



# Michael Yon : Online Magazine

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## Perspectives on the Press

The following are excerpts from Michael Yon's original dispatches "*And now, for the rest of the story,*" "*Proximity Delays,*" and "*The Embed.*"

Tuesday, May 24, 2005

### And now, for the rest of the story....



#### Mosul, Northern Iraq

There are probably many reasons why violent acts get more attention than do acts of kindness. All of these reasons fit somewhere under the heading of human nature. Any person rummaging around in his or her own head while asking the simple question, "What do I find interesting?" is bound to find a few garish relics. Sex and someone else's bad news will sell.

Finding or generating news can be costly. A good businessperson buys cheap, sells high. These points are obvious, but less conspicuous is how the media squeezes news cheaply from Iraq.

#### Now to our correspondent in the field...

The formula followed by foreign (non-Iraqi) journalists here is different than that used by the local papers back home. Western media cannot free-range Iraq, asking questions and jotting answers on notepads, particularly where insurgents cut off the heads of anyone they do not

agree with, later posting "news" videos of their own. Here in Iraq, where bullets are often the background noise, most news agencies get their daily facts spoon-fed straight from the military. The basic building block for just about any news item reported in mainstream press is something called a SIGACT.

SIGACTs are Significant Actions; anything that significantly affects friendly or enemy forces, from sandstorms to IEDs. SIGACTs originate at the smaller units and feed to higher units quickly; sometimes in seconds. If a soldier dies on a dusty street in Mosul, his HQ on FOB Marez might know within seconds, and soon his higher HQ, then various HQs in Baghdad will learn. People at Central Command in Tampa might get the news moments later, as will the Pentagon in Washington. Good or bad, information travels faster than bullets. In fact, SIGACTs travel faster than bullets every minute of the day.

Public Affairs Offices (PAO) are like news bureaus for the military, constantly taking SIGACTs and translating them into unclassified press bulletins called "media releases." Here in Mosul, I see the SIGACTs as they come in, or am with the soldiers on the ground where SIGACTs grow. But journalists settled in places like Tikrit or Baghdad rely on the PAO for printed media releases. Once in hand, the "news" can be broadcast or posted on the internet in minutes.

But news of a baby girl with a circulatory condition who needed surgery getting medical help from U.S. soldiers and a concerned nurse did not become a SIGACT, nor will it be included in a media release. So, unless a reporter was embedded with that unit at that time--and decides to tell the story--no one will ever know this one small, but powerfully important detail. There are a thousand such details falling like trees in a forest, but no one is listening for those kinds of sounds.

I write about them when I can, but there's an irony to all of this that is hard to escape. Most of the acts of kindness I witness are done from an instinctive altruism that almost always seeks anonymity. And there is that other problem with catching people doing good--the cynical media is quick to ascribe cheap motivations to soldiers who reveal their humanity through their decency. And does anyone really care about the soldiers who, after having arrested a suspected insurgent, then spent the next twenty minutes trying to find a home for the two little puppies he was keeping?



When real reporters really want to know something, they could teach the CIA a thing or two about digging up the facts. Having learned valuable lessons about being open--more or less--the military operates under the principle that by giving the press something, they have a fighting chance of getting their side of the story into the news stream. Yet, daily, when those SIGACTs are reduced into media-friendly releases, some have to wonder if they weren't very careful about what they wished for, because the easiest news to tell, in that 30-second summary, is a body count.

Cynicism aside, the media really is important to this war. Not only is this a war for public opinion, at home and abroad, but also, people's lives are won and lost every day in Iraq as a direct result of how the media uses its cameras and keyboards. Iraq is extremely dangerous. There are relatively few reporters here, and those here cannot operate as if it were "business as usual." The military makes it easy for journalists to nibble at facts and then dash back to their desks. Nobody is well-served by this arrangement; the media could still sell advertisement

without stirring and blowing new life onto dimming brimstone.

Yet, finally, the ultimate decision-maker is the person reading or watching the news. We cannot expect mainstream media to give quality reporting if we accept drive-through service every night.

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Saturday, August 20, 2005

## Proximity Delays

### Mosul, Iraq

During radio interviews, listeners sometimes call in with questions for me. People who follow the war closely and read my dispatches might ask about events covered by mainstream news but about which I've posted few details, if any. Thousands of emails pour in.

"Did you know about the letter to Zarqawi?" *(Yes, I was in the Deuce Four daily briefing when it was first displayed and read, about a week before the media learned about it. The letter was captured minutes down the road from here.)*

"Did you know about the Chemical Weapons Plant?" *(Yes, and probably more than most readers care to know. Turned out to be nothing of consequence. The "Plant" was minutes down the road from here.)*

"There was a report that three terrorists were shot down in Mosul the other day. Did you know about that?" *(Yes, I was in the TOC when the blood first started pumping through their skulls. Credit was given to the Iraqi police, but American forces actually conducted the ambush minutes down the road from here.)*

Then comes the question: "Why didn't you write about that?"

The answer is simple. Often I am asked to withhold information due to the immediate sensitivity. And so, I never release the slightest hint. But then somebody in Baghdad - three steps removed from the action here in Mosul - releases it to CNN and the rest of the world. What is seen on television and in the papers is practically always inaccurate, or is at least poorly framed. But I rarely waste a breath trying to correct the information. It's too late. Life is busy here.

The greatest paradox I have seen in this war results from "proximity delay." The proximity delay for me is caused by being embedded so closely with Deuce Four soldiers that I often see things unfolding before they happen, and then I am in the thick of events as they occur. But then I am asked not to write about events.

