

MISINFORMATION INTERN

My summer as a U.S. military propagandist in Iraq

By Willem Marx

Last spring, during my final semester at Oxford, a cousin wrote to tell me that she was planning to work for an American company in Iraq over the summer. She suggested I join her. The company, Iraqex, claimed on its website to have “expertise in collecting and exploiting information; structuring transactions; and mitigating risks through due diligence, legal strategies and security.” Iraqex was also looking for summer media interns, my cousin pointed out, who would “interact with the local media” in Baghdad and “pitch story ideas.” This was almost too good to be true.

I have wanted to be a reporter, and particularly a foreign correspondent ever since I was given a copy of John Simpson’s *Strange Places, Questionable People* as a teenager. In this memoir, Simpson recounts his many adventures as a BBC reporter lying in a gutter at Tiananmen Square in 1989, his camera rolling as bullets zipped by; being arrested during the revolution in Romania; and broadcasting from Baghdad in 1991, with U.S. bombs exploding around him. Inspired, I began writing for my high

school paper, eventually becoming its editor, and at Oxford, where I majored in Classics, I joined the staff of a campus weekly (Simpson had edited a quar-

changed its name to Lincoln Group.) After an anxious wait, I was called by one of the company’s employees. He was young, himself just out of school, and he ended our short interview by asking whether I would be able to stay focused on work “with mortar fire at the end of the street.” I was honest about my credentials. I had been to the Middle East, having vacationed in Egypt and Syria a couple of years before. During a spring break, friends and I had cycled some two thousand miles from Geneva to Damascus. And at university I had handled the pressures of translating Cicero and Polybius. But, I admitted, I couldn’t say for sure about the mortar fire. He seemed to think this would be fine.

terly at Cambridge.) By the time I heard from my cousin, I was already slated to begin journalism school in the fall, but I was yearning for some of John Simpson’s manner of real-world experience. In fact, Simpson had actually spent years toiling in the BBC’s London office before being sent overseas, and here I might be able to get a break right out of college.

I submitted my internship application within days. (Yet by then my cousin’s parents had decided she couldn’t go to Baghdad and Iraqex had

I soon received phone calls from both of Lincoln Group’s founders, Paige Craig and Christian Bailey. Craig, a former Marine, told me that he had spent a great deal of time in Iraq and spoke very generally about the company’s important work there. When I asked about security, he assured me that this was not a problem for them. Other foreign companies drove around the country in massive four-by-four armored vehicles, basically advertising themselves as targets. But Lincoln Group, he said, operated

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“under the radar,” with employees dressed as locals and Iraqis manning the front offices.

Christian Bailey, like me, was an Oxford man. Yet whereas I had whiled away my time in pubs, he had set up an expensive Bloomberg computer terminal in his dorm room and successfully played the stock market. Although Bailey initially described the media internship as the perfect launch pad for my journalism career, he later offered me a position working on private equity projects in Washington. It was not my dream to become a financial analyst, I had to tell him. I wanted to spend the summer in Baghdad working with real Iraqi reporters. Bailey said he understood but would have to get back to me. A month later, in June, I was told the media internship was mine.

Only one formality remained before I could fly to Baghdad. I needed to travel to the U.S. capital to pick up a Common Access Card, a kind of *passpartout* for military facilities all over the world. In downtown Washington, I was surprised by the ubiquity of fresh-faced young men, their blue short-sleeved button-downs tucked neatly into khakis; Starbucks, too, were everywhere. Lincoln Group had its headquarters above an Indian grocery on K Street; a small placard in the building's foyer read: VISITORS TO LINCOLN GROUP/IRAQEX, 10TH FLOOR, SHOULD BE ANNOUNCED IN ADVANCE. On the tenth floor, electricians wired lights in some rooms while in others suited men conferenced behind glass walls. The company's head of human resources, who was only just hired herself, told me with a weary smile that things had been crazy lately.

Paige Craig popped in to see me as I filled out work papers in a tiny waiting room. Shaking my hand with a mighty grip, he uttered something to the effect of “welcome aboard.” He was very well built, with short, tidy hair and the tight khaki trousers and shirt of a military man. As he strode away, he seemed purposeful. Bailey, by contrast, was baby-faced and slight, his sandy-brown hair cut in a Bill Gates bob. In his corner office, we chatted about Oxford. He had studied economics and management at Lincoln

College. When I asked if his college had inspired the company's new name, he shrugged. “Partly,” he said cryptically. He did say that Lincoln Group was rapidly expanding and that it offered incredible opportunities for bright young people like me. Stock options were available to employees after just three months, and I might consider staying on after the summer. Christian Bailey hadn't yet been to Iraq himself. Although he had planned numerous trips, he said, something always came up that kept him in D.C.

