

The author of this piece, which appeared in ROLLING STONE, is the Author of THE PUZZLE PALACE and BODY OF SECRETS, important studies of the NSA.

The Man Who Sold the War

Meet John Rendon, Bush's general in the propaganda war

By JAMES BAMFORD

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The road to war in Iraq led through many unlikely places. One of them was a chic hotel nestled among the strip bars and brothels that cater to foreigners in the town of Pattaya, on the Gulf of Thailand.

On December 17th, 2001, in a small room within the sound of the Crashing tide, a CIA officer attached metal electrodes to the ring and index fingers of a man sitting pensively in a padded chair. The officer then stretched a black rubber tube, pleated like an accordion, around the man's chest and another across his abdomen. Finally, he slipped a thick cuff over the man's brachial artery, on the inside of his upper arm.

Strapped to the polygraph machine was Adnan Ihsan Saeed al-Haideri, a forty-three-year-old Iraqi who had fled his homeland in Kurdistan and was now determined to bring down Saddam Hussein. For hours, as thin mechanical styluses traced black lines on rolling graph paper, al-Haideri laid out an explosive tale. Answering yes and no to a series of questions, he insisted repeatedly that he was a civil engineer who had helped Saddam's men to secretly bury tons of biological, chemical and nuclear weapons. The illegal arms, according to al-Haideri, were buried in subterranean wells, hidden in private villas, even stashed beneath the Saddam Hussein Hospital, the largest medical facility in Baghdad.

It was damning stuff -- just the kind of evidence the Bush administration was looking for. If the charges were true, they would offer the White House a compelling reason to invade Iraq and depose Saddam. That's why the Pentagon had flown a CIA polygraph expert to Pattaya: to question al-Haideri and confirm, once and for all, that Saddam was secretly stockpiling weapons of mass destruction.

There was only one problem: It was all a lie. After a review of the sharp peaks and deep valleys on the polygraph chart, the intelligence officer concluded that al-Haideri had made up the entire story, apparently in the hopes of securing a visa.

The fabrication might have ended there, the tale of another political refugee trying to scheme his way to a better life. But just because the story wasn't true didn't mean it couldn't be put to good use.

Al-Haideri, in fact, was the product of a clandestine operation -- part espionage, part PR campaign -- that had been set up and funded by the CIA and the Pentagon for the express purpose of selling the world a war. And the man who had long been in charge of the marketing was a secretive and mysterious creature of the Washington establishment named John Rendon.

Rendon is a man who fills a need that few people even know exists. Two months before al-Haideri took the lie-detector test, the Pentagon had secretly awarded him a \$16 million contract to target Iraq and other adversaries with propaganda. One of the most powerful people in Washington, Rendon is a leader in the strategic field known as "perception management," manipulating information -- and, by extension, the news media -- to achieve the desired result. His firm, the Rendon Group, has made millions off government contracts since 1991, when it was hired by the CIA to help "create the conditions for the removal of Hussein from power." Working under this extraordinary transfer of secret authority, Rendon assembled a group of anti-Saddam militants, personally gave them their name -- the Iraqi National Congress -- and served as their media guru and "senior adviser" as they set out to engineer an uprising against Saddam. It was as if President John F. Kennedy had outsourced the Bay of Pigs operation to the advertising and public-relations firm of J. Walter Thompson.

"They're very closemouthed about what they do," says Kevin McCauley, an editor of the industry trade publication O'Dwyer's PR Daily. "It's all cloak-and-dagger stuff."

Although Rendon denies any direct involvement with al-Haideri, the defector was the latest salvo in a secret media war set in motion by Rendon. In an operation directed by Ahmad Chalabi -- the man Rendon helped install as leader of the INC -- the defector had been brought to Thailand, where he huddled in a hotel room for days with the group's spokesman, Zaab Sethna. The INC routinely coached defectors on their stories, prepping them for polygraph exams, and Sethna was certainly up to the task -- he got his training in the art of propaganda on the payroll of the Rendon Group. According to Francis Brooke, the INC's man in Washington and himself a former Rendon employee, the goal of the al-Haideri operation was simple: pressure the United States to attack Iraq and overthrow Saddam Hussein.

