MEDIA LAW RESOURCE CENTER

“In the Trenches Revisited: War Reporting and the First Amendment - Part II”

November 12, 2003
SANDRA BARON: Thanks guys. To all the MLRC members and their guests, I want to tell you that we have a great pleasure tonight, presenting Tim Hays, former owner and publisher of Press-Enterprise of Riverside, California, with MLRC’s William J. Brennan, Jr. Defense of Freedom Award. As you all know, we take very seriously our obligations to do honor to Mr. Justice Brennan each and every time we commit to presenting the Defense of Freedom Award that bears his name. I have no doubt, however, that Mr. Hays is exactly the kind of individual that Justice Brennan would be pleased to see us honor in this way. At a time when access to information, to government proceedings and activities is seriously challenged at almost every level, when there are rollbacks of FOIA principles of openness, of freedom of information rules and laws, of Sunshine laws. When in the courts today such challenges to the government’s right to hold and process immigrants and others in secrecy, MLRC believes it most suiting that we honor a man who stepped forward
and led his newspaper organization to challenge government acting in secret. I want to thank Gary Pruitt of McClatchy for coming east to help us honor Tim Hays. And I want to thank our panel, led by Brian Williams, with Cheryl Diaz Meyer, Mary Beth Sheridan, and Michael Weisskopf, who’ll be talking about covering the war and national security. Picking up perhaps where our pre-Iraqi war panel left off last November, these journalists, all of whom have covered this war, will bring their insights to this ongoing conversation on access to and reporting on critical matters. We will take your questions I hope, if we have time at the end. There are bios on all of our speakers in the program, and of course our honoree. Take a look at them and at the essay done by David Schulz, President Emeritus of the Defense Council section on the Import of Press Enterprise I and II. It is an essay definitely worth reading. Take it home with you if you don’t have time tonight to read, and think about it. I also want to thank on all of our behalf, two directors of MLRC who, after a number of years of remarkable service on the board, are rotating off – Robin Bierstedt of Time, Inc., Director and former Chair of
MLRC, and Mary Anne Warner of the Washington Post, both of whom [applause] - yes, please. Both of these directors brought so much experience, intelligence, and common sense to our proceedings. They will be missed.

And I want to thank Media Professional, again on all of our behalf, for the reception that preceded this dinner - a much appreciated annual event. We have, as you may have noticed, a record crowd tonight. For that I wish to thank all of you, and thank you all for your support throughout 2003. We look forward to working with you in 2004 and for many years to come. And I hope you all enjoy the evening.

HAROLD FUSON: I apologize for interrupting your meal, but we have an important first act to get out of the way. I’m Hal Fuson. I’m the Chief Legal Officer of the Copley Press in San Diego. And I happen to have the privilege of being the chair of the august body -- the Media Law Resource Center -- this year and next. I’m not sure exactly how that happened. Perhaps because they find it easier, those New Yorkers on the board, to conduct their meetings without me physically present. But I do my best to keep them on track insofar as the speakerphone allows that to happen. The
biggest regret I have is that they don’t send me any
cookies to participate with them during the meetings.

New Board Members

Sandy mentioned two important board members who
are leaving us. Two other important board members will
join us. Steve Fuzesi of Newsweek and Katherine Hatton
of Philadelphia Newspapers, Inc., who I think most of
you know, or many of you know, will be joining the
board come the first of the year. Also Sandy didn’t
mention our Defense Council section. She likes to play
down the Defense Council section because after all the
whole purpose of the Media Law Resource Center is to
keep you guys under control. We do our best. But Lee
Levine has served dutifully as chair of the Defense
Council section for the last year and he’s about to
step aside and hand the gavel over to Bruce Johnson
from Seattle. You’ll notice a trend here – San Diego,
Seattle. And it’s my job now to introduce an award.

William J. Brennan Defense of Freedom Award

The William J. Brennan, Jr. Defense of Freedom
award is a very important part of the Media Law
Resource Center’s annual thought process. We don’t
always give this award. Some years we can’t find anyone who quite lives up to Justice Brennan’s example. Justice Brennan was the first recipient of the William J. Brennan Defense of Freedom award and since then we’ve found a surprising number of folks who do, in fact, measure up to the standard that he set.

Introduction of Gary Pruitt

I’m going to introduce the man who will present the award and tell you more about the honoree. That man is Gary Pruitt who is the Chief Executive Officer of the McClatchy Company. The McClatchy Company is based in Sacramento and has newspapers as far west as Anchorage. They also have some out east in the Carolinas. Gary is one of us. He was the general council of McClatchy. He joined them in 1984 when he was, I think, seven years old. He’s a little older now. He became a publisher after helping the company go public. He doesn’t do the country lawyer act very well, but you could pin that label on him. Gary is head of what is one of the most dynamic and innovative newspaper publishing companies in the country with a substantial presence in the Midwest, in the Southeast, and certainly in the West. And I think as someone who
presides over a public company with a substantial family ownership still present, that he’s the best person I could think of to present this award. Gary?

GARY PRUITT: I don’t know if you believed all that stuff that Hal just said, but it reminds me of when Oliver Wendell Holmes went to the unveiling of his portrait at the Harvard Law School. And they unveiled the portrait and Holmes looked at it and said, it’s not me, but it’s a damn fine thing that people think it’s me. And that’s the way I feel about what Hal said to me. It’s a damn fine thing if you believe that. But actually I’ve had a succession of increasingly less popular jobs. I started out as a lawyer. A lot of lawyers here tonight. We all know people dislike lawyers. Then I became a publisher and I realized that publishers are disliked even more than lawyers. And now I’m a CEO. I’m truly vilified. I don’t – it’s just a process of de-evolution and I don’t know where I’d go from CEO. I think it’s felon. The two go hand in hand these days.

But tonight we’re here to sing the praises of a man who has never been much about singing his own. We’re here to honor a person who most of his career
stood just outside of the spotlight, directing the coverage to others. The man is Tim Hays. Though his modesty might occasionally obscure the fact, his generation produced no greater champion of the public’s right to participate fully in the affairs of self-governance, especially the judicial branch. He’s a lawyer/publisher - that unpopular connection again. But Tim would emerge as the moving force behind two landmark Supreme Court decisions that still serve as important guarantees that the people have a firm constitutional right to watch their courts in action. A closed judiciary system is the beginning of a road that leads to people being arrested and jailed in secrecy, Hays warned in a 1986 interview that sounds especially prescient today. If people can’t observe and watch and judge how the court system operates, you can’t pretend to have a free and open society, he said. His reasoning resonated with a unanimous court in 1984 and with a solid majority in 1986, as his Riverside Press-Enterprise newspaper was victorious in appeals that opened first jury selection and then pre-trial proceedings to public scrutiny.
Now some may have thought that this medium-sized newspaper in Southern California was an unlikely champion of Supreme Court challenges, but Hays brought special sensibilities to his crusades. His civility and self-effacing nature belied a backbone of steel as those who underestimated his commitment would learn time and again. Tim was also rare in another crucial respect in his willingness to back up his convictions with his checkbook, spending substantially on these legal proceedings with no prospect of a financial return. Now just among us lawyers, dare we suggest an additional award on Tim’s willingness - based on Tim’s willingness to return again and again to expensive, principled, access litigation, taking it all the way to the Supreme Court. What would we call it? Tim Hays, the Perfect Client. The case we know as Press-Enterprise One, produced a unanimous 9-0 opinion authored by Chief Justice Warren Burger, decisively endorsing the paper’s contention that jury selection is inseparably part of the trial process and must likewise be open to the public. In a 1986 case we call Press-Enterprise Two, the court decided 7-2 that Hays and the Press-Enterprise were right in arguing that pre-trial
proceedings couldn’t be considered differently from the regular trial sessions that were already routinely open following the Supreme Court Richmond Newspaper’s case.