I had to go to Fort Belvoir, Virginia, to get my Common Access Card. The women running the office where I was given immunizations and completed more paperwork said they had a young friend back in the District who would love my British accent. They were going to call her this very instant, they teased, and then I'd have a companion for the evening. With solemnity, they also talked about all the brave men and women who came through the base and then shipped off to Iraq. In another room a chatty African-American nurse, contracted by the Halliburton subsidiary Kellogg, Brown & Root (KBR), took my vitals and drew blood. She joked as well about the way I spoke and wanted to know about England. Yet when I asked why she needed to make copies of my dental X rays, she suddenly became speechless. “It's for our files,” she finally said, shooting me a quick glance and then turning away. In the long silence that followed, I understood. With a body charred beyond recognition or exploded into irretrievable parts, a dental match might be all that remained to identify me.

Only then did I really consider that I would be risking my life for men I had just met and for a company I knew very little about. My pay, I had recently learned, would be a measly \$1,000 a month, meaning I would likely lose money over the summer. When I had begged out of eight days of Stateside military training so I could get to Baghdad sooner, the company was only too willing to oblige. “It makes more financial sense for us,” I was told. “We'll get more work out of you.”

I might have aborted the venture then had I not been envisioning my

burgeoning career. I had come to see myself braving the dangers of Iraq for the sake of the good news story, and I liked it when others saw me this way as well. Shortly before flying to America, I had visited my younger brother in Scotland, and he had said he was proud that I was willing to take real risks to pursue this profession. (He also was relieved that I was not becoming another investment banker, like so many other Oxford grads.) When a group of us went to an Edinburgh restaurant one evening, I was seated next to a raven-haired beauty, a half-Italian who had just graduated from university as well. After one of the courses, she asked perfunctorily about my plans for the summer holiday, and I began to talk excitedly about my impending trip to Baghdad. I needed to know whether I could survive in an environment like Iraq, which was now the center of the universe for the kind of reporting I wanted to do. Although dangerous, such work was essential, I said, since people back home needed to understand the painful realities at the other ends of the earth. She now leaned toward me, her dark eyes wide with interest. When I finally finished, she whispered, “That's very sexy.”

I arrived at the Baghdad airport on July 7, after waiting for my luggage in Amman for nearly a week. People at the baggage claim shouted like tour guides for KBR employees to gather in one spot while others, holding aloft signs with the names of various security firms, urged bulky, tattooed men to congregate in groups. But I saw no one there to greet me. As the hall emptied, I noticed a man and woman loitering indifferently near the exit. I eventually made my way over and asked if they were here to meet Willem Marx. They were. Each shook my hand, and then they led me in silence out of the airport and to the back seat of a battered sedan.

On the short drive to the U.S. Army's Camp Victory, a sprawling complex of prefabricated buildings in what was one of Saddam Hussein's many estates, I caught sight of my first bomb-wrecked palace. Its dome

had collapsed, and exposed girders poked violently skyward. I asked my new colleagues about their work and what they had done before joining the company. Gina, a fair-skinned woman in her twenties, said she had a military background in Iraq, and Ryan, who seemed not much older than me, had been a soldier as well. Their answers were so curt that I decided not to delve further.

Once inside Camp Victory, Ryan sent me to buy a transparent neck pouch for my military-contractor identification, so I queued behind a group of soldiers, all of whom carried their rifles with them inside the base's PX. Then I was deposited in a dusty trailer, where I sat alone for the rest of the day watching *Lara Croft* and other action films on a giant flat-screen TV.

To get to the villa where I would be living for the summer, I was awakened before dawn and loaded onto what was essentially a Greyhound bus with armored plating and shatterproof windows. The road to Baghdad's Green Zone, where the Lincoln Group villa was located, is known as the Highway of Death, for the number of convoys that have been attacked along its route. And so we trundled along the dangerous road in complete darkness, flanked by a quartet of Humvees and watched over by helicopters with nightscopes.

There were four bedrooms on the villa's ground floor, and I was to share one of these with an Iraqi named Ahmed.¹ Ahmed, who had attended American University in Washington, always wore immaculately pressed shirts and remained clean-shaven. Because he often shared his bed with one of several Baghdadi girlfriends, I moved down the hall after only a few nights. My new roommate, Steve, a recent Brown graduate, had signed on with Lincoln Group for a full year and seemed to be pacing himself accordingly. Most nights he would drink beers bought from a nearby market, and the next day he would sleep well into the afternoon.

The villa's other inhabitants had been sent to Iraq as part of a contract

¹ To protect the Iraqis I worked with during my internship, I have changed their names for this article.

Lincoln Group had with USAID to build training centers for Iraqi businesses.² None of them had much experience in the region nor had worked very long for the company. A tall San Franciscan, who passed whole days in the tarpaulin-covered courtyard smoking cigarettes with a former air-conditioning-systems executive from Arizona, had spent a year or so working on an archaeological mission in Egypt. When they weren't in the courtyard, these two trawled the Internet, pretending to work. They often speculated about the company, suspecting that it might secretly be owned by the Carlyle Group or that some of its employees were really CIA. I asked them whom I should speak to about getting going on my media internship, but they only shrugged. They had no idea. The Arizonan declared the whole organization a mess but couldn't say specifically what he meant by this.

