provide the fair balanced picture that you want. So I would suggest if you do care about how the war is being portrayed in this country and overseas, perhaps the problem is bottling up the news media (DoD, 2001d).

Other bureau chiefs tried to get Clarke to appreciate how the media and DoD’s “interests converge from time to time” particularly with respect to the accuracy of the reporting (see DoD, 2001c). Without an independent ability to confirm information, they argued, the probability of inaccurate stories would increase, as too would the publication of information that the DoD might not want aired. They suggested that the DoD provide reporters with a mechanism for real-time confirmation of events. The October 25, 2001 briefing concluded with the following admonition from a bureau chief:

I’d like to say even though we are going to push for embedding and access, that does not change the fact that we appreciate the daily briefings here, the backgrounders. We’ve asked you and you’ve been responsive, and I just want to urge you to continue because particularly since we’re not having the access in the field to be able to confirm so many things we’re getting anecdotally, that it’s really even more essential. (DoD, 2001c)

Such an admonition was ignored. On December 5, 2001, in what was to journalists a particularly galling example of the problems they faced in light of the military’s control over news coverage, Marines confined pool reporters and photographers in a warehouse so that they could not cover the return of wounded U.S. soldiers. The warehouse incident brought outrage from the press corps, a written apology from the DoD, and the DoD’s rapid movement toward a new media strategy (Clarke, 2001). In a written apology the next day to the bureau chiefs, Clarke (2001) summarized the situation in stark terms: “We [the Pentagon] owe you an apology. The last several days have revealed severe shortcomings in our preparedness to support news organizations in their efforts to cover U.S. military operations in Afghanistan. We have a significant responsibility to provide your correspondents the opportunity to cover the war.” This responsibility was soon articulated publicly on December 20 in a Public Affairs Guidance (DoD, 2001f) document; among other steps, it delineated a rudimentary embedded media program that was a forerunner of the more elaborate system eventually used to cover the invasion of Iraq. Soon thereafter, DoD officials started “on a case-by-case basis” embedding selected journalists with some Special Forces units (DoD, 2001g).\(^4\) The number of embeds remained limited in Afghanistan, it was explained, because of the nature of the war and the U.S. reliance on Special Forces. Nevertheless, unilateral coverage (e.g., journalists independently covering the war) was soon facilitated under the principles of “maximum coverage, minimum hassle” (Clarke, 2001).

The warehouse incident may have triggered the use of embedding, but a change in media coverage of the war also resonated with the evolving preferences of DoD
planners: They were unable to control media coverage of the war and thus could not provide an authoritative interpretation of events. The DoD could not control the flow of information out of the theater, especially given the portability of communication technologies. Approximately 1,000 foreign and domestic media representatives sought to cover the conflict unilaterally; these “unilaterals” made their own arrangements for entering Afghanistan and its neighboring states, often reporting on the war with the assistance of Northern Alliance troops (Jackson & Zubryzycki, 2001; Stanley, 2001). Even before the DoD officially announced the onset of ground combat in Afghanistan, the Washington Post reported in mid-October that U.S. troops were operating in Afghanistan and that the war had begun (see Hickey, 2002). The next day, DoD briefers provided an overview of the U.S. assault. Soon Seymour Hersh (2001) of the New Yorker alleged that U.S. raids on October 20, 2001, were not as successful as the chairman of the Joint Chief of Staffs had claimed. Hersh’s story was vehemently denied by leading DoD officials even before the article hit the newsstands (see Miller, 2001). Having challenged the Pentagon’s claims, Hersh’s story was picked up by other media outlets.

More problematic for the DoD was its inability to provide an authoritative interpretation of events as they unfolded. For example, in the aftermath of a bombing expedition in Afghanistan in July 2002, the DoD claimed that it had targeted Taliban fighters. Yet, when reporters arrived on the scene, local residents noted that the bombs had hit a wedding party and that there were no Taliban fighters in the area. The DoD blamed the Taliban for placing its military weaponry near women and children, but questions remained about who had the correct interpretation of events (Shanker, 2002). DoD officials subsequently recognized that had reporters been with the troops as the action unfolded, they could have told the definitive story, helping the DoD win the public opinion battle. As Secretary Rumsfeld (DoD, 2002c) stated in a late October 2002 press briefing, “There was a great degree of skill on the part of the Taliban and the al Qaeda in news management and they were able to co-locate their various military activities in close proximity to hospitals and nursing homes and schools and sympathy-engendering locations. . . . It’s helpful to the extent you have people who are journalists and are accurate and professional with you that can see those things on the ground when they happen.”