The good law established and illuminated by these decisions has been with us now for almost two decades, forming an important part of the foundation upon which we build arguments to open the courts to public scrutiny. Our gathering tonight offers a fitting opportunity to abridge Tim Hays’ modesty for a moment. We celebrate the legacy of accountability and openness he has championed so successfully across his illustrious career. The Media Law Resource Center could have chosen no more deserving recipient of the Brennan Award for Defense of Freedom than Tim Hays. For his commitment, his consistency, and the legacy they brought us, we proudly offer Tim Hays our thanks, our recognition, and this Brennan Award. Tim Hays.

HOWARD HAYS: I want to make some remarks about Gary Pruitt. I’ve known Gary and I’ve known his ancestors and I’m a great admirer of his. But he’s so inflated his introduction to me. He said kinder things about me than I could imagine, and I was so impressed and so pleased by these that if he would agree to go
down that path with me in the future I think I’d run
for President of the United States.

HAROLD FUSON: This is the award, sir.

HOWARD HAYS: I appreciate that very much.

HAROLD FUSON: Before Tim leaves, seated over
here are a group of folks who work for a company called
Belo, which is based in Dallas. They used to work for
them. They were instrumental in achieving Press-
Enterprise Two, and Press-Enterprise One. Mel
Opotowsky, who was managing editor, Tim? I think at
the time Marsha McQuern, who later became the publisher
of the Press-Enterprise, was working for us in San
Diego. We’d stolen her away from you for a little
while.

HOWARD HAYS: Are you that old?

HAROLD FUSON: I’m that old. I am. And, let’s
see, who am I missing down here. David Cornwall’s the
publisher. I’m going to get to Jim, don’t worry.
We’re not going to miss Jim. But I’m going to make
sure that I’ve got everybody else before we get to Jim.
Jim? I don’t know how many of you -- probably not very
many of you -- were actually present during either of
these oral arguments, but the man who argued both
Press-Enterprise and Press - Press-Enterprise One and Press-Enterprise Two, Jim Ward, who is now a California Appellate Justice in Riverside, is sitting right there. Stand up, Jim.

And there’s just one thing about Jim. Justice O’Connor asked him about a point during the argument and he said, well, that’s not really my case. And she said, I suppose that’s your next case, Mr. Ward. And he gently nodded. We’re waiting for Jim’s next case.

Tim, congratulations. HOWARD HAYS: Thank you.

HAROLD FUSON: Thank you.

[Break in audio]
HAROLD FUSON: Our theme this year is a little unusual: *In the Trenches Revisited: War Reporting and the First Amendment - Part II*. We had the same theme, you know, except Part I last year. We didn’t call it Part I. It just turned out to be part I. The problem was Ted Koppel began by asking a very erudite question of Sy Hersh about war coverage. And Sy Hersh took the opportunity, of course, to go tearing off on a tangent of his own somewhere into space, generally throwing bombs kind of at the White House sort of. But it wasn’t - we weren’t surprised at that exactly and we knew Koppel could handle this sort of thing. So Koppel soldiered on and he tossed another question at Bob Simon from CBS, and, you know, Simon’s a TV guy. He should be able to stay on point, keep it focused, bang, bang, bang. Well, Simon went off on another tangent thataway, you know? Bang, boom, bombs were going off. Koppel was looking really frustrated at that point and he turned to John Kifner. Now John Kifner’s from the New York Times, he’s a very serious person, low key. He went crazy, too. At that point Koppel gave up and as you all recall, those of you who were here, went off
on a tear of his own. And the evening was terrific. We loved it. It was wonderful, but they never really got around to talking about war coverage.

In the interim we’ve had a war and we’ve had some fantastic journalism in connection with that war. And so we have a chance now to try once again, this time focusing on what I think is the core mission of the organization and the core of the work that those of you who are lawyers do and those of you who are journalists do. It’s advancing the ability of the American people to make informed decisions about matters of public importance. Whether those decisions concern the performance of the criminal justice system as in the case of the work that you heard about earlier this evening in the Press-Enterprise cases, the incarceration of foreign nationals at Guantanamo Bay, or the course of military operations in the Middle East.

Brian Williams from NBC has graciously agreed to devote one of the few precious evenings that a man who has been designated to succeed Tom Brokaw is allowed these days, with us with three distinguished reporters who have been there and done that - Michael
Weisskopf from Time, Mary Beth Sheridan from the Washington Post, and Cheryl Diaz Meyer, a photographer from the Dallas Morning News.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Hal, thank you. We got your message on tangents. We’ll be terse and succinct. I heard Gary’s introduction earlier and he made a joke about lawyers being unpopular, and I just want to ask is this a big thing within your community because I’m not familiar with this at all. The first I’ve heard was sitting there tonight so I’ll have to look into this further.

I’ll let my colleagues in the news media speak for themselves. It’s a pleasure and honor for all of us to be here tonight and to have - for me at least to have anything to do with any evening connected at all with Mr. Justice Brennan, who was my favorite American. When I grew up as a kid having absolutely nothing to do with ideology but everything to do with having been a court buff and a huge fan of his story. We were both from New Jersey. All of you no doubt are familiar with his great story of his upbringing, the son of a stevedore and a union organizer who really - who went from those modest roots and ended up at Harvard Law
School and of course on the high court. Was the leprechaun of the court for many years, famous for his personal notes and flowers if the spouse of a clerk had a baby, if anyone they’d ever met had a baby you would get flowers from Justice Brennan. And we may not see his kind ever again. So he was my hero as a kid for kind of overcoming roots that we both kind of shared in northern New Jersey. He overcame his and I’m still working in cable.

We have a lot to get to tonight. We will endeavor to repeat some of our dinner conversation over here in the corner. We got to talking about our shared experiences and it’s a lot like the blind man and the elephant. We came away with a different sensation and different ideas about the same conflict. All four of us covered different pieces of it. Contentions held by one or two of us would not be universally held. And while there is a lot of substance to get to this evening I’m going to begin the conversation with everyone’s favorite stories from the war, and to tell this I need to run right over here and get a prop.

So as they say, there we were in Baghdad. The day after the statue fell we were able to gain entry to
the city starting as we did from Kuwait. And honest to
God, and not to be falsely coy -- because the people
who got us to Baghdad are elements of the United States
military who are still there and in positions of
command and management, and by more or less hiding us
like the Von Trapp family did us a huge favor and
risked their own careers -- I can’t tell you how we got
from Kuwait to Baghdad, but we did and it didn’t take
very long at all. And when we arrived it was still
every bit a hot zone. I was traveling with retired
four-star General Wayne Downing, who in an illustrious
30-year plus career with the U.S. military, among his
jobs had been head of all U.S. Special Forces --
there’s an embedded hint in his bio as to how we got to
Baghdad -- along with NBC news veteran producer Justin
Balding. About the sharpest, most pleasant, and most
resourceful person I’ve ever worked with overseas.

We arrived during blackout conditions at the
airport. There is still live fire going on outside the
perimeter of the airport. Again this is the day after
all American viewers watched that statue get pulled
down laboriously in downtown Baghdad. We can see
rocket attacks, we feel the sporadic concussion of
larger explosives going off, but still a good time not
to keep your head up for too long.

We always live on New York time overseas so I
am fixated on my watch and the approach of 6:30 Eastern
time in New York. I have one job on the ground there
and it is to get on the air as Tom Brokaw’s lead story
from Baghdad. That required setting up a satellite
phone. They look like basically a laptop computer.
You set up panels, aim them generically toward the
Indian Ocean with the help of a compass and some good
luck and a retired four-star general, you get a signal.
We were able, using another satellite phone – the first
call I made was to our Vice-President, Bill Wheatley,
who joins us here tonight, and I’ll never forget that.
We got the signal established. Much running around.