Because I had just two short months in Iraq, I emailed Bailey and Craig back in Washington after several days of inaction. What projects could I begin working on? I wanted to know. Who was in charge here? What could I do to contribute? A day later I received a rather brusque response from Paige Craig. They didn't have time to deal with my little problems. I needed only to take my lead from Jim Sutton, the country manager, whom I had seen just once during my first week.

But my badgering did seem to pay off. I was soon contacted by a Lincoln Group employee named Jon, who formerly had run political campaigns in Chicago and now worked on the company's I.O., or Information Operations. Over lunch at the recently bombed and rebuilt Green Zone Café—an air-conditioned tent with plastic chairs and a TV airing Lebanese music videos—Jon explained that he was returning home for several weeks of R & R and that Jim Sutton had chosen me to be his replacement. Jon quickly sketched out my new I.O. responsibilities.

² This contract was first delayed and then finally canceled, and by mid-August many of these Lincoln Group employees had returned home. Most were outraged by the vast disparity between the vital work that had been promised them by the company back in Washington and the pointlessness of their actual time in Iraq.

An Army team inside the Al Faw palace, another of Saddam's former residences, would send me news articles they had cobbled together from wire stories and their own reports from the field. It was my job to select the ones that seemed most like Iraqis had written them. I was then to pass these articles along to our Iraqi employees, who would translate the pieces into Arabic and place them in local newspapers. Jon told me that the U.S. Army could hardly carry out this work in their military uniforms, so they hired Lincoln Group, which could operate with far fewer restrictions. It was a bread-and-butter contract, he said, that paid the company about \$5 million annually. I asked if the newspapers knew that Lincoln Group or the U.S. military were behind these articles. They did and they didn't, Jon said. The Iraqis working for us posed as freelance journalists, but they also paid editors at the papers to publish the stories—part of the cost Lincoln Group billed back to the military. "Look," Jon assured me, "it's very straightforward. You just have to keep the military happy."

Despite some misgivings, I returned to the villa feeling like I was finally part of the team. I would contribute to the news-making process during war and be embroiled in the politics that this entailed. The experience of doing any work in Baghdad, in and of itself, would help instill in me the skills necessary for survival in other perilous environments. Perhaps I could even change how the company operated, and, if at all possible, maybe improve

the situation in Iraq through my efforts.

I began my media work on July 14, waking up early to shave in the bathroom's cracked sink and brew some coffee in the sandy kitchen. I chose a spot on the large red sofa in the villa's living room, which also doubled as its office space, and waited for an email to arrive from the military. For several hours I checked the BBC website for news on Iraq, brewed more coffee, and sent emails home, telling friends and family that I was beginning to do real work here. In the afternoon I finally received an email from a First Lieutenant Christopher Denatale that was also

copied to a long list of American military personnel with @iraq.centcom.mil address suffixes. The communiqué was labeled “Unclassified/ For Official Use Only” and stated simply, “Here are the Corps IO storyboards for 14 JUL 05.”

I carefully read the five articles that were attached as PowerPoint slides. The first reported on a speech by then prime minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari, in which he announced that Iraqi troops would soon be able to replace foreign forces. It was accompanied by a photo of Jaafari at a lectern and ended with this bit of uplift: “Combined with the recurring successes of the ISF, Prime Minister Jaafari’s remarks inspire a greater degree of hope for the peaceful and progressive future of Iraq.”³ In the second article, also on the progress of the Iraqi Security Forces, the U.S. Army writers at the Al Faw palace put an even more positive spin on the country’s prospects. “Unlike the terrorists, who offer nothing but pain and fear, the ISF bring the promise of a better Iraq. No foreign al-Qa’ida mercenary would ever consider bringing gifts to Iraqi children. The Iraqi Army, however, fights for a noble cause. . . . Together with the Iraqi people, they will bring peace and prosperity to the nation.”

The remaining stories continued in this vein. The American soldier writing one of them took on the persona of an Iraqi to denounce the terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, another argued that insurgents were attacking Iraqis solely to instigate a civil war, and the final one concluded with an apparent public service announcement: “Continue to report suspicious activities and make Iraq safe again.” These were far from exemplars of objective journalism, but Jon had said that I should think of the storyboards not so much as news but as

³ Because I knew so little about Iraq at this point in my internship, I had to spend a good part of that first day looking up acronyms on Google—somewhat more obscure ones such as ISF (Iraqi Security Forces), MNCI (Multi-National Corps Iraq), and PAO (Public Affairs Office) but even, embarrassingly, such things as Centcom and PSYOP. I also realized very quickly that I needed to learn much more about this country, so I ordered a small library of books on Iraqi history and politics from Amazon.

messages Iraqis needed to hear. I supposed they were that.

