The New York Times
nytimes.com

March 13, 2005

Under Bush, a New Age of Prepackaged TV News

By DAVID BARSTOW and ROBIN STEIN

It is the kind of TV news coverage every president covets.

"Thank you, Bush. Thank you, U.S.A.," a jubilant Iraqi-American told a camera crew in Kansas City for a segment about reaction to the fall of Baghdad. A second report told of "another success" in the Bush administration's "drive to strengthen aviation security"; the reporter called it "one of the most remarkable campaigns in aviation history." A third segment, broadcast in January, described the administration's determination to open markets for American farmers.

To a viewer, each report looked like any other 90-second segment on the local news. In fact, the federal government produced all three. The report from Kansas City was made by the State Department. The "reporter" covering airport safety was actually a public relations professional working under a false name for the Transportation Security Administration. The farming segment was done by the Agriculture Department's office of communications.

Under the Bush administration, the federal government has aggressively used a well-established tool of public relations: the prepackaged, ready-to-serve news report that major corporations have long distributed to TV stations to pitch everything from headache remedies to auto insurance. In all, at least 20 federal agencies, including the Defense Department and the Census Bureau, have made and distributed hundreds of television news segments in the past four years, records and interviews show. Many were subsequently broadcast on local stations across the country without any acknowledgement of the government's role in their production.

This winter, Washington has been roiled by revelations that a handful of columnists wrote in support of administration policies without disclosing they had accepted payments from the government. But the administration's efforts to generate positive news coverage have been considerably more pervasive than previously known. At the same time, records and interviews suggest widespread complicity or negligence by television stations, given industry ethics standards that discourage the broadcast of prepackaged news segments from any outside group without revealing the source.

Federal agencies are forthright with broadcasters about the origin of the news segments they distribute. The reports themselves, though, are designed to fit seamlessly into the typical local news broadcast. In most cases, the "reporters" are careful not to state in the segment that they work for the government. Their reports generally avoid overt ideological appeals. Instead, the government's news-making apparatus has produced a quiet drumbeat of broadcasts describing a vigilant and compassionate administration.

Some reports were produced to support the administration's most cherished policy objectives, like regime change in Iraq or Medicare reform. Others focused on less prominent matters, like the administration's efforts to offer free after-school tutoring, its campaign to curb childhood obesity, its initiatives to preserve forests and wetlands, its plans to fight computer viruses, even its attempts to fight holiday drunken driving. They often feature "interviews" with senior administration officials in which questions are scripted and answers rehearsed. Critics, though, are excluded, as are any hints of mismanagement, waste or controversy.

Some of the segments were broadcast in some of nation's largest television markets, including New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Dallas and Atlanta.

An examination of government-produced news reports offers a look inside a world where the traditional lines between public relations and journalism have become tangled, where local anchors introduce prepackaged segments with "suggested" lead-ins written by public relations experts. It is a world where government-produced reports disappear into a

maze of satellite transmissions, Web portals, syndicated news programs and network feeds, only to emerge cleansed on the other side as "independent" journalism.

It is also a world where all participants benefit.

Local affiliates are spared the expense of digging up original material. Public relations firms secure government contracts worth millions of dollars. The major networks, which help distribute the releases, collect fees from the government agencies that produce segments and the affiliates that show them. The administration, meanwhile, gets out an unfiltered message, delivered in the guise of traditional reporting.

The practice, which also occurred in the Clinton administration, is continuing despite President Bush's recent call for a clearer demarcation between journalism and government publicity efforts. "There needs to be a nice independent relationship between the White House and the press," Mr. Bush told reporters in January, explaining why his administration would no longer pay pundits to support his policies.

In interviews, though, press officers for several federal agencies said the president's prohibition did not apply to government-made television news segments, also known as video news releases. They described the segments as factual, politically neutral and useful to viewers. They insisted that there was no similarity to the case of Armstrong Williams, a conservative columnist who promoted the administration's chief education initiative, the No Child Left Behind Act, without disclosing $240,000 in payments from the Education Department.

What is more, these officials argued, it is the responsibility of television news directors to inform viewers that a segment about the government was in fact written by the government. "Talk to the television stations that ran it without attribution," said William A. Pierce, spokesman for the Department of Health and Human Services. "This is not our problem. We can't be held responsible for their actions."