Because of a minimum of cable and because we
couldn’t be lit and visible in a blackout zone, orders
of the Army, I had to crouch next to a deuce-and-a-
half, an Army truck. So I did this live report on my
knees. There was the matter of illumination. It truly
was against the rules but a reporter on television with
no light on his face does scant little good to the
reporter or the viewer, frankly. So General Downing,
always the resourceful retired four-star produced -- and those of you who are outdoor people will recognize this -- the new LED headlamps that people use on camping trips. I’m trying to figure out how it turns on but we did get it while we were there. This goes -- and there are no photographers here tonight -- this goes around your head and -- those photos live forever. You know? The night Regan gestured at the State Dinner. It’s still being reprinted. And this illuminates your way. Very tiny, but very bright, very powerful.

To cut to the chase, when they counted us down on the air in New York I had a retired four-star general two feet from my nose on his knees facing me with his forehead light. Just looking right at me. And I said, now, General, you are my only source of light. You are it. The viewers don’t see me if you so much as look down at your watch -- I’m gone. I’m gone from the screen and New York won’t tolerate it. They’ll cut away to something else. And right in the crucial seconds, literally in my ear I can hear three, two, I said hit me with the sweet spot, General. Which was later suggested by our senior producer for foreign
news in New York, M.L. Flynn, as the cracker jack title for any book to come out of this war. Hit me with the sweet spot, General.

I’m happy to report that these little dandies -- I recommend them. It’ll get you through the night in Baghdad and then some. But this was the little flashlight that could. There are -- the only problem with asking a journalist what their favorite story from Baghdad is, of course, how do mean that? There’s very little humor in a war zone, but we do have to cull down to our favorites. And I guess we’ll start with Michael and go on across. Favorite story from Iraq.

MICHAEL WEISSKOPF: I spent the fighting war, the shooting war, in Qatar at CENTCOM -- which was always a day late and a dime short on the story -- and arrived in Baghdad a few days after the statue fell. And although most of the shooting had stopped then there was another war going on that was for control of hearts and minds and occupation. And this is a more compelling story than favorite or fun story, but one Saturday night, returning to a house we ended up renting and passing through the center of Baghdad, a colleague of mine -- also from Riverside, the same town
as our honoree -- by the name of Brian Bennett and I saw a large crowd of Iraqis and we pulled the car around only to find that 50 or 100 Iraqis were surrounding two guys in a lane in the median, shot in the head and bleeding. One of them was stiff, dead. The other one was still heaving and we kept on hearing from the Iraqis, Ali Baba, Ali Baba. So we assumed that these were mugging victims. And the lawlessness had just about started then where there were car-jackings and house break-ins and we figured these were victims. And so we dragged this man -- and of course a few other points of interest, none of the Iraqis did anything to help. And there was no communications. And it was quite extraordinary to have an emergency without modern contrivances to call authorities or figure out where an emergency room is, call an ambulance, the police, or whomever. So it was all we could do was load this guy in the back of our car, bleeding profusely -- at least 200 pounds of him -- and drive around looking for an emergency room.

We finally found one open and drove up and yelled for doctors and a surgeon came out and opened the back of the car and said, oh, this man has been
shot in the head. We don’t have a brain surgeon here. Closed the door on him. Of course we had nowhere else to take him so we insisted on bringing him in at least to be looked at or administered to.

There was no gurney so we had to - we loaded him onto a wheelchair - Brian Bennett and I, my colleague -- none of the doctors helped -- and finally got him into an emergency room, which was filled with other burly characters like him in various states of distress, all of whom were covered with tattoos. And we discovered that our victim had also been covered with tattoos. And this was a place filled with felons. People who had been released from prison by Saddam or even by Americans because when we got to Baghdad there were still people in prisons and there was no way to take care of them so we had to let them go. These were people who were out creating havoc in the streets and something had backfired. One of them had a knife in his back. Another one had his hand blown off from a backfiring pistol. And it became a sort of microcosm for what was going sour in Baghdad. All of them were covered, as I said, in tattoos, which looked almost like extended veins. They’re all prison designs and
this is how you can always spot a prison felon. And in the corner of this emergency room was a little five-year-old who was surrounded by a mother and some screaming aunts, all also trying to get the attention of doctors. And this little boy had been scalded in the groin area and couldn’t urinate and was because of that in danger of dying of I guess urea poisoning, and needed a catheter. And there was no catheter in this hospital. A feeble attempt was made to call the nearest assemblage of American GIs to see if they had a catheter or could get one, and they couldn’t.

So everything was sort of contained -- the trauma, the tragedy -- of that city in this little frozen moment of the hospital. And it was a compelling story for me because it reflected just the impact of our invasion and also the trouble ahead. And it continues to haunt me because it’s the kind of problem that continues to haunt Baghdad.

MARY BETH SHERIDAN: I don’t know if this is my favorite story of the war, but I thought maybe I’d just tell you briefly about my first night in Iraq. I was embedded for the war with an Army cargo helicopter unit. And this is not really a sexy assignment, cargo
helicopters. But the good thing is they go all over the place because they carry stuff to all sorts of different units. So three days after the war started I was still in Kuwait and came across some pilots who I knew who were going to be going into Iraq shortly. And this was going to be a big deal because they were flying in equipment and people and so on for the Apache helicopters.

The Apaches were supposed to be one of the big stars of this war. They were the most sophisticated helicopters, you know, anywhere in the world, very expensive, extremely high-tech, so this was going to be very exciting. And I said to the pilots, can I come along? And they said, no, there’s no room for you. So I said, well, could I just wait here on the side while you pack up and if there’s any room can I jump in? And they said sure. So I stood on the side trying to look very small.

So eventually we did fly into Iraq and, like I said, I was prepared for this to be a really important night because the Apaches were going to be flown in and then -- to a big staging area that had just been set up called RAMS. It was going to be very important that
night they were scheduled to launch the first deep attack of the war. They were going to fly to Kabala, almost all the way to Baghdad. They were going to hit the Republican Guard for the first time, kind of soften them up, go way beyond the ground troops and, you know, have this great victory so the ground troops could just sort of rush by the next day.

Anyway, so we finally got to RAMS, which was near Najaf in the sort of central south area, and what was this great staging area. Well, we got there and there were no tents, there were no latrines, no tanks. In fact there was nothing there. There was a lot of sand and not much else. So the Chinooks landed with us, we unloaded, and then they left. The Apaches were there -- Apaches are very small helicopters with only two passengers in them. And there we were with no protection, in an area that was really still controlled by the Iraqis in the countryside. And, well, in most of the area actually.

So anyway, there we were sort of wondering what to do and the Apaches were also quite wondering what to do because the convoy had not arrived. We had expected to find the convoy had set up this big camp, but in
fact they’d gotten stuck in traffic and wrong turns and so on. So there wasn’t gasoline, there wasn’t enough intelligence, et cetera. There really -- things were not looking very well. So anyway, the Apache pilots, who are real kind of gung-ho, macho, you know, top gun types, they were very keen to go in anyway and they had a big conference and they decided that two of the groups would go in and fly the attack and so on. So they got ready to go and they were all sort of pumping each other on the back and, you know, kick some ass for me and all this kind of stuff, right? And I was interviewing them and saying - and they seemed kind of pleased to have a woman around, actually. And I said, can I interview you on your triumphant return after your spectacular success? And they said, of course, you know, and, you know, we’ll be back and so on.