Much of the censorship is self-imposed because I will not write anything that jeopardizes US, Iraqi or Coalition forces or civilians. This is not a game of who gets the scoop; I am not per se a journalist. On some missions I've been the first to spot the enemy. On others, I've been so close to the action, my face gets smacked by flying shell casings. I come away with information and details no other writer could possibly have.

I've refused to write about incidents countless times, even when soldiers have asked me to publish the details. My time traveling the world, following scent trails and navigating on

snippets of information has taught me that a person with a seasoned imagination can coax a great deal of information from seemingly innocuous tidbits. This enemy is smart and also reads the news.

Just why the military considers some information "classified" while other information gets the "go ahead, write it" shrug, is not based on logic, science, or even one of those absurd but ironclad rules that codify so much of the military. Many explanations for the military's requests not to publish certain information, do not hold up well to scrutiny.

For example, our soldiers capture or kill top terror figures in Mosul routinely. Sometimes in stunning operations that display split-second timing. The "higher ups" often say, almost reflexively, that they don't want the enemy to know about these kills or captures.

Sounds reasonable. But whether soldiers sneak through dark allies with silenced weapons, slipping over walls with padded ladders, snatching sleeping terrorists from their beds before they can fully waken; or, whether they engage in a gunfight at a busy intersection and drag terrorists from behind the wheels of their cars - these are not anonymous men. Families notice when daddy's gone missing.

If we aren't keeping it secret from the enemy - and we can't keep it secret from them - who do we protect by keeping quiet? These are not illegal operations. These are examples of the effectiveness of our forces. In Mosul alone there are daily events where the Coalition gets things right, that I never write about.

The "proximity delay" seems to be bi-directional. The higher-ups also seem to have a disconnect with what the media eventually does with Coalition successes. I kept silent for days on the Zarqawi-letter dispatch, ready to post what was probably the single most important piece of insider information to drop into our hands in quite some time. I requested clearance several times per day, each time being asked to hold back. I complied.

But then, without even giving the leaders at Deuce Four a heads-up, a typically enthralling military press release went out to major, mainstream, media outlets. We all learned of it on CNN. The Zarqawi-letter story was almost unrecognizable. Because, in the hands of a network that hasn't had a body in the field in Mosul long enough to get their bearings, the best the media could do is paraphrase the military press release. So what should have been a front page banner headline story ended up buried on page 6.

Even CNN couldn't grasp the importance of the letter. They ended up giving more coverage to the impending E-Bay auction of Jennifer Aniston's old love letters than to the missive in which the top Al-Qaeda leader in Mosul writes to the second most wanted man in the world, and describes in amazing detail the weaknesses and impending collapse of the terrorist network in Mosul and surrounds. Only then did the military ask if I wanted to write about the letter.

Everyone, even a "higher up" deserves the benefit of the doubt, and should be entitled to one mistake. But how many times, and how many major stories have to be mangled into meaninglessness before someone connects the cables and lets the information flow in a direction other than down the mainstream media drain?

Meanwhile, by the time you read this, the US Army and the ISF will have launched offensive operations in Mosul and I will be in the middle of it. Maybe this time I will be able to write about matters while they still matter.

# The Embed

Thursday, October 13th, 2005

## Baghdad

I've returned to Iraq.

People ask how journalists get embedded. This seems a fair moment for synopsis of some firsthand experience.

In World War II, writers like Hemingway and Ernie Pyle loaded up and packed off, sweeping across places like northern Africa, Italy, France, Germany, and the Pacific islands. They wrote about war, but also about fascinating cultures scattered across new landscapes. And the war itself seemed to obey simpler rules: there were tremendous human losses, but when Europe's cities were liberated one after another, they stayed liberated. Victory was cumulative and satisfying, not slapped together with slogans covering festering resistance. But since WWII there have been few "great adventures" in war, and even less glory in reporting war, and most people tasked today with naming a "living war correspondent" would come up blank.

For most journalists considering Iraq, where the frustrations and dangers are high, where there is little glory and less money, and where the expenses vomit—I've now got probably \$35,000 worth of gear that might burn up in the next IED explosion—nobody needs a calculator to figure out this one. Food and lodging are free after the embed process—which greatly helps—but that does not settle the account.

There was a different calculus for me. I started with the premise that this war was extremely important, whether or not many people agreed. While I hear radio and television crews often lamenting about how it takes a whole day just to file one story, it can take me two weeks of dangerous research, photography and writing to get a single major dispatch out. I am not a war correspondent or journalist. I am only a writer who came to Iraq after it became apparent that we might be in trouble, and I did not trust the news. I had never covered a war before and, with any luck, never will again.

But there I was, sitting at the Kuwait Hilton with Hans the Dutch radio journalist, comparing notes about gear, costs and value. We dined under a tent billowed by warm breezes sweeping in from the Arabian Gulf, while Arab men sat nearby, laughing as they smoked their shisha pipes.

## Hotel Al Rasheed

Before Hans could check in, an American Army officer at the Iraqi-run hotel gave an in-briefing. Among other precautions, Hans was told to keep his dark curtains closed at all times to foil snipers. The Al Rasheed serves beer, and the officer told Hans that if he drank, he was expected to keep himself in order. So Hans checked in, paying \$170 in cash, but I wanted to see his room before deciding on whether to rent one. During all my time in Iraq, I had never seen a Baghdad hotel room.

We rode the creaky elevator up to the eleventh floor. Hans' room was dreary and dirty, the carpet tattered and stained. He immediately opened the curtain to look out his window. I dashed into the bathroom and told him to close the curtain. He chuckled. Then he noticed the bullet hole in his window and closed the curtain, still chuckling. A good sniper could have killed him in the interval of open curtains.