I was to publish at least five stories each week, so I now had to decide which of these, if any, made the cut. After some deliberation, I chose the piece on the insurgency inciting Iraqi-on-Iraqi violence. Its rhetoric was powerful, even Ciceronian, I thought, with the grand sweep of its opening line: “Great triumphs and great tragedies can redirect the course of a people’s destiny.” And I agreed with its overall message that one destructive act should not beget others. I was to pass along the article to a man named Muhammad, who would see that it was translated from the English. It also fell to me to tell Muhammad where to place the translated piece; I was to choose from a spreadsheet listing Iraqi newspapers and the amounts they charged to run our stories. I knew nothing at all about the media in Iraq, and certainly didn’t know the difference between the newspaper *Al Sabah* and the similar sounding *Al Sabah Al Jadeed*. Jon didn’t believe this would be a problem, however, having himself started with no regional expertise, and he made it very clear that I should under no circumstances ask the military team for guidance. Jon warned me that the two majors in charge, Scott Rosen and John Muirhead, would hound me for information on exactly how Lincoln Group placed the stories, and that I should remain cagey about the process, allowing secrecy to swell the perceived value of the company’s work. I was to send them only the results of what had been published, detailed in a spreadsheet. The military, Jon said, loves statistics.

From the dozen publications on the list, I picked out *Al Mutamar*, meaning Congress, because it was one of the least expensive (around \$50 per story) and I could see we hadn’t used it in a while. (I thought it would be good to mix things up a bit.) Later that day, Steve came into the living room with a story Jon had asked him to put together. Written from the perspective of a frustrated Iraqi citizen, it condemned a recent insurgent attack that had left twenty-three children dead. Steve’s information came directly from news sources on the Internet, with no actual reporting of his own, but he had authored what I considered to be a very

decent opinion piece. I emailed this to Muhammad as well, asking that it be published in another of the newspapers, *Al Sabaah*, or *The Morning*, which I selected because it was the most expensive on the spreadsheet, charging over \$1,500 to run one of our pieces. Steve’s writing, I felt, deserved the best.

I received an email back from Muhammad the following day, acknowledging my instructions and including two Word files. They separately contained the two stories in English and in what I assumed were their Arabic versions, and I saved the files onto my laptop, as Jon had instructed me to do. Two days later I felt a little thrill when Muhammad sent me scanned versions of the “articles” as they appeared in the Iraqi newspapers. Despite the subject matter of Steve’s piece, he and I both laughed at the thought that he was now published in a major Iraqi newspaper.

I forwarded the scanned version of the articles on to Rosen and Muirhead and received emails thanking me for my work. Then I sat back on the red sofa, proud that I had successfully completed my initial run through this process. I had even made what I believed were sound journalistic decisions.

Over the next weeks, my U.S. military liaisons at the Al Faw palace continued to send me around five storyboards each day. I soon had a better sense of how Lincoln Group was positioned between the Army team and our Iraqi staff, who were themselves the company’s sole link to the local press. Lincoln Group had originally signed its media contract with the military’s Public Affairs Office, which supplies “real” information to reporters wishing to know about troop casualties or reconstruction projects. But Paige Craig had later convinced the military that his company was better suited to the more covert Information Operations sphere. I was still struggling to get a grip on all this information myself but recognized that there was some power in selecting which storyboards to publish. Although not exactly intoxicating, this power was certainly more significant in the grander scheme of things than anything I had experienced at university.

I also learned that whatever power I possessed was not absolute. When senior commanders labeled storyboards a priority, this trumped my particular journalistic proclivities. One storyboard, with the alliterative headline “Badr Corps not Baited into Fight,” was given a special “emphasis” by General George Casey, the most senior U.S. officer in Iraq at the time, and as such was made a top priority by Majors Rosen and Muirhead. The story took a new tact, it seemed, praising Shiite militias for refraining from retaliatory attacks against Al Qaeda. “The restraint of the Badr Corps and their faith in all Iraqis to stand up to terrorist violence bring great credit to themselves and great honor to all of Iraq,” the article opined. “History does not fondly remember murderers and destroyers. History reveres the people who stand up against pain and risk of death to say ‘No’ to the murderers and destroyers. This is why it is such treacherous blasphemy when the al-Qa’ida gang claims the honored title of ‘martyr’ for their murderers.”

I had by then developed what I considered a rapport with Muhammad and his staff, who had been remarkably forgiving of my naiveté. Whereas I had assumed that all of the newspapers on the list Jon had left me were daily publications, Muhammad told me that, in fact, many were weekly, triweekly, or just unreliably issued. When I requested that an article appear in a specific paper, he would sometimes go against my request if he knew that the paper wouldn’t publish for several days, and would place it instead in a daily. As he explained to me in an email, if he didn’t do this, “Some of those articles will delay in time for couple or three days, and in this case their importance will reduce and attenuate and other newspapers will deal with them before us. This is one of the most important points which leads the newspapers’ editors to know about the connection of those articles with the American, because who would pay money to publish an article which got old news!!!”