So anyway off they went leaving us kind of alone in the very dark and very quiet and very unnerving desert. So all of a sudden - I was kind of wondering what was going to happen. And a Gator suddenly just popped up out of nowhere with this great big Army soldier -- enormous guy -- and he said I’ve been sent to take you, the reporter, back to the TOC -
the Tactical Operations Center. And I thought, this is just so great. This guy is, you know, my knight in shining body armor. I mean he’s huge, he’s got a gun, he’s got night vision goggles, and he’s going to take me somewhere sort of civilized. So off we went on the Gator bouncing over these kind of dunes and everything else and I just thought, well, this is so great. What a relief. That’s what I thought for the first hour.

We went bouncing all over the place and it soon occurred to me we were lost in Iraq. And every now and then we would run across a little sort of pathetic group of soldiers who were supposed to be flying but couldn’t because they didn’t have gas or whatever it is. And they would be sleeping on the ground. There were no cots, there were no tents, no latrines, and they’d be sort of spooned together because - and these were tough guys spooned together because it was so cold. So anyway this went on for about two hours or so and finally our Gator ran out of gas.

So I was really getting kind of nervous and also cold and tired and all the rest. And my brave hero, who had picked me up said don’t worry, we’re right near the camp. And as it turned out we walked to
it. It was a couple hundred yards away. We’d managed to go around it about 45 times. So I thought, well, phew. At last all this confusion and all this craziness and mistakes, it’s all over and we’re going to get back to the camp. The pilots were due back. They would tell us about their great triumph and I would write my story.

So we got to the camp and went into the operations tent and they were getting the reports back. Two of the pilots had been shot down. They were trying to launch a rescue operation. They were taken prisoner of war as it happened. And the rest of the helicopters, the world’s most sophisticated helicopters, had been shot to the point where the rotors were in ribbons, the engines weren’t working, and they had limped back to base. It was a shocking moment in a war that was a great military success. And I guess it showed me just that how confusing and how prone to human error and how chaotic war can be.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Mary Beth, thank you. Cheryl?

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: Well, one of my more memorable moments was at the beginning of the war. I was embedded with the second tank battalion and before
the actual war started we were in a camp in Kuwait that was part of the regimental group. And so we were probably with about 6,000 men and a handful of women, including myself. And the morale was getting low because the men had been there sometimes for several months, some of them, and there had been a suicide in one of the latrines.

And so the colonel who I was embedded with wanted to kind of get everybody excited, throw a party, and so they decided that they would have this talent show. And as part of the talent show the journalists -- there were several of us that were part of this group -- were invited to come up on stage. And I was the only female. And we had this whole skit set up and my line was going to be, you know, you -- I’ve told you that I’m with the Dallas Morning News and that’s who you think I am. But in reality I’m actually looking for the 2003 men of the Second Tank Battalion for the calendar.

And so I had this line all, you know, rehearsed. And so they introduced all the guys and then it got to be my turn, and before I could open my mouth there was this roar, this cheering, this ongoing
clapping 40 seconds straight. And I remember all the men up there screaming and waving and I thought, wow, Cheryl, you better remember this. I said to myself, this is as close to Marilyn Monroe as you are ever - [laughter]. It was good.

**Was Embedding a Success?**

BRIAN WILLIAMS: I didn’t want to ruin that moment. Mary Beth has now raised the often touchy subject of spooning in the desert, and during one of our forays when we were sleeping in a Chinook helicopter, also lost -- and Mary Beth’s travails will be the subject of an NBC made for TV movie this weekend, called Saving Mary Beth Sheridan -- but I had to at one point -- not to push away an advance by General Downing. I just said, you know, we’re not spooning. It didn’t mean that it – it would have been great to have someone to spoon with, but it was cold and there were MLRS launches. Those are those multiple rocket packs you’ve seen in the nighttime video that if it weren’t for such a hideous cause would look absolutely stunningly beautiful in the middle of the night in the desert.
Listening to all these comments I wanted to get in one note before we continue. Two weeks ago I went down to Ward 57 at Walter Reed, the amputee floor. And let us not ever, ever, ever -- we dwell on the death toll so much, especially in our business -- let’s not forget the wounded count is approaching 1,900 on the nose. And these were men who came home not whole -- missing one or both legs, one or both arms. To a man every one of them just wanted to be back with their units. Many would go back in a heartbeat if they were allowed. The loss of a limb or more than one was ancillary to them. Really the reaction was almost, “oh, that...” They were full of questions about their units. The most motivated and patriotic group you will ever spend time with, which was really nicely symmetrical.

Having dealt with and met their units over there, it was kind of the period, though a sad one, at the end of the sentence seeing them here at Walter Reed in Ward 57. And it’s just one of the many stories that continue to play out from this war. We, with caveats, not all of us were embedded, but all of us of course are interested in the question of the experiment we
just saw play out in this war. The new word in the English lexicon, embedded. And again I guess we'll just keep going in this order. Michael, do you think embedded journalists was, as an art form, as un-exact as it was, a success? Do you think there’s ever any going back?

MICHAEL WEISSKOPF: It gave a slice of life, an Ernie Pyle view of warfare, which we really haven’t seen since World War II. In that sense, yes, I think it was successful and I think it was important, really, to qualify these stories as sort of told to and done with an obvious bias because you become part of that unit. And it sort of was telling their story. And, yeah, I think that was quite valuable. It gave people a better sense of the struggles with the military and everything from the cold nights to the dietary issues and the morale issues. It was a funny war because there was never a kind of central place for information. A CENTCOM in Doha had been set up for that purpose, but because of its own bureaucracy and communications problems, just the constipation of the military, it became -

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Which way -
MICHAEL WEISSKOPF: - almost -

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Having had MREs for meals -- three a -

MICHAEL WEISSKOPF: Yeah.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: - week -- which way do you mean?

MICHAEL WEISSKOPF: Well, I was - I had more in mind the mental constipation, but perhaps the others began welling up. It became irrelevant and so it was a funny war to fight, or to report on rather. And very often Washington would steal the beat with something at a briefing or an informed source story. Some of the primary reporting, for instance, on Jessica Lynch, albeit inaccurate but still the sort of the breakthrough reporting, came out of Washington. Which is a sort of sad commentary.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: An inaccurate breakthrough.

Mary Beth, there’s been so much talk about the closeness that - the underside of embedding. Jim Dwyer and I flew back from Cairo to New York. I was not embedded. I was unilateral. He was with I believe the 82nd - 82nd or the 101st. He said I got out - and he wouldn’t mind me quoting him. He’s said it since. I
got out because I felt I was liking it too much. I got close to the people I covered. Is that a danger? Did you experience it?

MARY BETH SHERIDAN: Yes. I think there were greater dangers. I think one was that we all signed ground rules when we embedded and some of them I thought were quite understandable in a time of war. You couldn’t report on people being shot down, for example, if there was a rescue operation underway, so as not to alert the Iraqis that somebody survived being shot down.

But I think that the rules themselves were so vague in many cases that we withheld a lot because you weren’t sure what would get you kicked out of the program. I think a lot of them were simply too vague.

I think another thing, though, too, I think obviously you got close to the people you were with. You literally, you know, you slept next to them. But I also think one thing that people sometimes don’t consider is that this was a really new experiment for the Army -- for the military, and, like reporters covering any institution, you wanted to break down some
of their uneasiness and fear and you wanted them to talk to you. You wanted to win their confidence. So I think that was a factor that perhaps sometimes weighed too much and resulted in coverage that wasn’t critical enough. So I would argue that there were indeed all the positive -- the personal bonds, but I think there were these other issues, too, that sometimes meant that the coverage was not as accurate as it should have been.