Yet in three separate opinions in the past year, the Government Accountability Office, an investigative arm of Congress that studies the federal government and its expenditures, has held that government-made news segments may constitute improper "covert propaganda" even if their origin is made clear to the television stations. The point, the office said, is whether viewers know the origin. Last month, in its most recent finding, the G.A.O. said federal agencies may not produce prepackaged news reports "that conceal or do not clearly identify for the television viewing audience that the agency was the source of those materials."

It is not certain, though, whether the office's pronouncements will have much practical effect. Although a few federal agencies have stopped making television news segments, others continue. And on Friday, the Justice Department and the Office of Management and Budget circulated a memorandum instructing all executive branch agencies to ignore the G.A.O. findings. The memorandum said the G.A.O. failed to distinguish between covert propaganda and "purely informational" news segments made by the government. Such informational segments are legal, the memorandum said, whether or not an agency's role in producing them is disclosed to viewers.

Even if agencies do disclose their role, those efforts can easily be undone in a broadcaster's editing room. Some news organizations, for example, simply identify the government's "reporter" as one of their own and then edit out any phrase suggesting the segment was not of their making.

So in a recent segment produced by the Agriculture Department, the agency's narrator ended the report by saying "In Princess Anne, Maryland, I'm Pat O'Leary reporting for the U.S. Department of Agriculture." Yet AgDay, a syndicated farm news program that is shown on some 160 stations, simply introduced the segment as being by "AgDay's Pat O'Leary." The final sentence was then trimmed to "In Princess Anne, Maryland, I'm Pat O'Leary reporting."

Brian Conrady, executive producer of AgDay, defended the changes. "We can clip 'Department of Agriculture' at our choosing," he said. "The material we get from the U.S.D.A., if we choose to air it and how we choose to air it is our choice."

Spreading the Word: Government Efforts and One Woman's Role

Karen Ryan cringes at the phrase "covert propaganda." These are words for dictators and spies, and yet they have attached

themselves to her like a pair of handcuffs.

Not long ago, Ms. Ryan was a much sought-after "reporter" for news segments produced by the federal government. A journalist at ABC and PBS who became a public relations consultant, Ms. Ryan worked on about a dozen reports for seven federal agencies in 2003 and early 2004. Her segments for the Department of Health and Human Services and the Office of National Drug Control Policy were a subject of the accountability office's recent inquiries.

The G.A.O. concluded that the two agencies "designed and executed" their segments "to be indistinguishable from news stories produced by private sector television news organizations." A significant part of that execution, the office found, was Ms. Ryan's expert narration, including her typical sign-off - "In Washington, I'm Karen Ryan reporting" - delivered in a tone and cadence familiar to television reporters everywhere.

Last March, when The New York Times first described her role in a segment about new prescription drug benefits for Medicare patients, reaction was harsh. In Cleveland, The Plain Dealer ran an editorial under the headline "Karen Ryan, You're a Phony," and she was the object of late-night jokes by Jon Stewart and received hate mail.

"I'm like the Marlboro man," she said in a recent interview.

In fact, Ms. Ryan was a bit player who made less than $5,000 for her work on government reports. She was also playing an accepted role in a lucrative art form, the video news release. "I just don't feel I did anything wrong," she said. "I just did what everyone else in the industry was doing."

It is a sizable industry. One of its largest players, Medialink Worldwide Inc., has about 200 employees, with offices in New York and London. It produces and distributes about 1,000 video news releases a year, most commissioned by major corporations. The Public Relations Society of America even gives an award, the Bronze Anvil, for the year's best video news release.

Several major television networks play crucial intermediary roles in the business. Fox, for example, has an arrangement with Medialink to distribute video news releases to 130 affiliates through its video feed service, Fox News Edge. CNN distributes releases to 750 stations in the United States and Canada through a similar feed service, CNN Newsource. Associated Press Television News does the same thing worldwide with its Global Video Wire.

"We look at them and determine whether we want them to be on the feed," David M. Winstrom, director of Fox News Edge, said of video news releases. "If I got one that said tobacco cures cancer or something like that, I would kill it."

In essence, video news releases seek to exploit a growing vulnerability of television news: Even as news staffs at the major networks are shrinking, many local stations are expanding their hours of news coverage without adding reporters.

"No TV news organization has the resources in labor, time or funds to cover every worthy story," one video news release company, TVA Productions, said in a sales pitch to potential clients, adding that "90 percent of TV newsrooms now rely on video news releases."