I passed Muhammad the Badr Corps story, explaining that it was of the utmost importance and feeling a bit excited to be carrying out the orders of such a senior officer. Days later, however, the story still had not been pub-

lished. Muhammad told me that an editor at the newspaper I had chosen, *Addustour*, had rung the evening before it should have ran, claiming that his managers had objected to its politics. By Muhammad’s account, the same editor had then relented after some discussion, agreeing to publish the piece. (I assumed this meant that Muhammad had swayed him with an offer of more Lincoln Group money.) But when the newspaper came out the following morning, there was still no “Badr Corps not Baited into Fight.” I sent an apologetic email to the two majors, explaining why such a high-priority story had not been published. I hadn’t taken up this issue with the newspaper’s management, I wrote, because I didn’t want to sour my relationship with the paper’s editors. Rosen accepted this reasoning and was even somewhat pleased by the insight he thought it provided. “It is good feedback actually that the piece rubbed up against political/philosophical boundaries,” he wrote back. “Is this something we should use to shape future pieces for that paper, for all papers, etc? It is good to keep us on our toes and it shows that they are not our lapdogs.”

Indeed, because Rosen and his team assumed I interacted regularly with the Iraqi press, they believed I was someone to take seriously. And Rosen’s encouraging words actually emboldened me to offer additional suggestions on ways to improve our “pro-democracy” pieces. I told him that an article on the military’s discovery of a cache of bulletproof vests was too outdated to run in a daily newspaper and read like a catalogue of munitions, with none of the “human appeal” that grabs readers. “This is not criticism,” I wrote Rosen, “merely my honest opinion as a media analyst.” (Jim Sutton had bestowed this title upon me, and it was by then printed on my Lincoln Group business cards.) For other articles, I pointed out that the military had failed to properly mask its own voice and Intel, such as one piece in which the Army writers directly responded to an Abu Musab al-Zarqawi claim: “It is true that during one security operation a woman was detained by Coalition Forces.” I told them that their entire approach to Zarqawi was wrong, as they were giving him far too much exposure—bad

press being better than none at all. Rosen thanked me for all my “efforts to steer us toward better products.” Although they too were reconsidering how to write about Zarqawi, the team had been “given some fairly rigid guidelines from our boss.” Rosen added that they also were “synchronizing messages with PSYOP and PAO,” and were thus limited in what they could do. But attached below Rosen’s comments was a forwarded email to him from a confused subordinate: “Should we continue to write the same way?”

In one correspondence with me, Rosen confided that his biggest frustration was when his colleagues—“a bunch of white guys”—nitpicked over this or that word for a piece that would eventually be translated into Arabic. “Not ONCE have they consulted one Arab on the best way to write the THOUGHT in Arabic. They forget that it is the message that we are trying to get across not the word.”

One morning toward the end of July, Jim Sutton decided that I needed to check up on Muhammad and his team in their downtown offices. He picked me up outside the villa in a black BMW and drove us to the concrete blast barriers and razor wire at the outer limits of the Green Zone. A sign instructed drivers and passengers to “Lock and Load,” and Jim gave me a Glock 9 mm pistol to hold out of sight in my lap.⁴ Then we drove on, into the vast portion of Baghdad every American I had met called the “Red Zone.” At six two, with a shock of blond hair, I had little chance of blending in there, and my striped Polo shirt and Raybans hardly put me “under the radar.”

Along a narrow street of ramshackle

⁴ Jon, who was known to spend hours in the villa’s courtyard drinking beer and repeatedly attempting to land bullets ejected from a pistol into a paper cup, taught me how to handle the company’s various firearms before he left for Chicago. With practice, I was able to put together and load the Glock but had much more trouble with the larger Mp5 submachine gun. Its dirty-bronze-colored bullets would lodge in the chamber whenever I tried cocking the gun, and it repeatedly jammed as I tried to fire rounds into the ground. Jon told me not to take it personally, as this Mp5 was a cheap Iranian knockoff.

stores beside the Tigris River, Jim slowed the car to a crawl, waving to some kids on a nearby doorstep who returned the gesture. Then, without warning, another vehicle speeding toward us from behind slammed on its breaks and came to a halt directly in front of our BMW. Jim jumped out, and I frantically looked from him to the strange car, out of which large swarthy men were now emerging. One of these men ran past Jim toward our car. Before I could react, he was in the driver's seat beside me. He quickly introduced himself in rudimentary English as part of Lincoln Group's security detail. Able to breathe again, I saw Jim get into the second car, a silver-gray BMW, along with a couple of armed guards, and we were joined by a man wielding an AK-47 who sidled in behind me. My driver was Kurdish, from the area around Fallujah, and as he steered us into the downtown center he barked orders to the car in front through a two-way radio.

I was twenty-two years old, and here I was holding a loaded gun while being ushered through Baghdad's dangerous, detritus-laden streets by two total strangers. Maybe this was the real Iraq. Maybe this was what it was like to be
John Simpson.