This position provided the basic justification for the decision to embed reporters in military units for the operation in Iraq. Secretary Rumsfeld (DoD, 2002c) argued that embedding would counter Saddam Hussein’s ability to disseminate propaganda: “We see intelligence that they [the Hussein regime] are already arranging things that will mislead the press in Iraq as to how they want to do things. There’s a risk that they will do that and try to blame it on the United States in the event that something takes place in Iraq, and having people who are honest and professional see these things and be aware of that is useful.” Rumsfeld’s perspective was repeated numerous times by his department’s public affairs officials. Clarke and Bryan Whitman, deputy assistant secretary of defense for public affairs, referred to Saddam Hussein,
for example, as a “practiced liar” (Whitman, 2003a, p. 205; 2003b; 2003c) and his regime as “masters of lies” (Clarke, quoted in Rhem, 2003). The importance of countering Hussein’s potential propaganda is identified in the DoD’s 2003 Public Affairs Guidance document, which delineates the embed program: “We need to tell the factual story—good or bad—before others seed the media with disinformation and distortions, as they most certainly will continue to do. Our people in the field need to tell the story” (DoD, 2003b). Embedding would counter “giving any credibility or credence to what the Iraqi Defense Ministry might be putting out” (Whitman, 2003c).

The DoD indicated its confidence in using its personnel not only to counter Saddam’s message but also to let them be escorted by the media in real time. As Whitman (2003c) continues, “We simply were so confident in our own military and the way in which they would execute these very dangerous duties but, with the care and precision that they would take in trying to minimize civilian causalities, and reduce collateral damage. We thought that would be important, not only for our own audiences here in the United States to see, but for the world to see, who was somewhat skeptical perhaps.” As Clarke (DoD, 2002c) observed in late October 2002, “We are trying very, very hard to facilitate as much media access and as many embeds as possible. And it’s for the right reasons and it is for self-serving reasons.”

The precise procedure for embedding reporters in individual units emerged thanks to an iterative process between media representatives and DoD public affairs officers. For example, in a series of meetings with these officials, bureau chiefs made clear that they wanted to embed immediately once hostilities began, wanted the embed opportunities to be on the front lines, wanted to be embedded for the duration of the engagement, and wanted there to be some transparent process for allocating embed opportunities (see DoD, 2001c, 2002a, 2002b). In launching the embed program, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Whitman (DoD, 2002c) acknowledged that “all the feedback we’ve been getting from you [national bureau chiefs and their staffs]. And that has been very valuable for us and we would like to continue to solicit that from you in the days ahead because we do take your concerns very seriously and they have molded our thinking as we have been doing some planning for ourselves here.” In sharp contrast to the Afghanistan conflict, Whitman explained, “We have been doing public affairs planning right from the beginning alongside all the contingency planning, the military contingency planning being done in this building” (DoD, 2002c). This public affairs planning included the establishment of media boot camps, where those journalists most likely to be embedded participated in at least 1-week-long training camp so that they could become better acclimated to the rigors of frontline war reporting. Before the war began, nearly 250 national and international journalists participated in these camps (DoD, 2003a).

The sources of the embed program used in the Iraq War were four-fold. First, the leading proponents of the program enjoyed a privileged position in the policy-making process. Media representatives enjoyed access to the key policy makers, continuously making their preferences known as they sought to persuade these officials. Second,
Secretary Rumsfeld and his associates began the Afghanistan conflict without a clear understanding of or strong position on how to incorporate the media. Third, the media’s coverage of events in Afghanistan called into question the success of the DoD’s prevailing media strategy, which limited media access to the front lines. Fourth, the technologies available to disseminate information globally led the DoD to see embedding as a means to retain control over war coverage and, ultimately, public opinion.