Federal agencies have been commissioning video news releases since at least the first Clinton administration. An increasing number of state agencies are producing television news reports, too; the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department alone has produced some 500 video news releases since 1993.

Under the Bush administration, federal agencies appear to be producing more releases, and on a broader array of topics.

A definitive accounting is nearly impossible. There is no comprehensive archive of local television news reports, as there is in print journalism, so there is no easy way to determine what has been broadcast, and when and where.

Still, several large agencies, including the Defense Department, the State Department and the Department of Health and Human Services, acknowledge expanded efforts to produce news segments. Many members of Mr. Bush's first-term cabinet appeared in such segments.

A recent study by Congressional Democrats offers another rough indicator: the Bush administration spent $254 million in

its first term on public relations contracts, nearly double what the last Clinton administration spent.

Karen Ryan was part of this push - a "paid shill for the Bush administration," as she self-mockingly puts it. It is, she acknowledges, an uncomfortable title.

Ms. Ryan, 48, describes herself as not especially political, and certainly no Bush die-hard. She had hoped for a long career in journalism. But over time, she said, she grew dismayed by what she saw as the decline of television news - too many cut corners, too many ratings stunts.

In the end, she said, the jump to video news releases from journalism was not as far as one might expect. "It's almost the same thing," she said.

There are differences, though. When she went to interview Tommy G. Thompson, then the health and human services secretary, about the new Medicare drug benefit, it was not the usual reporter-source exchange. First, she said, he already knew the questions, and she was there mostly to help him give better, snappier answers. And second, she said, everyone involved is aware of a segment's potential political benefits.

Her Medicare report, for example, was distributed in January 2004, not long before Mr. Bush hit the campaign trail and cited the drug benefit as one of his major accomplishments.

The script suggested that local anchors lead into the report with this line: "In December, President Bush signed into law the first-ever prescription drug benefit for people with Medicare." In the segment, Mr. Bush is shown signing the legislation as Ms. Ryan describes the new benefits and reports that "all people with Medicare will be able to get coverage that will lower their prescription drug spending."

The segment made no mention of the many critics who decry the law as an expensive gift to the pharmaceutical industry. The G.A.O. found that the segment was "not strictly factual," that it contained "notable omissions" and that it amounted to "a favorable report" about a controversial program.

And yet this news segment, like several others narrated by Ms. Ryan, reached an audience of millions. According to the accountability office, at least 40 stations ran some part of the Medicare report. Video news releases distributed by the Office of National Drug Control Policy, including one narrated by Ms. Ryan, were shown on 300 stations and reached 22 million households. According to Video Monitoring Services of America, a company that tracks news programs in major cities, Ms. Ryan's segments on behalf of the government were broadcast a total of at least 64 times in the 40 largest television markets.

Even these measures, though, do not fully capture the reach of her work. Consider the case of News 10 Now, a cable station in Syracuse owned by Time Warner. In February 2004, days after the government distributed its Medicare segment, News 10 Now broadcast a virtually identical report, including the suggested anchor lead-in. The News 10 Now segment, however, was not narrated by Ms. Ryan. Instead, the station edited out the original narration and had one of its reporters repeat the script almost word for word.

The station's news director, Sean McNamara, wrote in an e-mail message, "Our policy on provided video is to clearly identify the source of that video." In the case of the Medicare report, he said, the station believed it was produced and distributed by a major network and did not know that it had originally come from the government.

Ms. Ryan said she was surprised by the number of stations willing to run her government segments without any editing or acknowledgement of origin. As proud as she says she is of her work, she did not hesitate, even for a second, when asked if she would have broadcast one of her government reports if she were a local news director.

"Absolutely not."

Little Oversight: TV's Code of Ethics, With Uncertain Weight

"Clearly disclose the origin of information and label all material provided by outsiders."

Those words are from the code of ethics of the Radio-Television News Directors Association, the main professional society for broadcast news directors in the United States. Some stations go further, all but forbidding the use of any outside material, especially entire reports. And spurred by embarrassing publicity last year about Karen Ryan, the news directors association is close to proposing a stricter rule, said its executive director, Barbara Cochran.

Whether a stricter ethics code will have much effect is unclear; it is not hard to find broadcasters who are not adhering to the existing code, and the association has no enforcement powers.