**Embedding - Endangering Lives**

BRIAN WILLIAMS: No discussion would be complete without mentioning our colleague David Bloom, who filed so much spectacular reporting during the war, and really this new art form. No one knew as we went in that everything would work on that vehicle, that convoy of vehicles that my bosses at NBC and David worked so hard on. The magazine world of course lost Michael Kelly. There were losses in every -- really every branch of the news media, say nothing of course of the working military. Cheryl, you and I were speaking at dinner about pushing back, stretching the rules of embeddedness, and how doing that may be self-serving for a journalist, may make the readers back
home all the more fortunate for what you’ll get but you can also endanger lives.

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: Yeah, one of the things that really tormented me when I was there was, you know, when you’re embedded, yes, you do get to know the people that you’re with. Yes, you experience everything that they experience, the same fear, the same filth, the same anxiety, the same exhaustion. So, I think you tell a truer story. At the same time I really felt there’s a fine line when you affect the situation that you’re in. And for me it was really something that I thought about a lot. Number one, how much danger do I put myself in? But that’s really something that I have to deal with on a very personal level. But how much danger do you put other people in that you’re around? And that -- the answer would seem very simple in that you say of course you don’t endanger the people around you. But it’s actually a really -- being embedded there’s so many subtle and gray areas that are not clear.

For example if I wanted to stop and make a photo, what if I asked them to stop and something happened? What if there was somebody with an RPG or an
AK37 nearby and somebody got hurt because of me? How could I live with that? And I thought about that a lot and I actually talked about that a lot with my boss. And he said, well, you’d be fired if you endangered anybody. And I thought, forget fired. How could I live with it? You know? That’s the bigger question. I found that not a lot of people talked about that and it’s just something that I had to keep reminding myself to try to pray for wisdom and clarity about each situation and each day as it came so that I made the right choices along the way.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Michael?

MICHAEL WEISSKOPF: Brian, I think that there’s a mythology and misunderstanding that journalists try to keep their distance from their sources. And in fact we all get in the foxhole with our sources. That type of empathy breeds trust and a competitive advantage from time to time. The difference here is that we usually go home at nights and we can take our mask off and we deal in a different reality, and that reality ends up seeping in when we ultimately filter through the story and decide what’s a balanced picture. And I think from what you guys are saying it was very hard to
take that mask off. It was very hard to change the reality.

*Long Time Between Showers*

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Will the record holder on this stage for the longest period between showers please raise her hand?

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: Was it me?

MARY BETH SHERIDAN: That would be you.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: That would be a long time. We -- as part of our pre-game conversation at dinner we established it was two weeks for our lucky winner.

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: Actually I should tell you the story of my first shower.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Please do. I am sure that as we clear the dessert plates everyone is anxious to --

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: After -- I couldn’t even get a comb through my hair. My hair was --

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Oh, my.

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: -- matted to my head like a dog. I covered the war in Afghanistan and that was a few months before my wedding and so I decided there was no way in hell I was cutting my hair off. So after I did that I said, well, you know, Iraq comes along and I
thought, yeah, you know, I can deal with the hair. This is fine. But I just didn’t really count on, those really, really nasty dust storms that just cover your hair and literally I mean I was to the point I just couldn’t get a comb through it.

And finally I approached the master gunnery sergeant and I said would it be terribly incorrect or inappropriate or somehow wrong for me to ask for water to shower or bathe? And he said -- he looked at me and I must have been just a wreck. I must have been such a mess because he said, no, it’s fine. It’s fine, Cheryl. And he called over a sergeant and he said give this woman some water and set her up. And you know what they did? They put me in the engine compartment of an amphibious assault vehicle. And I’m not even kidding you. I climbed up this thing. It’s probably nine feet tall, and I had to clamber down into the engine compartment and I had this one jug of water. And there I was trying to, you know, maneuver myself. Next thing you know two helicopters go flying by. I was, like, oh, this is a con job. They planned it all, you know? And - but I finally got myself washed up and
got my hair re-braided by a Marine and everything. It was good.

MARY BETH SHERIDAN: I remember every shower I took during the war.

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: Oh, yeah.

MARY BETH SHERIDAN: They were huge.

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: Delicious.

MARY BETH SHERIDAN: Yeah.

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: Delicious.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: It’s an intensely personal evening, isn’t it already? I want to -- again the tangents are many and the topics are flying by. Again to you Cheryl on the topic of privacy. Everyone who was with the front line units, overwhelmingly male, these Bradley fighting vehicles -- the captains and lieutenants who command them boast about how many men they can fit in the back, with MOP gear. That’s the chemical suits. With body armor, with weapons. Shoulder mounted weapons, one per vehicle, and all the personal weapons every soldier is issued. Our lieutenant in the unit we spent the most time with boasted that he could put eight guys back there. There is no circulating air or light. The air that comes in
is equal parts air and dust. The light is filtered through bulletproof glass portholes that become a dark green and give you a vague idea as to where you are. But until the electric hatch opens, and unless the lieutenant opens what’s called the clamshell behind him -- he stands with head exposed driving it or calling out the route -- there is nothing to breathe. And it is a close intensely male environment. How did you deal with it and emerge from the war as you did with pride and dignity?

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: There is no dignity.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Yeah.

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: There is no pride.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Is there a, you know, without turning this into a doctor’s convention, is there --

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: Okay, I’ll tell my story.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: - a bromide -

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: I’ll reveal all.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Okay. Tell the story.

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: Let’s all reveal all. We - so I was embedded with the second tanks. It was 1,000 men and me. And just to put this in perspective, you know, there was, like, this young woman lieutenant.
She was checking me in and she said who are you with? And I couldn’t get my regiments, my companies straight. I, you know, like second tank battalion. Does that sound right? She said, yeah, there’s that. She looked at me kind of, you know, and she said you’re with the second tanks? And I said yeah. And she said, well, she goes, do you realize how forward you’ll be in battle? And I said great. This’ll be good for pictures, right? And she said, well, let me put it to you this way. She said if you were a female Marine you’d be making history because there are no female Marines on the front lines of combat. So anyway that put it in perspective.

Well, the first week that -- we were probably a week in Kuwait and about 3:00 in the morning we were awakened, you know, Bush made his speech, next thing you know we’re, like, get ready, tear down your tents, we’re leaving. And for the first time I put on my MOP suit, my helmet, my bulletproof vest, my camera fanny pack, two cameras, my gas mask, and, you know, a variety of -- my backpack. I had to carry all my stuff.
So we leave the camp, the safety in Kuwait to go to the northern part of the country where we’re supposed to make our entry into Baghdad. It’s called the DA -- the dispersal area. And we’re one of the first groups because we’re with the command center. The colonel decided that he would adopt us. And we arrived there and it was the middle of the desert. And I’d been jiggled and jostled for probably at this point four hours and I was thinking I’ve been really good but I have got to go to the bathroom. And I looked around and it was just flat desert. Not a tree, not a hill, not even a stump. There was nothing. And because we were with the command center we were in the center of the whole group. So we had to wait for the tanks to arrive and the scouts to arrive and the tows to arrive, and everybody was there. And by this time I thought, okay, you know, when are the jiffy johns going to come? And they just -- there was a long half an hour and I waited crossing my legs and nothing. And finally I thought this is for the birds, you know? I’ve got to ask somebody.

So I went to the master guns. He makes everything happen. You need anything you go the master
guns. I said Master Guns? I said, you know, I kind of need to do my business. I said, you know, when are the jiffy johns going to come? And he said Cheryl, the jiffy johns don’t follow us into war. And I was very seriously devastated at this point. I thought what am I going to do? A girl with a thousand guys, you know? And so he said, you know, I got a great idea for you. And he came up with this package and he said, you know, so and so you get this, so and so you get that. He presented me with two items, and he said Cheryl, here’s the shovel and here’s the shitter. And it was this contraption that was like a big can about this tall, gouged out on both sides with a toilet seat that had been roped to the top of it. And he said you go over there and you go dig yourself a one foot hole, and when you’re done you make sure you cover it up.