By this time, I was winning plaudits for my work. Jim Sutton liked my easy manner with the Iraqis and attempts at basic Arabic. He praised me, too, for my cool-headedness in unfamiliar situations—such as the automobile switch beside the Tigris, which seemed to have been at least in part a test. Even Gina, who had been so cold when I had first arrived in Iraq, became far less frosty toward me. Because of the Oxford background I shared with Christian Bailey, she initially thought I might be his spy, here to report back to him on company problems and employee activities. But when Gina learned I was risking my life in Baghdad for just \$1,000 a month, as opposed to her \$70,000 annual salary, she mostly felt sorry for me.

Jim Sutton sat me down one afternoon at the villa to talk about what he said was “the next step” in the company's operations. In line with Lincoln Group's longer-term aims, he and

the established team (the half-dozen or so who had been in Iraq longer than two months) were intent on carrying out a much larger military contract. “Western Mission” would be a hugely expanded version of the current media efforts. It would be an all-out “media blitz,” Jim said, and the largest contract ever of its kind. During the months of August and September alone, we were proposing to place sixteen different pro-government/anti-insurgent spots on Iraqi television stations for a fee of \$16.5 million. There would be twenty constructive radio broadcasts as well, with the military paying us around \$20,000 for each. We would publish eighty half-page color advertisements and thirty-two op-ed articles, for which we would charge nearly \$400,000. Blanketing Baghdad with 140,000 posters would earn us another \$400,000, and we would design nine Internet news sites, at a cost of \$2,500 each, and produce five DVDs, for just over \$580,000. Lincoln Group's overall haul for the two months: \$19 million.

We were also to create something called a Rapid Response Cell. Lincoln Group would hire Iraqi journalists and send them to the Al Anbar province west of Baghdad, which Jim called the “insurgency's center of gravity.” Working in the dangerous cities of Ramadi and Fallujah, the journalists would be paid by Lincoln Group to report news as dictated by the U.S. military. They would be on hand as well to capture breaking stories, about which they alone would be conveniently forewarned by Coalition forces, and would thus be able to effectively portray events before the insurgency made them into “anti-freedom” messages. Ahmed and I were told to recruit cameramen, reporters, and television stations to do this work. We were also to line up op-ed writers, so that once Western Mission was formally approved our team would be ready on August 1 to “execute.” Finally, in order to show the military officers at Camp Victory that we were giving them more bang for their buck, I was now to pass ten stories along to Muhammad each week.

Ahmed had worked in the press office of the Coalition Provisional Authority, where he issued professional accreditations to Iraqi reporters, and

also as a fixer for ABC News. (He often reverentially recounted a brief meeting he had with Peter Jennings a couple of years before the broadcaster's death.) So to find willing op-ed writers, we began by visiting Ahmed's past associates. Two of them I met several times at the Baghdad Press Center—an office that the U.S. State Department funded to provide Iraqi reporters with equipment and to train them in journalistic ethics and professional conduct. And yet we were there hiring these same reporters to work indirectly for the U.S. military. When State Department officials at the press center asked me about my work in Iraq, I would tiptoe around an answer, saying I ran advertising campaigns in Iraqi newspapers on behalf of multinationals. (Which was effectively true.) A director in the office explained that they believed an independent media would help buttress the country's nascent democracy, and she thought it was great that my efforts were allowing local newspapers to gain commercial independence.

It was easy finding Iraqi reporters who would write op-ed pieces with “positive” messages for a little extra cash. But hiring those who would go to the dangerous Al Anbar province was altogether a different matter. The reporters, cameramen, and sound operators we spoke with all said the same thing: they would work in Ramadi and Fallujah as part of a Rapid Response cell only if they were embedded with U.S. troops. But because the whole point was that they were to report news that at least appeared to be independent of the military, this was impossible. We even explored whether we could embed our reporters with Iraqi troops there. But this also proved to be untenable.

Gina then had the idea of placing a Lincoln Group team permanently in a U.S. base near Ramadi or Fallujah, where they would operate one half of a satellite uplink system that would send footage or sound recordings to Baghdad. At the other end, Iraqis working in the company's Green Zone villa would receive the footage and splice it up into whatever form was required. Breaking news, the thinking went, could then be rushed to a TV station and aired immediately.

To explore this option, Ahmed and I visited a number of upstart production companies in their heavily guarded compounds. We found one company that would produce one of our half-minute TV spots for as little as \$10,000. At Iraq's national station, Al Iraqiya, located within Baghdad's old Jewish ghetto, an English-speaking commercial director said he could then air the spot during the station's nightly news, the most expensive time, for only \$2,000. Production and distribution together, then, would cost us around \$12,000. The amount Lincoln Group was charging the military for developing, producing, and airing each commercial had already been determined: just over \$1 million.⁵

At Al Iraqiya, Ahmed and I were then escorted to another part of the decrepit compound and introduced to the station's news director. We were left alone with him, and Ahmed began to explain that we were part of a recently formed independent news-gathering service that sought to cover the Al Anbar province. I followed the Arabic with difficulty but heard Ahmed launch into an account of his work with ABC. Then he said I was a former BBC reporter, which was an outright lie. I kept quiet, and Ahmed proposed that Al Iraqiya consider airing the footage from our Iraqi reporters. Ideally we would get paid for this, Ahmed said, but at this stage we wanted to make a reputation for ourselves and would in certain circumstances be willing to pay to have our footage shown on the news programs. The news director nodded repeatedly and then vigorously shook our hands. He was thrilled by our proposal.