The Federal Communications Commission does, but it has never disciplined a station for showing government-made news segments without disclosing their origin, a spokesman said.

Could it? Several lawyers experienced with F.C.C. rules say yes. They point to a 2000 decision by the agency, which stated, "Listeners and viewers are entitled to know by whom they are being persuaded."

In interviews, more than a dozen station news directors endorsed this view without hesitation. Several expressed disdain for the prepackaged segments they received daily from government agencies, corporations and special interest groups who wanted to use their airtime and credibility to sell or influence.

But when told that their stations showed government-made reports without attribution, most reacted with indignation. Their stations, they insisted, would never allow their news programs to be co-opted by segments fed from any outside party, let alone the government.

"They're inherently one-sided, and they don't offer the possibility for follow-up questions - or any questions at all," said Kathy Lehmann Francis, until recently the news director at WDRB, the Fox affiliate in Louisville, Ky.

Yet records from Video Monitoring Services of America indicate that WDRB has broadcast at least seven Karen Ryan segments, including one for the government, without disclosing their origin to viewers.

Mike Stutz, news director at KGTV, the ABC affiliate in San Diego, was equally opposed to putting government news segments on the air.

"It amounts to propaganda, doesn't it?" he said.

Again, though, records from Video Monitoring Services of America show that from 2001 to 2004 KGTV ran at least one government-made segment featuring Ms. Ryan, 5 others featuring her work on behalf of corporations, and 19 produced by corporations and other outside organizations. It does not appear that KGTV viewers were told the origin of these 25 segments.

"I thought we were pretty solid," Mr. Stutz said, adding that they intend to take more precautions.

Confronted with such evidence, most news directors were at a loss to explain how the segments made it on the air. Some said they were unable to find archive tapes that would help answer the question. Others promised to look into it, then stopped returning telephone messages. A few removed the segments from their Web sites, promised greater vigilance in the future or pleaded ignorance.

Afghanistan to Memphis: An Agency's Report Ends Up on the Air

On Sept. 11, 2002, WHBQ, the Fox affiliate in Memphis, marked the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks with an uplifting report on how assistance from the United States was helping to liberate the women of Afghanistan.

Tish Clark, a reporter for WHBQ, described how Afghan women, once barred from schools and jobs, were at last emerging from their burkas, taking up jobs as seamstresses and bakers, sending daughters off to new schools, receiving decent medical care for the first time and even participating in a fledgling democracy. Her segment included an interview with an Afghan teacher who recounted how the Taliban only allowed boys to attend school. An Afghan doctor described how the Taliban refused to let male physicians treat women.

In short, Ms. Clark's report seemed to corroborate, however modestly, a central argument of the Bush foreign policy, that forceful American intervention abroad was spreading freedom, improving lives and winning friends.

What the people of Memphis were not told, though, was that the interviews used by WHBQ were actually conducted by State Department contractors. The contractors also selected the quotes used from those interviews and shot the video that went with the narration. They also wrote the narration, much of which Ms. Clark repeated with only minor changes.

As it happens, the viewers of WHBQ were not the only ones in the dark.

Ms. Clark, now Tish Clark Dunning, said in an interview that she, too, had no idea the report originated at the State Department. "If that's true, I'm very shocked that anyone would false report on anything like that," she said.

How a television reporter in Memphis unwittingly came to narrate a segment by the State Department reveals much about the extent to which government-produced news accounts have seeped into the broader new media landscape.

The explanation begins inside the White House, where the president's communications advisers devised a strategy after Sept. 11, 2001, to encourage supportive news coverage of the fight against terrorism. The idea, they explained to reporters at the time, was to counter charges of American imperialism by generating accounts that emphasized American efforts to liberate and rebuild Afghanistan and Iraq.

An important instrument of this strategy was the Office of Broadcasting Services, a State Department unit of 30 or so editors and technicians whose typical duties include distributing video from news conferences. But in early 2002, with close editorial direction from the White House, the unit began producing narrated feature reports, many of them promoting American achievements in Afghanistan and Iraq and reinforcing the administration's rationales for the invasions. These reports were then widely distributed in the United States and around the world for use by local television stations. In all, the State Department has produced 59 such segments.