And I thought, well, that’s really great but, you know, a girl could get a little verklempt with a thousand guys looking on, you know. I said you got any suggestions? And he said - and he called over this guy and his name was Corporal Hannibut [phonetic]. This is a true story. And he said Corporal Hannibut would you please share your poncho with this woman? And he
pulled out this poncho and he said here. This is what you’re going to do to keep your business private. And the poncho never left my side the entire war. I completed many successful missions under the poncho, including under fire.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Somewhere Anna Nicole Smith is saying it could have been me.

**Choices About Coverage**

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: Yeah. Yeah.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: All right. Let’s -- with neck snapping grace let’s back -- take a left turn into policy. Michael, let’s talk about the business of journalism. Have you any regrets about what you choose to cover or not while you were there? And how has the coverage changed? Did American journalism get swept up with the flags on the TV screens in a kind of, oh, let’s help this effort along?

MICHAEL WEISSKOPF: I think that that is the legacy of embedding, yes. I think that really contributed to the forward movement of the troops and of the American morale and perspective of the war. And that hitting the ground there, and I was there the --
at the beginning of the occupation you saw a very
different reality and I’m sorry that we didn’t begin
reflecting that reality a lot faster.

I’m sorry we didn’t begin making demands for
and noting the absence of information on the WMD issue
from the start. We allowed them -- we allowed the
administration and people in the field to continue this
but it would -- appears to be a canard as long as they
did, for many, many months. And then only now do we --
we concluded that we were all probably mislead on that.

But what happens on the ground is you end up
sort of taking the stories like you take flak or dodge
it, whatever comes along you do. You know, I’m happy
with the story selection in the four weeks I was in
Baghdad. I wouldn’t have minded another four weeks
just to continue it.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: First a programming note.
That’s the last time we’ll ever discuss having to use
the facilities. Did you notice about 30 people got up
and --

MICHAEL WEISSKOPF: Yeah.
BRIAN WILLIAMS: Don’t -- when they come back don’t tell them we were talking about them, but it was too much for them to take, clearly.

Was it too Rah-Rah?

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Mary Beth, if you go back through your clip files, would you defend every word that you wrote and the tone, tenor, and spirit in which it was written from there? And do you concur with Michael that there was some rah-rah mixed in with the just the facts?

MARY BETH SHERIDAN: You know, I think that one thing that is very important to point out about embedding is we were not -- or at least I -- speaking for myself, because I think a lot of different embeds had different experiences, but when I was with the Army I was not covering Iraq. I was covering the Army. And there was a big difference. I mean this staging area eventually did get tents and latrines. It was -- the whole point of it was to be away from Iraqis, not be near them, to protect these very fancy helicopters and a lot of other gear they had, and to go out and do their missions and come back.
So -- and I guess one thing I also think that’s important to note, I think covering the military as it does its thing is a valuable thing to do in war. I don’t think the sort of other side, or the civilian side, or the Iraq side, whatever it is, should be neglected at all, but I do think that sometimes in discussions of war coverage people sort of forget about the particular nature of this war. I mean it was not the invasion of Panama where you could have sort of gone there and just roamed around and fended for yourself very easily. I mean it was an authoritarian -- or totalitarian society that didn’t really allow western journalists in in any great numbers. It certainly didn’t allow them any movement.

So while I’m not defending, and while I think the coverage could have been better, I think that our ability to tell the Iraqi story while we were there with an Army kind of on the move in the middle of a war, it simply was very limited and there’s just nothing -- or very little that one could have done. And I don’t think really people who were unilateral, as they were called, who tried to travel more independently around Iraq, I don’t think they had a lot
more success, frankly, than we did simply because of the nature of the Iraqi society and government.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: I don’t think there’s any disputing, Mary Beth, that the intelligence failure was probably colossal. Failing to reveal in advance the rise of Saddam’s Fedayeen, the militias, the technicals they were driving around on with machine guns and RPGs. Having said that, Tom Friedman in the Times while you were away coined one of the enduring phrases of the war, saying this war was like fighting the Flintstones. The technological superiority of the United States was that severe. It’s been compared to mosquitoes swirling around an elephant. The terrorists that we’re still seeing today -- and the Italian forces lost, what, 17 members just in the last 24 hours. Do you concur with that? Do you think it is a nuisance level? Do you think this is just going to be the caliber of the resistance from here on out?

MARY BETH SHERIDAN: You know, I have to be honest. I don’t know. I have a hard time predicting the future in Iraq, but what I saw was in fact -- particularly in the case of these Apaches -- they seem to have very poor intelligence on even the areas that
they were flying over. So I mean the funny thing about high-tech equipment is it can sometimes be downed or screwed up extremely low-tech means.

If these helicopters could have hovered and fired their missiles the way you might have in an old Warsaw pact style war, they would have been brilliant. But in fact they could be shot down with rocket-propelled grenades. And I think there was a big failure of intelligence to even know what they were flying over. And then to realize the degree, as you say, of organization of these sort of irregular militias.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Cheryl, true or false. I’ll put forward a thesis and support it or knock it down. With 130,000 U.S. troops in that nation it is fair to say most Iraqis will never really lay eyes on an American soldier, one-to-one basis. That it is fair to say that most Iraqis did not consider themselves necessarily oppressed on a daily basis by Saddam Hussein. And it is also fair to say that many of them are just angry that the day the war started they lost the two dependable things in their lives -- power and
water -- thus a lot of the anger we're seeing well up. Is any of that, all of that, fair, accurate?

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: Oh, absolutely.
Absolutely. I think, you know, for the most part, a lot of people had it good under Saddam. At least they had something they could count on. They had electricity, they had water, they had food. I mean now what do you have? You have people starving, you have no medical care, you have no -- people just don't have money. Even if there is food to be bought, the money situation is really bad. There was a lot of looting going on and the $10,000 -- 10,000 Iraqi dinar bills were -- essentially they said they were valueless because they -- a lot of them were looted and certain numbers -- they couldn't tell which ones, and -- so a lot of people who had traded in all their money for larger bills so that they could keep them, turned around really having absolutely nothing.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Michael, I had an infantryman show me a card from his commander that said people will welcome you in their villages. They may throw flowers. They may attempt to give you baked goods to thank you for liberating their town. Thank them politely. Do
not eat the baked goods just in case. This particular special forces staff sergeant was in a firefight in Baghdad with his safety off and finger on the trigger when he said to me, I wonder if these are baked goods that they are firing at us. A cynical view from a Special Forces sergeant. Do you --

MICHAEL WEISSKOPF: Warranted suspicion. I -- adding to Cheryl’s thoughts, Iraq was a remarkably civilized place for that part of the world. And prior to the UN sanctions there was quite a bit of economic development. Of course it all ground to a halt. And people were used to a certain level of civility. Part of the reason the occupation has been as rough as it’s been is because they lost that standard.

At the same time, though, the terror in that society I found permeated pretty widely and that it was highly personal. Men afraid to allow their daughters outdoors for fear that Fedayin or those associated with Uday would grab them up and rape them. It was more than a just a kind of father’s fear because legitimately there were stories of just reckless wanton behavior like that by members of the regime. And by the time Saddam was toppled there were millions of
people associated with that regime through the Bathist Party, through the military, the Fedayin, some of whom had very direct dealings with Uday and Qusay and the top command.

And so that -- I found that the -- and I may have spent more time in the society because I didn’t -- wasn’t embedded. I found that the fear was palpable and that the relief was palpable. And, you know, we’ve seen a lot of seemingly crazed Iraqis waving their fists in the air in front of the Palestine Hotel. That’s something they never could do.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Mary Beth --

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: You know, I might add -- sorry, if I --

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Go ahead.