The chubby head of the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation's Baghdad Bureau, yet another of Ahmed's old friends, was less enthusiastic about doing business with us. Over small glasses of sweetened tea, Ahmed again portrayed us as an upstart news service but revealed to his past associate that

⁵ Jim, Gina, and other senior Lincoln Group employees who worked on Western Mission all eventually left the company, after large bonuses they were promised failed to materialize. Although Bailey and Craig had initially offered them 10 percent of the profit on the entire Western Mission contract, in recent arbitration the employees said they were able to recoup only a tiny fraction of this amount.

the U.S. military was bankrolling our operation. The station director listened in silence, finally speaking to warn us that we were embarking on an extremely perilous campaign. All would inevitably be uncovered, he said, and we, our employees, and our partners would be placed in grave danger.

With all I was doing on Western Mission, I had begun to pay far less attention to the military's daily storyboards. Although I was passing along more than ten articles to be published each week, thrilling the stats-obsessed military team, I had stopped reading all the items the military sent me, and I'm sure I forwarded on to Muhammad stories I would previously have held back. Every week I was required to confirm the details of the military's spreadsheet, which listed the stories written by the I.O. team, the stories published, and which newspaper had published them. But it wasn't until early August that I really looked closely at the figures for the previous three weeks. When I examined Muhammad's records, I saw that the amounts some newspapers had charged us for placing articles had shot up dramatically. During July pieces published in the newspaper *Addustour* had gone from \$84, to \$423, to \$1,345, and finally to \$2,156. For another newspaper, *Al Adala*, what we were charged had climbed from \$82 at the start of July to \$1,088 by month's end. I checked the word counts of the articles, since we paid more for additional column inches, but all the stories were roughly the same in length. On closer inspection, I also noticed that articles had been published in newspapers I had not specified. One particular paper, *Al Sabaah Al Jadeed* (*The New Morning*), had been paid around \$12,000 over a ten-day period from late July to early August, although I had never told Muhammad to place stories there.

I traveled the Highway of Death to discuss all this with Jim Sutton at Camp Victory. We spoke on a fourth-floor balcony, the clicks of military boots echoing on the palace's red marble atrium. Jim said it was up to me to ferret out the thief or thieves. It could

be Muhammad, members of his staff, or the entire office. I told Jim that I now believed I had naively misread the Iraqis at our downtown office, mistaking their effusive "Yes, Mr. Willem" and "Soon, Mr. Willem" for real fealty. I had allowed them to exploit my ignorance: because I didn't know exactly how they published the military-written storyboards or whom they dealt with at the papers, they were able to inflate prices and take advantage of Lincoln Group. Jim said there was some important Western Mission work to take care of the next morning, but after that I needed to make my way downtown to get to the bottom of this matter.

Western Mission, after an initial delay, was finally beginning in earnest. Lincoln Group, as usual, had promised more than it could deliver, so in order to purchase airtime up front, it was forced to request an unusually large advance payment from the military. In fact, as Gina and I drove with Jim to the Green Zone villa that next day, the advance sat a few feet behind me, in the trunk of Jim's car: \$3 million in cash, plastic-wrapped in thirty \$100,000 blocks.

Just beyond the concrete blast barriers at the camp's exit, where we waited for our Kurdish guards, Jim told me to turn off my cell phone so that our location couldn't be traced. I held one of the Iranian submachine guns at the ready, and Gina, who rode shotgun, hid behind gold-rimmed sunglasses and a black kaffiyeh headscarf. The guards were late, and as cars slowly passed and our wait lengthened an ambush began to seem imminent. My fears were somewhat allayed when the Kurds finally pulled into the parking area, apologetic but prepared to escort us and our secret cargo to the villa. The seven-mile ride turned out to be uneventful, and the \$3 million was locked up in a safe inside my bedroom.

A few hours later, after lunch, I drove into Baghdad to speak to Muhammad and his staff. Jim, who said he was a former FBI field agent, had instructed me on the best ways to question my suspects. During each interview a staff member was to be seated in a single empty chair in the center of Muhammad's office—without a wall nearby, Jim explained, the man

would feel vulnerable and lose his nerve. It was very important as well that I remain calm yet forceful at all times, and Jim said that I should test various hypotheses by accusing each man of carrying out the crime in a different manner. According to Sutton, I would be able to hear guilt in the denials. To further unsettle the staff, Lincoln Group had also arranged for two Sunnis to be there while I conducted the examination. These men had worked for Saddam's notorious Mukhabarat, the intelligence arm of the Iraqi Baath party. And I had asked an Iraqi I had come to know quite well to accompany me, essentially to serve as my personal bodyguard and translator. Hamza worked for another American firm based in the same compound as our villa and was responsible for delivering our soft drinks. I offered him \$100 for his time.