Structure of the Embed Program

This section provides an overview of the embed program’s structure. It begins by delineating the rules of the program and then investigates the decision rules used to allocate individual embed slots for covering the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In doing so, we highlight three traits associated with the creation and implementation of the embed program, which Clarke and Whitman introduced in January 2003 (see DoD, 2003a). First, DoD officials sought to facilitate the dissemination of information from the front lines. Second, the program was structured to include domestic and foreign journalists, including those from nonallied countries. Third, journalists from Arab countries were included, some of whom were embedded on the front lines with U.S. troops. These traits indicate that the DoD sought to learn from its mistakes in Afghanistan: The wide dissemination of information became the objective, even if this were to be made by media organizations from unsympathetic states.

According to the DoD guidelines (DoD, 2003b), “a media embed is defined as a media representative remaining with a unit on an extended basis—perhaps a period of weeks or even months.” Such journalists “will live, work, and travel as part of the units with which they are embedded to facilitate maximum, in-depth coverage of U.S. forces in combat and related operations.” In recognition of the risks associated with journalists accompanying military personnel in the heat of the battle, the DoD created concrete guidelines for the program (DoD, 2003b). Some of the rules sought to protect the safety of military personnel (e.g., unit commanders for reasons of “operational security” could prohibit some communication equipment); others were geared to the safety of media representatives (e.g., media were prohibited from having their own weapons or vehicles and were provided with some protective gear). Ground rules were established regarding the type of information that could be disseminated and that which could not. The 14 items of “releasable” information included “friendly force” causality figures and force strength, information and location of previous attacks, types of forces involved, and operation code names. With individual consent, the hometowns and names of individual military personnel were releasable. Among the 19 types of information “not releasable” were the specific number of troops in a unit, the success of enemy weaponry, future engagement plans, specific geographic locations of military units, and real-time troop movements. The guidelines did not prohibit any type of communication equipment and encouraged
“the use of lipstick or helmet-mounted cameras” for covering “combat sorties.” The availability of these technologies, together with the paucity of prescreening rules, reflects the DoD’s view that its “ground rules recognize the right of the media to cover military operations and are in no way intended to prevent release of derogatory, embarrassing, negative, or uncomplimentary information” (2003b, p. 6).

According to documents from the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, or OASD(PA), 775 individuals’ names were received from media organizations initially to serve in the embed program to cover the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Because most television crews consisted of two-person teams, this list of 775 names represented 628 unique embed slots. These names were associated with 262 media organizations. The OASD(PA) allocated slots to media organizations on the basis of audience reach together with the following decision rules: 20% of the slots were allocated to international news organizations and 80% went to domestic news organizations (with 10% of domestic slots going to local media). “In each one of those categories,” Whitman (2003c) explains, “I wanted to make sure that we had all forms of media, that we had television, radio, print, wire service, still photo. . . . In the international, I wanted to make sure we had both European, Arabic and Asia audiences that had opportunities so we could reach all those audiences out there.” Clarke (DoD, 2003a) identifies similar criteria guiding the selection process for news organizations: “We looked at circulations, we looked at major media markets. . . . Our intent is to have as widespread and fair and balanced coverage as possible . . . across the board of news organizations of different sizes and shapes.” Additionally, the DoD “tried to ensure coverage in-depth, which means units that are most likely to see combat get good, meaningful newspaper coverage, TV coverage, and other broadcast coverage” (Strupp, 2003; see also DoD, 2003a).