United States law contains provisions intended to prevent the domestic dissemination of government propaganda. The 1948 Smith-Mundt Act, for example, allows Voice of America to broadcast pro-government news to foreign audiences, but not at home. Yet State Department officials said that law does not apply to the Office of Broadcasting Services. In any event, said Richard A. Boucher, a State Department spokesman: "Our goal is to put out facts and the truth. We're not a propaganda agency."

Even so, as a senior department official, Patricia Harrison, told Congress last year, the Bush administration has come to regard such "good news" segments as "powerful strategic tools" for influencing public opinion. And a review of the department's segments reveals a body of work in sync with the political objectives set forth by the White House communications team after 9/11.

In June 2003, for example, the unit produced a segment that depicted American efforts to distribute food and water to the people of southern Iraq. "After living for decades in fear, they are now receiving assistance - and building trust - with their coalition liberators," the unidentified narrator concluded.

Several segments focused on the liberation of Afghan women, which a White House memo from January 2003 singled out as a "prime example" of how "White House-led efforts could facilitate strategic, proactive communications in the war on terror."

Tracking precisely how a "good news" report on Afghanistan could have migrated to Memphis from the State Department is far from easy. The State Department typically distributes its segments via satellite to international news organizations like Reuters and Associated Press Television News, which in turn distribute them to the major United States networks, which then transmit them to local affiliates.

"Once these products leave our hands, we have no control," Robert A. Tappan, the State Department's deputy assistant secretary for public affairs, said in an interview. The department, he said, never intended its segments to be shown unedited and without attribution by local news programs. "We do our utmost to identify them as State Department-produced products."

Representatives for the networks insist that government-produced reports are clearly labeled when they are distributed to affiliates. Yet with segments bouncing from satellite to satellite, passing from one news organization to another, it is easy to see the potential for confusion. Indeed, in response to questions from The Times, Associated Press Television News acknowledged that they might have distributed at least one segment about Afghanistan to the major United States networks without identifying it as the product of the State Department. A spokesman said it could have "slipped through our net because of a sourcing error."

Kenneth W. Jobe, vice president for news at WHBQ in Memphis, said he could not explain how his station came to broadcast the State Department's segment on Afghan women. "It's the same piece, there's no mistaking it," he said in an interview, insisting that it would not happen again.

Mr. Jobe, who was not with WHBQ in 2002, said the station's script for the segment has no notes explaining its origin. But Tish Clark Dunning said it was her impression at the time that the Afghan segment was her station's version of one done first by network correspondents at either Fox News or CNN. It is not unusual, she said, for a local station to take network reports and then give them a hometown look.

"I didn't actually go to Afghanistan," she said. "I took that story and reworked it. I had to do some research on my own. I remember looking on the Internet and finding out how it all started as far as women covering their faces and everything."

At the State Department, Mr. Tappan said the broadcasting office is moving away from producing narrated feature segments. Instead, the department is increasingly supplying only the ingredients for reports - sound bites and raw video. Since the shift, he said, even more State Department material is making its way into news broadcasts.

Meeting a Need: Rising Budget Pressures, Ready-to-Run Segments

WCIA is a small station with a big job in central Illinois.

Each weekday, WCIA's news department produces a three-hour morning program, a noon broadcast and three evening programs. There are plans to add a 9 p.m. broadcast. The staff, though, has been cut to 37 from 39. "We are doing more with the same," said Jim P. Gee, the news director.

Farming is crucial in Mr. Gee's market, yet with so many demands, he said, "it is hard for us to justify having a reporter just focusing on agriculture."

To fill the gap, WCIA turned to the Agriculture Department, which has assembled one of the most effective public relations operations inside the federal government. The department has a Broadcast Media and Technology Center with an annual budget of $3.2 million that each year produces some 90 "mission messages" for local stations - mostly feature segments about the good works of the Agriculture Department.

"I don't want to use the word 'filler,' per se, but they meet a need we have," Mr. Gee said.

The Agriculture Department's two full-time reporters, Bob Ellison and Pat O'Leary, travel the country filing reports, which are vetted by the department's office of communications before they are distributed via satellite and mail. Alisa Harrison, who oversees the communications office, said Mr. Ellison and Mr. O'Leary provide unbiased, balanced and accurate coverage.

"They cover the secretary just like any other reporter," she said.

Invariably, though, their segments offer critic-free accounts of the department's policies and programs. In one report, Mr. Ellison told of the agency's efforts to help Florida clean up after several hurricanes.

"They've done a fantastic job," a grateful local official said in the segment.

