

# Me, a gun, \$3m and the good news from Baghdad

Straight out of college **Willem Marx** worked for a US-funded agency planting positive stories in Iraqi papers. In the end, he says, he had to flee

It was my cousin at law school in New York who first saw the advertisement. The Lincoln Group, based in Washington, was looking for an intern who would “monitor and interact” with local media in Iraq. Reading its website my father immediately smelt a rat. “It’s probably some ridiculous Pentagon operation,” he said dismissively. I disagreed, but the position on offer sounded intriguing.

I was just coming up to my finals at Oxford and most of my friends were looking forward to a summer spent relaxing after the exams. I fancied something more adventurous: during my first year I had cycled from Switzerland to Damascus over an Easter break and, having studied Arabic briefly at school, had visited the Middle East as often as possible since.

I knew nothing about this Lincoln Group, which has since become notorious for paying Iraqi newspapers and journalists to publish positive news stories planted by the coalition about the reconstruction of Iraq. But it sounded better than working in a bar and the idea of tasting life in Baghdad, chaotic and dangerous though it was, was irresistible.

Back in Oxford, I studied the Lincoln Group’s website again and again. It was hardly forthcoming about their business activities. Having sent a CV, I was summoned last July to Washington where I met the company’s co-founders. Christian Bailey, a fellow Oxford graduate, was shy and very young for a company head. He was partnered by Paige Craig, a former American marine.

I was told that in Baghdad their company’s job was to place as many friendly stories in the Iraqi media as possible. The stories —

about the refurbishment of hospitals or the upgrading of power stations — were written by a special US military unit in the hope that they would help win over Iraqi hearts and minds to the occupation. My job was to get the stories published.

Full of optimism I caught a plane to Baghdad. Frightened out of my wits by the landing (my plane had dived to the ground in a corkscrew descent to avoid incoming surface to air attacks) I suddenly wondered what I had let myself in for.

Two Lincoln group employees met me at the airport and greeted me with almost total silence. They dumped me in a dusty Halliburton trailer inside America’s Camp Victory, next to the airport. That evening I had brief access to the internet and received my exam results, as well as news of the London bombings. I felt a long way from home.

I put on a heavy military bullet-proof vest and helmet for the terrifying ride from the airport to the green zone. On my bus ride up the “highway of death” towards the city centre around 4am, we were escorted by Humvees and night-vision-equipped helicopters.

The small white villa that the Lincoln Group rented was close to Saddam Hussein’s old parade ground, marked by enormous crossed swords. On my first day “on duty”, I was e-mailed five stories: “Mourning the dead” reported and analysed a massacre of Iraqi children, blaming a foreign terrorist (a “treacherous monster”) for an attack in mid-July and urging readers not to retaliate violently but through the courts. “Train derailed in Mosul” painted terrorists as saboteurs and described how they were disrupt-



Goran Tomasevic

Good news for the coalition as Baghdad and Saddam fall – but it was downhill from there

ing attempts by the Iraqi government to rebuild the country. All the stories blamed terrorists for Iraq’s problems and lauded the work of the coalition troops. I had never encountered “journalism” like this before.

I chose two out of the five and

being US propaganda. I was told by colleagues that the Lincoln Group’s role was to leave no military fingerprints on the stories, but the price charged by Baghdad newspapers rose so steeply in a matter of weeks that they seemed to cotton on quickly as to where

**‘I had an MP5 sub-machinegun on my lap and \$3m in the back of the armoured BMW’**

passed them on to an Iraqi named Majid to translate into Arabic, which neither my American colleagues, military officers nor myself could understand. A messenger took the translated copy to the leading Baghdad newspapers, who were paid to run the story as if it was written by a genuine Iraqi journalist rather than