With respect to the last consideration, nearly half of embed slots were assigned to Army units (46.0%), more than a quarter to Marine units (28.1%), and the remainder to Navy (14.9%), Air Force (9.2%), and Special Operations forces (1.8%). This means that 75.7% of all embed slots with U.S. forces were allocated to ground combat units, a distribution that reflects the DoD planners’ stated goal to facilitate reporters’ access to likely scenes of combat. The data also indicate that the DoD attempted to reach both domestic and international audiences. Nearly three quarters of the 628 embed slots went to U.S. media organizations (73.5%), consistent with expectations that the DoD emphasized domestic audiences. However, many of those U.S. media organizations serve international news audiences. When audience type is taken into account, the picture changes; only 61.7% of embed slots were for news organizations that served primarily U.S. domestic audiences. Figure 1 shows the number of embed slots for media serving different types of audiences. Nearly a quarter of all embed slots (24.4%) were designated for international media, defined as intending to serve audiences in more than one country. Another 13.9% of embed slots went to media organizations serving the domestic audiences of foreign countries (labeled non–U.S. domestic).
The priority given by DoD planners to embed international media is shown in Figure 2, which displays all of the news organizations assigned five or more embed slots. The top three organizations—Reuters, the Associated Press, and Agence France-Presse—are the three most widely distributed international news services and together account for 11% of all the slots. Beyond those three, the ranking is closely tied to national prominence and audience reach in the United States: The top two newspapers in the United States—the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*—are number four and eight in the ranking, whereas the top cable news channel (Fox News) and the top broadcast news network (NBC) not only occupy positions five and six but also received the highest number of embedded slots among all broadcast media. The rest of the top 10 positions include CNN and the two other major television broadcast networks. Below them are prominent newspaper chains and regional newspapers, as well as weekly newsmagazines and other national newspapers serving the American domestic audience. In short, the ranking of news organizations by embed slots is led by the most dominant global news organizations followed closely by the dominant news organizations serving the United States. The data then are consistent with the DoD’s stated criterion of giving priority to those news organizations serving large audiences, domestically and abroad.

Figure 3 illustrates that the distribution of embed slots for foreign media was skewed toward a handful of countries. France had the third largest share of embed
slots \((n = 27)\) and Germany the fifth \((n = 13)\). By comparison, eight Arab media outlets from seven Arab countries received 13 embed slots.\(^{11}\) Seven of these 13 slots were allocated to the Marines, units that would likely engage in direct combat, which reinforces another DoD objective.

Coalition status appears to have had little to do with the number of embed slots a media outlet received.\(^{12}\) This impression is confirmed by the small \((r = .23)\) but non-significant \((p = .18)\) correlation between embed slots and coalition status for the 36 countries in Figure 3. Excluding the United States and the United Kingdom, there is no relationship at all between coalition status and the number of embed slots for the other 34 countries represented in the embed system \((r = -.05, p = .77)\).

The available data confirm that the DoD implemented the embed process, as publicly stated, to disseminate real-time war coverage to large and diverse audiences both in the United States and abroad.

**Conclusion**

The embed program used in the 2003 invasion of Iraq represents a shift in U.S. military–media relations. Instead of the military unilaterally determining and limiting the media’s role in the military campaign, media representatives advocated
embedding and participated in the program’s implementation. The process of embedding reporters in Iraq not only intertwined the military and the media but also simultaneously diffused much of the hostility that had come to characterize the relationship between these two institutions throughout the post-Vietnam period.

The decision to opt for embedding evolved from three primary sources. First, advances in communication technology, particularly the portability of satellite-transmitting devices, diminished the ability of the military to control the dissemination of information from the battlefield. This problem was compounded because this technology was available to news outlets outside the United States and, thus, those that were likely to be less supportive of the administration’s goals. Second, the DoD experienced the adverse impact of this technology following its failed media policy for the Afghanistan conflict. Strict control of the media’s access to the front lines did not limit the media’s ability to disseminate information about the U.S. military’s actions, some of which called into question the military’s claims and its capacity to maintain a supportive public at home and abroad. Third, the policy-making context for handling media relations revolved around the secretary of defense and the assistant secretary for public affairs. The national bureau chiefs enjoyed close relations with these officials thanks to their regular briefings. Because of this ongoing, interactive relationship and the debacle in Afghanistan, the bureau chiefs were able to persuade the DoD to use embedding for the Iraq conflict.
The significance of this last source rests on the openness of authoritative policy makers to new ideas. Even before the failure of the administration’s handling of media relations in Afghanistan, Secretary Rumsfeld and Assistant Secretary Clarke indicated their willingness to work with the media to craft a strategy successful to both institutions. Such openness helped to empower the bureau chiefs to offer suggestions for reforming their relationship during numerous briefing sessions with the assistant secretary and other DoD officials. The bureau chiefs quickly called for embedding, served as critics of the existing approach, and in the process, offered a strategy that had the potential to redress the problems associated with the DoD’s existing media strategy.