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: -- may add that I think also the resentment actually was very palpable in my experience after the war. People -- I mean my translator just carried on -- before we had to deal with Saddam but now we have to deal with these American troops driving around our city, our capitol, making us feel like we’re bad people and aiming guns at everybody, terrifying everybody. Terrorizing
everybody. I mean literally they just felt completely terrorized by the military because there were a lot of stories of people getting hurt accidentally.

So in my experience -- I mean people were very kind to me but at the same time, especially the, you know, the Shiaa, like the Karbala area where there are a lot of Shiaas, there just seemed a lot of resentment towards America.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Mary Beth, why didn’t that story get out? Why didn’t the “we’re here to help you” story get out more in Iraq among Iraqis, or is that the arrogant view of Mother America assuming that America will make your pathetic lives better?

MARY BETH SHERIDAN: Well, you know, I found sort of a mix of the two, if you will. And I think -- I found actually great relief among Iraqis, great support for the removal of Saddam, but not -- that didn’t translate necessarily into support of Americans. And I think when I first came home and said that to people they kind of said, well, why not? I think part of it was Iraqis felt powerless. They didn’t remove Saddam. If it was some sort of popular uprising maybe it would be a different story, but the Americans came
in sort of unasked by Iraqis. They were happy with that result but I don’t think they felt any sort of -- like they were part of it. They weren’t.

And I think the “we are here to help you” thing, the thing that actually astonished me and to this day astonishes me is that I think a lot of Iraqis that I encountered -- they’re very proud people and I certainly ran into this resentment of the tanks in the streets and so on, and definitely the whole concern about the power and the water and so on is huge -- but I think the amazing thing to me was that Iraqis have huge expectations of the Americans. They might have been a little suspicious of American motives for, you know, were they after the oil and so on, but they expected them to come in and rebuild Iraq in a flash. To get the water and the power and the food -- and so they felt the fact that they lacked these basic services for weeks and had tremendous difficulties in their daily lives. They lost their jobs and so on. Many of them of course did have also loss of families or friends or destruction from the war and so on.

The thing that encapsulated the best was a comment that was said to another reporter at the Post,
but one of the Iraqis said to this reporter, when are the Americans going to start acting like Americans?

**Does News Fail to Report the Positives of the War?**

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Michael, if George W. Bush were here there is a very good chance he would say listen to this carping. This is the filter I’m talking about. I’ve heard not a word about the school we opened on the outskirts of Baghdad, about the hospital that is back up and running thanks to American dollars, about the oil pipelines that now have around the clock security, about the two refineries that are up thanks to the U.S. Army. How legitimate a charge is that against the news media for dwelling on the negative and not the positive in this war?

MICHAEL WEISSKOPF: Well, he doesn’t come to meetings like this because he has a better audience at the VFW or at environment -- obviously friendly environment or with local media -- he likes to go over the head of the national media -- or with foreign media. And I think that there - that he has a point to some extent, and that is that there are changes -- and I think the change that is most striking is the
representative forms of government, particularly outside of the Sunni Triangle and recovery of much of the economic life on the street level.

Colleagues of mine come back and talk about that increasing. But the news business is chronically focused on the urgent and the urgent is usually -- usually if it’s deaths and destruction it usually trumps the reopening of drug stores. So that -- that’s just a -- but every administration complains about coverage, particularly administrations at war.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Mary Beth? Fair charge?

MARY BETH SHERIDAN: You know, I left in -- I left the last day of April from Iraq, so it’s hard for me to answer things about the current situation. But I do think -- I guess I agree with Michael, but against the number of very positive developments it seems to me that first of all a huge chunk of the population is unemployed. And just the amount of uncertainty that they’re facing, from the very domestic sort of when am I getting, electricity to who’s going to run the country a year from now? Will the Americans leave -- I imagine that is sort of a very -- makes things very tense.
BRIAN WILLIAMS: Cheryl, just how unforgiving a land is it?

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: Sorry?

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Just how unforgiving a land is it? By air we all got to see the stark desert, the oases that are around the Tigris and Euphrates, and then stark desert, which becomes mountains. What -- how does kind of form follow function? How does the ethos of the people reflect where they live in Iraq?

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: I guess I’m not sure I understand your question.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: How are the Iraqis -- it is said that certain peoples around the world are hard because life is not --

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: Oh, God. The Iraqis are not hard people. Actually it’s a great contrast I think. I actually did not want to be embedded in the beginning. I begged my editor not to embed me. I wanted -- we had two photographers. One with the Third ID and myself, the Second Tank Battalion. And I wanted -- I felt that, you know, a better use of our resources, instead of having two embedded people, would be to have somebody waiting in Baghdad and another
person embedded and cover it from both ends. But in the end they could not reconcile the danger issues and they said, look, you know, you’ve got to be embedded. It’s this way or no way. And so I did and I don’t regret that because in actuality, you know, there were a lot of things that you just could not have covered if you weren’t embedded.

But I stayed an extra month after the embed to work in Baghdad, to work on stories about the Iraqi people specifically because I felt that we didn’t get a chance to tell those stories enough during the embed. It’s not to say that we didn’t, but, you know, as Michael and Mary Beth said you just couldn’t stop to say, well, let’s focus on this dead family or what have you. The tragedies that would have been, I think, very illuminating for the American people.

But ironically, you know, I ended up meeting Iraqi people that I mean literally I just fell in love with them. I really did. They were so good to me. I had a couple incidents. I got stoned in a cemetery once. I had a guy come up and say “you’re American? Well, I could kill you right now.” My translator jumped in and said no, no, no, no. She’s Philippino.
Yeah. Yeah. She’s from the Philippines. You don’t need to do that. So my ethnicity always changed. It varied while I was there. But the people were really so incredibly good to me. And as a matter of fact I worked on a story about a veterinarian woman whose house was completely totaled. And here she had nothing. Absolutely nothing. And you know when I left, she put on a feast for myself and another photographer from Germany that was worth a wedding. I mean it was like -- for me it was the equivalent of giving me the shirt off her back. It was amazing.

MICHAEL WEISSKOPF: We should write about one thing and that is that as societies go this is probably one more naturally aligned with us than others in the Middle East. It’s a very large, educated elite. It’s a pretty secular society and because of the diversity it’s used to a certain pluralism. Getting along. And it doesn’t have that ideological fervor of the Palestinians or the kind of religious elements in Egypt. And it doesn’t have that sort of national ideology of the Saudis, the Wahhabiism. And so, you know, as pragmatic folks go in the Middle East these people do stand out.
BRIAN WILLIAMS: We -- I don’t want to go tonight, though we’re in our closing minutes, without hearing burning questions that inevitably come up when you listen to an event like this. So this’ll be the two-minute warning. If you have a question be prepared. Raise your hand, stand up, and in a loud clear, full voice ask your question of our panelists. Mary Beth, one more question to you before we get there and that is, to paraphrase H.R. Haldeman, can you put the toothpaste back in the tube? If the United States launched a smaller military operation, let’s say mostly Special Forces, to put down insurgence somewhere. And they tried to say you know what folks? This time nobody comes along. Too dangerous. We’re too light on our feet. We’ve got to get in, hit them, get out. No embeds. Is that possible now?

MARY BETH SHERIDAN: You know, I guess depending on the operation I’m sure they might try. But I think there’d be quite a great deal of protest and I think it would be perceived to have a lot of validity because I think for the military the worst -- all the worst case scenarios of embedding did not happen. And I think in the end they were fairly
pleased with it. And I think I, you know, once this kind of thing happens it just seems to me like it’s difficult to then say that it’s not feasible.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Questions from the audience.