I began by interviewing Muhammad, and we all squeezed into his cramped office, with its gaudy ashtrays and low leather chairs. I took Muhammad's seat at his desk, and Hamza, in baseball cap and Oakley sunglasses, sat to my left. The Sunnis positioned themselves on a couch along one of the walls while Muhammad remained standing by the solitary chair. Muhammad was surprised as well by the discrepancies in the ledger, and his suspicions fell on two Christians in his office, Farooq and Majid—those on his staff who physically transported the translated articles to the newspapers. Farooq, he thought, was our man. I, too, found Farooq to be dodgy. His hands were clammy whenever he greeted me, and he seemed always to have an elaborate excuse ready for Mr. Willem. On several occasions when I had phoned to question him about late work, our connection had suddenly gone dead. He would later blame this on the country's notoriously bad telecommunications network, but I believed he had simply hung up on me.

So we brought in Farooq, pointing him to the empty seat in the middle of the room. His protestations of innocence began even before he sat down, his face quickly turning a deep shade of red and the lip beneath his bushy mustache quivering in indignation. As I tried to follow Hamza's rapid-fire translations, I was distracted by the loaded

Glock that I had tucked into the belt of my trousers and that now jabbed into my groin. We generally were armed whenever we traveled outside the Green Zone, and on this occasion I had to consider that the entire office of Iraqis could be in collusion and willing to act against their young British accuser. I shifted to try to alleviate the discomfort but soon found the weapon's position unbearable. Removing it from my pants, I placed the gun on the polished surface of Muhammad's desk. Farooq looked from the weapon to me and then back again, and I realized too late just how threatening my action seemed. Yet I couldn't simply apologize and remove the pistol, as this would seem a sign of weakness. Now panicking, Farooq begged frantically that I consider his livelihood, that I think of the well-being of his young family.

Along with adrenaline and fear, a profound feeling of disgust welled up inside me. I had become a kind of stock character in a movie, someone I categorically despised. I hated violence and guns, was against the American presence in Iraq, and was sympathetic to almost every Iraqi I had met during the summer. The Glock's barrel even pointed directly at Farooq, for Christ's sake! John Simpson may have been on the receiving end of interrogations, but he certainly never carried one out. And to do this to recover a few thousand misappropriated dollars, for a company that was set to make millions from the American war effort.

With Farooq gone, the Mukhabarat heavies said there was no doubt about the Christian's guilt. They encouraged me to threaten him with a CIA criminal investigation. "Those three letters scare every Iraqi," the taller patrician-looking one said.⁶ As we went through the motions with Majid, his calm denials sounding the very timbre of innocence, we learned that Farooq had fled the building. Since it was also beginning to get dark, I decided I had had enough. It was time that

⁶ Less than two months later, gunmen entered this Sunni's house and shot and killed him and a number of his male relatives. The killings could have been retribution for his activities under the former regime. They also could have been reprisals for his involvement with our American company.

Hamza and I made our way back to the Green Zone.

Back at the villa, Hamza waited in the living room while I went to get his money. Before he left, he said he didn't understand how I could drive around Baghdad without real protection and enter an Iraqi office where I had no idea what was going on. He liked me and appreciated the extra money but said he would never do this again.

It had been an extremely long day, and I was exhausted and more than a little shaken. The blocks of cash that we had locked up in my room, a colleague informed me, had been picked up and moved to a bank in central Baghdad. In my email inbox, there were messages from both my parents, asking me when I would leave Iraq and saying they hoped that it would be very soon. Lincoln Group had also sent me a newly drawn contract; they were offering me up to \$70,000 to postpone journalism school and to work another ten months in Baghdad. But I couldn't fathom doing the work any longer. I had become what I had to admit was the antithesis of a journalist. And if I continued to suborn Iraqi reporters with U.S. military money, this would surely mean I would never be able to work as one.⁷

That night I rang Christian Bailey and Paige Craig at the company's D.C. headquarters and told them I wanted to go home. On August 20, I boarded a plane out of Baghdad, and my summer internship was over. ■

⁷ When U.S. newspapers broke the story late last year of Lincoln Group's secret propaganda work, it seemed a small victory had been won for journalistic ethics. Editorial writers condemned the business of paying Iraqi editors to run U.S.-military stories, and even the White House and the Joint Chiefs of Staff declared the practice a matter of serious concern. But such clarity was quickly obscured. Christian Bailey said in a December Washington Post article that his company had continued to secure lucrative contracts during all the media attention. And a couple of months later a Pentagon investigation actually cleared Lincoln Group of any wrongdoing, with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld extolling such "non-traditional" means of fighting terror in Iraq. In a companywide email sent around that time, Paige Craig assured his employees that their work had been honorable. "We've taken the fight to the enemy," he wrote, "and every member of the Lincoln team can be proud that their sacrifice and hard work has advanced the cause of the free world."