

**From:** Witt, Howard <(b)(6)>  
**Sent:** Wednesday, September 02, 2009 5:42 PM  
**To:** undisclosed-recipients  
**Subject:** Stars and Stripes: Our analysis of the Rendon scandal

For your consideration, our analysis of the Rendon scandal...

<http://www.stripes.com/article.asp?section=104&article=64540>

[http://www.stripes.com/article\\_files/logo\\_sub.gif](http://www.stripes.com/article_files/logo_sub.gif)

Wednesday, September 2, 2009

---

Analysis: Pentagon talks openness, but shows little action

By Leo Shane III <mailto:shanel@stripes.osd.mil>, Stars and Stripes Mideast edition, Thursday, September 3, 2009

RELATED STORIES:

Military terminates Rendon contract <<http://www.stripes.com/article.asp?section=104&article=64481>>

Army used profiles to reject reporters <<http://www.stripes.com/article.asp?section=104&article=64449>>

Pentagon: Reporter profiling under review <<http://www.stripes.com/article.asp?section=104&article=64421>>

Files prove Pentagon is profiling reporters <<http://www.stripes.com/article.asp?section=104&article=64401>>

Journalists' recent work examined before embeds <<http://www.stripes.com/article.asp?section=104&article=64348>>

In the newsroom: Military puts its spin on PR story <<http://blogs.stripes.com/blogs/stripes-central/in-newsroom-military-puts-its-spin-pr-story>>

WASHINGTON — Media critics for years have blasted the military for its heavy-handed efforts to control the flow of information coming out of the Pentagon. And now the Joint Chiefs Chairman has agreed with them.

"There has been a certain arrogance in our 'strat comm' efforts," Adm. Mike Mullen wrote in a recent essay in the Pentagon's Joint Force Quarterly magazine. "We need to worry a lot less about how to communicate our actions and much more about what our actions communicate.

"What we need more than anything is credibility," Mullen added. "And we can't get that in a talking point."

But the Pentagon has yet to embrace Mullen's beliefs, military watchdogs assert, noting that few meaningful changes have been made since President Barack Obama promised an "unprecedented level of openness in government" earlier this year.

"Those remarks by Adm. Mullen were refreshingly frank, but I can't point to anything that shows there's been a real change," said Diane Farsetta, senior researcher at the Center for Media and Democracy. "Iraq and Afghanistan are handled exactly the same as they were a year ago."

This week, the Pentagon abruptly canceled its \$1.5 million media-management contract with The Rendon Group, a controversial public relations firm, after Stars and Stripes revealed how the company was profiling and rating journalists seeking to accompany military units in Afghanistan — and advising the military how best to steer reporters toward "positive" coverage and "neutralize" any negative stories.

Since then, reporters from numerous media outlets have obtained copies of their own Rendon profiles and learned details of how they were blacklisted or secretly managed by public affairs officers.

Freelancer Nir Rosen, who has reported downrange for Time and Rolling Stone, said military officials overseas nearly blocked his embed requests because profiles labeled him as an opponent of the Iraq war and warned that he might "circumvent security and administrative restrictions in order to pursue other story angles" — charges he vehemently denied.

Last week Ron Martz, president of the Military Reporters and Editors Association, called the entire episode "alarming."

"It speaks to this whole issue of trying to shape the message and that's not something the military should be involved with," he said.

Farsetta said she won't believe the Pentagon has undergone a real culture change until she hears an acknowledgement from defense officials that sometimes "bad news" happens.

"War inherently isn't popular, for obvious reasons," she said. "There are parts of it that you can't spin away, no matter how hard you try.

#### Promise of openness

Shortly after his inauguration in January, Obama issued a government-wide memo on open government policies, noting that "transparency promotes accountability" and reminding agencies that citizens have a right to know "what their government is doing."

But beyond changes to the release of some public records and the granting of permission to use social media services such as Twitter and Facebook to interact with citizens, the White House has not offered any specific directives to the Pentagon regarding how it handles its interactions with the media or the public.

And despite the publication of his critical essay, Mullen himself is not recommending any changes to the public affairs or strategic communications efforts—and defense officials said they have not planned any immediate modifications in reaction to the chairman's remarks.

Capt John Kirby, spokesman for Mullen, said the article was designed to spur conversation among defense officials in advance of the Quadrennial Defense Review. He added that the issue of message management within the ranks "has bothered the chairman for some time."

Pentagon officials believe they have followed the White House's call for openness, making more files available through Freedom of Information Act requests and using new media to disseminate military news.

But earlier this summer, both the House and Senate Armed Services Committees raised concerns over the amount of money being spent on military strategic communications. The Department of Defense budgeted nearly \$5 billion for recruiting, advertising and public relations this year, according to the Associated Press, and that doesn't include some media contracts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Meredith Fuchs, general counsel for the National Security Archive, a non-governmental research institute at George Washington University, said so far her impression of the new, more open Pentagon is "a mixed bag."

The decision earlier this year to reverse the ban on photographers observing the return of troops killed in combat overseas was a positive step, but little else has followed, she said.

"Overall, the administration seems more open, but it will probably take a while," she said.

### Losing the message

Geoff Livingstone, a fellow at the Society for New Communications Research, a media and public relations think tank, said the nature of military missions doesn't lend itself to the same openness as a Fortune 500 company or even other government agencies.

"You can't have the wife of a soldier finding out he was killed from a Twitter post," he said. "You can't have openness compromise a mission. So in a lot of ways they're going through information issues that the business world is also going through, but with a more delicate balance."

But Livingstone said the overmanagement of information by any group — in the Pentagon's case, carefully scrubbing press releases, discouraging troops from speaking to reporters without supervision, selecting and rejecting journalists based on their past coverage — damages the overall message.

"Everything gets so buttoned up, you get a vanilla press release that says nothing," he said. "If you have an overemphasis on controlling the message, you can lose its impact."

Mullen acknowledged as much in his essay.

"We shouldn't care if people like us," Mullen wrote. "That isn't the goal. The goal is credibility. And we earn that over time."

Livingstone echoed other media experts' assessments that the tough talk is a positive first step for the department, but it only hints at the possibility of a more open Pentagon. Patrice McDermott, director of [OpenTheGovernment.org](http://OpenTheGovernment.org), said she'd welcome any such change in attitude.

"I think it is a positive step if the Defense Department spends less time involved in the sorts of things that were done by the Bush Administration: planting stories, engaging in psy-ops via the media," she said. "We need to trust that our government is telling the truth, to us and to others."

Howard Witt

Senior Managing Editor

Stars and Stripes

529 14th St. NW

Suite 350

Washington, DC 20045

(b)(6)

(b)(6)

(b)(6)

(b)(6)