More recently, Mr. Ellison reported that Mike Johanns, the new agriculture secretary, and the White House were determined to reopen Japan to American beef products. Of his new boss, Mr. Ellison reported, "He called Bush the best envoy in the world."

WCIA, based in Champaign, has run 26 segments made by the Agriculture Department over the past three months alone. Or put another way, WCIA has run 26 reports that did not cost it anything to produce.

Mr. Gee, the news director, readily acknowledges that these accounts are not exactly independent, tough-minded journalism. But, he added: "We don't think they're propaganda. They meet our journalistic standards. They're informative. They're balanced."

More than a year ago, WCIA asked the Agriculture Department to record a special sign-off that implies the segments are the work of WCIA reporters. So, for example, instead of closing his report with "I'm Bob Ellison, reporting for the U.S.D.A.," Mr. Ellison says, "With the U.S.D.A., I'm Bob Ellison, reporting for 'The Morning Show.'"

Mr. Gee said the customized sign-off helped raise "awareness of the name of our station." Could it give viewers the idea that Mr. Ellison is reporting on location with the U.S.D.A. for WCIA? "We think viewers can make up their own minds," Mr. Gee said.

Ms. Harrison, the Agriculture Department press secretary, said the WCIA sign-off was an exception. The general policy, she said, is to make clear in each segment that the reporter works for the department. In any event, she added, she did not think there was much potential for viewer confusion. "It's pretty clear to me," she said.

The 'Good News' People: A Menu of Reports From Military Hot Spots

The Defense Department is working hard to produce and distribute its own news segments for television audiences in the United States.

The Pentagon Channel, available only inside the Defense Department last year, is now being offered to every cable and satellite operator in the United States. Army public affairs specialists, equipped with portable satellite transmitters, are roaming war zones in Afghanistan and Iraq, beaming news reports, raw video and interviews to TV stations in the United States. All a local news director has to do is log on to a military-financed Web site, www.dvidshub.net, browse a menu of segments and request a free satellite feed.

Then there is the Army and Air Force Hometown News Service, a unit of 40 reporters and producers set up to send local stations news segments highlighting the accomplishments of military members.

"We're the 'good news' people," said Larry W. Gilliam, the unit's deputy director.

Each year, the unit films thousands of soldiers sending holiday greetings to their hometowns. Increasingly, the unit also produces news reports that reach large audiences. The 50 stories it filed last year were broadcast 236 times in all, reaching 41 million households in the United States.

The news service makes it easy for local stations to run its segments unedited. Reporters, for example, are never identified by their military titles. "We know if we put a rank on there they're not going to put it on their air," Mr. Gilliam said.

Each account is also specially tailored for local broadcast. A segment sent to a station in Topeka, Kan., would include an interview with a service member from there. If the same report is sent to Oklahoma City, the soldier is switched out for one from Oklahoma City. "We try to make the individual soldier a star in their hometown," Mr. Gilliam said, adding that segments were distributed only to towns and cities selected by the service members interviewed.

Few stations acknowledge the military's role in the segments. "Just tune in and you'll see a minute-and-a-half news piece and it looks just like they went out and did the story," Mr. Gilliam said. The unit, though, makes no attempt to advance any particular political or policy agenda, he said.

"We don't editorialize at all," he said.

Yet sometimes the "good news" approach carries political meaning, intended or not. Such was the case after the Abu Ghraib prison scandal surfaced last spring. Although White House officials depicted the abuse of Iraqi detainees as the work of a few rogue soldiers, the case raised serious questions about the training of military police officers.

A short while later, Mr. Gilliam's unit distributed a news segment, sent to 34 stations, that examined the training of prison guards at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri, where some of the military police officers implicated at Abu Ghraib had been trained.

"One of the most important lessons they learn is to treat prisoners strictly but fairly," the reporter said in the segment, which depicted a regimen emphasizing respect for detainees. A trainer told the reporter that military police officers were taught to "treat others as they would want to be treated." The account made no mention of Abu Ghraib or how the scandal had prompted changes in training at Fort Leonard Wood.

According to Mr. Gilliam, the report was unrelated to any effort by the Defense Department to rebut suggestions of a broad command failure.

"Are you saying that the Pentagon called down and said, 'We need some good publicity?'" he asked. "No, not at all."

Anne E. Kornblut contributed reporting for this article.