Let me see a brave volunteer. Oh, boy. Oh, come on now.

MICHAEL WEISSKOPF: No cross-examination?

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Liberal, conservative, all this talk up here tonight and no one willing to stand up and be heard. All these people who make a living --

MARY BETH SHERIDAN: Right there. Brian.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Yes. Right there.

MALE VOICE: [Off-mic] and should have been reported but hasn’t been [off-mic]?

 Stories Not Told

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Wow. Anybody want to take a swing? So the story that has been most suppressed, should have been reported, hasn’t been.

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: You know, I would say that not necessarily suppressed, but a story that probably hasn’t been told -- the impact hasn’t been told enough -- is the number of civilian casualties, number of
people that really died needlessly among the Iraqi people.

MICHAEL WEISSKOPF: Yeah.

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: It’s really a heartbreak. There were times when, you know, I think most of the time the military wanted to exercise good judgment and, these are good men, but they were scared and sometimes a little trigger happy, and there were people that it seemed there were situations that they should have known.

MICHAEL WEISSKOPF: See, the unexploded ordnances is -- litters --

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: Yeah. Oh, that’s --

MICHAEL WEISSKOPF: -- parts of Iraq --

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: -- a good one.

MICHAEL WEISSKOPF: -- and it’s extremely dangerous because kids pick up unexploded mines, for instance.

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: Cluster bombs.

MICHAEL WEISSKOPF: Cluster bombs.

MARY BETH SHERIDAN: Iraqi ordinance?

MICHAEL WEISSKOPF: No, it’s a U.S. --

MARY BETH SHERIDAN: American ones?
MICHAEL WEISSKOPF: -- ordinance. Yeah. And something that was supposedly very limited and in fact it wasn’t. I mean I wrote about this and there are many, many casualties of children innocently stumbling upon unexploded pieces of --

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: Any stories of kids picking up cluster bombs --

MICHAEL WEISSKOPF: Right.

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: -- because the way the cluster bombs --

BRIAN WILLIAMS: They’re yellow.

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: -- are painted --

MICHAEL WEISSKOPF: Yeah.

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: -- is very pretty. They’re bright blue with silver -- they look kind of like toys. And families would literally -- kids would bring them home and blow up their whole families, like, at the dinner table.

MICHAEL WEISSKOPF: Right. Yeah.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: For a time there was a yellow ordnance, which matched the color of the MREs we were giving out in other countries and children would run toward them thinking they were treats and get blown up
by them. If I’m allowed, I would concur it’s civilian deaths. It’s a messy, brutal business. I don’t think on our road to -- into downtown Baghdad, which followed the route of the Third Infantry, we saw a vehicle without a body or bodies in it. If you were on the road when they were doing their initial probing thunder runs downtown, if it moved they shot at it. And I’ll add, just as quickly, we also saw the last minute into-the-combat briefing of one of the Third ID units -- the stuff of which only Hollywood could produce if it didn’t happen in front of your very eyes -- where they are told not all of you will come back. And sadly this commander was right. And it was all about trigger discipline. That’s the expression you heard. The ROEs -- the Rules of Engagement -- you cannot fire unless you are fired upon. It was as true in the made for TV movie about Jessica Lynch, if you saw it, as it was in real life. And yet there was an almost imperceptible moment when they were being fired on and that all switched. And the mindset of the U.S. -- the young U.S. soldiers switched, and however disciplined they were it is quite another thing to be in someone’s sights. And a lot of the deaths I think we would all
concur came during that period. Mary Beth? You would agree?

MARY BETH SHERIDAN: Yeah. You know, I felt like I saw this great transformation of the pilots - both the cargo pilots and the Apache guys. Because from going in as this kind of swaggering, you know, a lot of guys who had never seen combat and who really had trained on, you know, simulators and so on. So it was really very much like -- they described it like a videogame. And they were into the technology and the game part of it. And after they were shot at the first time they became a lot more serious and they became a lot more ready to shoot back. And I think that they tried hard - they had these rules of engagement. They literally had pocket cards that were given out and a lot of people complained they were too restrictive, the rules. But the truth is simply when they started coming under fire they started firing a lot sooner, a lot more often, and it was -- their reaction was quite understandable I thought. But it meant that, you know, civilians got killed.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: I saw another question behind the first gentleman. Right back in that area. No?
Anyone up front or over to the right? Oh, come on.
There can’t be -- yes, thank you. God bless you. Bill
Wheatley, our Vice-President. Boy, it’s -- when a
family member stands up and saves your bacon.

State of Affairs in Iraq in a Year

BILL WHEATLEY: I wonder if each of the
panelists would give us their opinion of what the state
of affairs will be in Iraq, say, a year from today.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: State of affairs in Iraq a
year from today. I’d be remiss if I didn’t introduce
Bill. Bill Wheatley, the veteran Vice President of NBC
News as responsible for all the logistic and planning
and coverage as anyone in the news organization. A
year from today. Let’s see, who among our anxious
panel of journalists wants to take on predicting
what’ll happen in the future in Iraq no less.

MICHAEL WEISSKOPF: The big question is how
many Americans will be there, which will of course
impact the elections. My sense is that it could go --
it could really turn either way. It could -- the
violence could escalate and -- or these little pockets
of progress could begin connecting and more and more
the place pacifying. I haven’t been there for about
three months so I wouldn’t -- so I can’t get a sense of what’s happening on the ground there. But my best guess.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Anybody for a week or a month from today? Mary Beth?

MARY BETH SHERIDAN: I guess -- I mean I’m sort of equally guarded in the sense that I haven’t been there lately. But it strikes me that one of the great questions or unknowns is -- and I don’t -- I have not really covered the U.S. government piece of this here in Washington, but my sense was that the Bush administration expected a sort of a government or perhaps a mid-level, you know, the mid-levels of Iraqi government or whoever it is, to stay in place and to kind of rise up and fill the void left by removing the top of the government. And I think that a great surprise is that the system pretty much collapsed. I think one of the really big questions is can some sort of leadership emerge that would eventually become a new, you know, kind of semi-unified at least Iraqi leadership, or will be there a situation where if the U.S. troops leave there’s civil war and chaos.
BRIAN WILLIAMS: Cheryl, you want to take a whack at it?

CHERYL DIAZ MEYER: It’s really hard to predict where it’s going but if we don’t get it under control pretty quickly I worry that it will be something akin to Afghanistan where you just have continuing violence, continuing death. Also there’s a lot of worry among the Iraqi people that the Shiaas are really going to take control and that this will become something more like Iran where the society becomes much, much more religious, more restrictions are put on women.

Even in the time that I was there, which was the month right after the war, that one month was amazingly enlightening because every single week there would be different restrictions on me. So one day I might go to the orphanage and they’d say you’re welcome, come on in. Next day they’re, like, nope. Cleric so and so says no more media because you all are taking advantage of our women. So if we don’t do something about it, you know, quickly and really notably so that the Iraqis can really have something concrete to hang onto, it’s really increasingly worrisome.
BRIAN WILLIAMS: I want to on behalf of my panelists to thank you for the warm reception and very attentive audience tonight. This is - a lot of this is fresh and a lot of the memories actually have not yet been tapped. Not all the questions have been asked of those who have spent time over there during the war. I think I’ll say that you’ve been very lucky to hear from three extraordinary and experienced print journalists here before you this evening, and it’s been my pleasure being able to call them colleagues up here on stage. Thank you very much for having us.

SANDRA BARON: I think the quiet in this room reflects the fact that this panel really reached a lot of us very, very deeply, both intellectually and emotionally. This is a difficult subject. Thank you very, very much for coming and joining us tonight.

[END RECORDING]