Embedded reporters produced up-close coverage marked by two central traits (see Aday, Livingston, & Herbert, 2005; Pfau et al., 2004). Embedded journalists provided positive portrayals of the troops in their individual units and found it difficult to offer an overarching picture of the military campaign. The DoD judged its media strategy to be a success with respect to operational security, objective reporting, and public support (see Halonen, 2003; Whitman, 2003d). The media, although quick to recognize the narrow view provided by their reports, continue to seek opportunities to embed with U.S. troops to cover the continued fighting in Iraq.

Does the embed program represent the beginning of a new direction for military–media relations in the United States? Our analysis suggests that the policy–making context plays a pivotal role in understanding the media’s role in military campaigns. The secretary of defense and the structure of authority within the DoD loom large in understanding the shift to embedding. It is possible that another defense secretary may come to office with strong opinions about the downside of embedding for the security and success of the next military campaign. In such a situation, a different course of action may be identified that could return hostility to the military–media relationship. Until that time, the contentious relationship between the military and the media appears to be yesterday’s news, not tomorrow’s top story.

Notes

1. This program has been the subject of interest in the political communication and military affairs literature. See, for example, Aday, Livingston, & Herbert (2005), Foyle (2004), Payne (2005), and Pfau et al. (2004). The number of embedded reporters (e.g., correspondents, photojournalists, and video crews) decreased soon after the U.S. military arrived in Baghdad in mid-April 2003. The program has endured throughout the U.S. intervention in Iraq. By October 2006, 26 media representatives were embedded with U.S. forces (see Carter, 2003; Vaina, 2006).

2. In this regard, our analysis focuses only on the initial allocation of embed slots.

3. There is a vast literature on the president’s war powers and the role of Congress. See, for example, Fisher (2004) and Silverstein (1997).

4. Clarke (“Press Coverage,” 2002) noted that media coverage included the “highly unusual and highly rare instance of embedding media with Special Forces.” Clarke referenced six journalists who were embedded at the end of 2001: “Two were broadcast networks, AP, New York Times, Newsweek, Gannett.” A small group subsequently was embedded with Marines in Operation Anaconda in March 2002.

5. The findings presented here are based on data obtained from the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs OASD(PA), thanks to a Freedom of Information Act request, and from publicly obtained DoD press briefings archived at www.defenselink.mil.
6. The only exception involved prohibited information, and it was left to the unit commander to inform the embedded journalist about the parameters for reporting that information. See Section 6 of DoD (2003b).

7. The DoD provided opportunities for 920 initial positions (see Whitman, 2003a, p. 208). The available data do not provide information about which media organizations were originally invited to participate, how many news organizations were denied slots by the OASD(PA), or which organizations declined spots.

8. The term embed slot refers to the number of unique reporting units rather than the number of individual reporters.

9. Internal OASD(PA) documents report only 251 different news outlets. This discrepancy reflects the tendency for multimedia news services to be counted as a single outlet by the OASD(PA) even when listed separately by medium in the spreadsheet data. For instance, the Reuters news service has three separate entries in the DoD-supplied data: Reuters–Pix, Reuters–Text, and Reuters–TV. Our count lists the total number of discrete entries in the data.

10. Simply adding the Army, Marine, and Special Operations totals provides a figure of 75.9% but overlooks that two of the slots allocated to Army and Marine units were assigned to these services’ air operations.

11. Al Jazeera, the Qatar-based satellite TV network, was offered four embed slots, more than any other news organization serving Arab audiences. Philip Seib (2005, p. 603) reports that “the station was only able to use one of these because its reporters could not acquire the visas needed to reach U.S. units in Bahrain and Kuwait where the governments disapproved of the channel.”

12. Coalition status is determined using the White House memorandum issued on March 21, 2003, which listed the 46 countries that were publicly committed to the coalition. This document was obtained at http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/03/030321-4.html (accessed August 19, 2005), but was deleted by the White House between August 2005 and April 2006. This document is archived in the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine at http://web.archive.org/web/*http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/03/030321-4.html. A revised list of 49 coalition countries that had been issued on March 27, 2003 (adding Angola, Tonga, and Ukraine to the original list of 46) is available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/03/030337-10.html (accessed November 6, 2008). Our analysis relies on the original list since the addition of Angola, Tonga, and Ukraine occurred well after the embed system had been put into action.

13. The White House (2003) also judged the strategy effective.

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