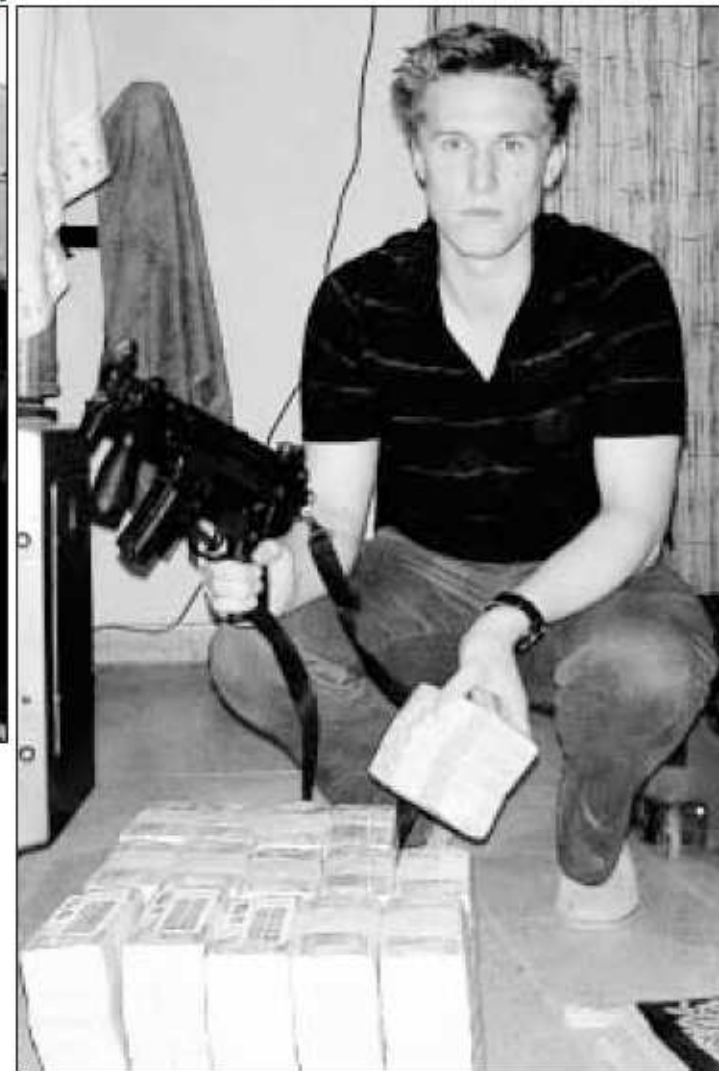
the stories (and the money to pay for them) was really coming from.

When I started pushing out stories the cost would be around \$500 dollars; six weeks later it was \$1,500. The Lincoln Group charged the US military about \$80,000 a week for this.

One of our go-betweens, Farouq, was suspected of being on

the take. It was my task to interrogate him. In one of the most surreal scenes I found myself, flanked by two heavies, accusing him of dishonesty with a loaded Glock pistol inches from my right hand. Farouq was furious and scared. I was, too. He ran off home that afternoon and was formally sacked soon after.

I was asked to set up a “rapid response unit” of Iraqi broadcasters and journalists. I was paired with Ahmed, an Iraqi-American employee who had previous CNN and ABC News experience, and together we began recruiting journalists. Many were friends and contacts of Ahmed’s, which may have made them loyal to him but was no guarantee of either ability or publishing potential. However, since neither I nor any of the other Lincoln Group staff spoke any real Arabic — nor were friendly with many Iraqi journal-



Willem Marx

Marx with gun and some of the millions advanced by the US to his group

ists — there was little choice.

Events grew increasingly surreal by the middle of August. As the new push began, the Lincoln Group needed money and the American military, with some reluctance, agreed to advance a portion of its new contract fee in cash. Thus I found myself with two colleagues in a car waiting impatiently for an armed Iraqi escort that would accompany us back to Baghdad city centre. I had an MP5

sub-machinegun on my lap and \$3m — cash — in the back of the armoured BMW. I’ve never felt more like a sitting duck.

As the minutes ticked by, with our guards unusually late, other drivers circled the dusty area eyeing us suspiciously. It could have been a scene from a Hollywood thriller. But it was too much for me: I decided to leave Baghdad. A few days later I was back in Britain. The relief was indescribable.