As the CIA official flew back to Washington with failed lie-detector charts in his briefcase, Chalabi and Sethna didn't hesitate. They picked up the phone, called two journalists who had a long history of helping the INC promote its cause and offered them an exclusive on Saddam's terrifying cache of WMDs.

For the worldwide broadcast rights, Sethna contacted Paul Moran, an Australian freelancer who frequently worked for the Australian Broadcasting Corp. "I think I've got something that you would be interested in," he told Moran, who was living in Bahrain. Sethna knew he could count on the trim, thirty-eight-year-old journalist: A former INC employee in the Middle East, Moran had also been on Rendon's payroll for years in "information operations," working with Sethna at the company's London office on Catherine Place, near Buckingham Palace.

"We were trying to help the Kurds and the Iraqis opposed to Saddam set up a television station," Sethna recalled in a rare interview broadcast on Australian television. "The Rendon Group came to us and said, 'We have a contract to kind of do anti-Saddam propaganda on behalf of the Iraqi opposition.' What we didn't know -- what the Rendon Group didn't tell us -- was in fact it was the CIA that had hired them to do this work."

The INC's choice for the worldwide print exclusive was equally easy: Chalabi contacted Judith Miller of The New York Times. Miller, who was close to I. Lewis Libby and other neoconservatives in the Bush administration, had been a trusted outlet for the INC's anti-Saddam propaganda for years. Not long after the CIA polygraph expert slipped the straps and electrodes off al-Haideri and declared him a liar, Miller flew to Bangkok to interview him under the watchful supervision of his INC handlers. Miller later made perfunctory calls to the CIA and Defense Intelligence Agency, but despite her vaunted intelligence sources, she claimed not to know about the results of al-Haideri's lie-detector test. Instead, she reported that unnamed "government experts" called his information "reliable and significant" -- thus adding a veneer of truth to the lies.

Her front-page story, which hit the stands on December 20th, 2001, was exactly the kind of exposure Rendon had been hired to provide. AN IRAQI DEFECTOR TELLS OF WORK ON AT LEAST 20 HIDDEN WEAPONS SITES, declared the headline. "An Iraqi defector who described himself as a civil engineer," Miller wrote, "said he personally worked on renovations of secret facilities for biological, chemical and nuclear weapons in underground wells, private villas and under the Saddam Hussein Hospital in Baghdad as recently as a year ago." If verified, she noted, "his

allegations would provide ammunition to officials within the Bush administration who have been arguing that Mr. Hussein should be driven from power partly because of his unwillingness to stop making weapons of mass destruction, despite his pledges to do so."

For months, hawks inside and outside the administration had been pressing for a pre-emptive attack on Iraq. Now, thanks to Miller's story, they could point to "proof" of Saddam's "nuclear threat." The story, reinforced by Moran's on-camera interview with al-Haideri on the giant Australian Broadcasting Corp., was soon being trumpeted by the White House and repeated by newspapers and television networks around the world. It was the first in a long line of hyped and fraudulent stories that would eventually propel the U.S. into a war with Iraq -- the first war based almost entirely on a covert propaganda campaign targeting the media.

By law, the Bush administration is expressly prohibited from disseminating government propaganda at home. But in an age of global communications, there is nothing to stop it from planting a phony pro-war story overseas -- knowing with certainty that it will reach American citizens almost instantly. A recent congressional report suggests that the Pentagon may be relying on "covert psychological operations affecting audiences within friendly nations." In a "secret amendment" to Pentagon policy, the report warns, "psyops funds might be used to publish stories favorable to American policies, or hire outside contractors without obvious ties to the Pentagon to organize rallies in support of administration policies." The report also concludes that military planners are shifting away from the Cold War view that power comes from superior weapons systems. Instead, the Pentagon now believes that "combat power can be enhanced by communications networks and technologies that control access to, and directly manipulate, information. As a result, information itself is now both a tool and a target of warfare."

It is a belief John Rendon encapsulated in a speech to cadets at the U.S. Air Force Academy in 1996. "I am not a national-security strategist or a military tactician," he declared. "I am a politician, a person who uses communication to meet public-policy or corporate-policy objectives. In fact, I am an information warrior and a perception manager." To explain his philosophy, Rendon paraphrased a journalist he knew from his days as a staffer on the presidential campaigns of George McGovern and Jimmy Carter: "This is probably best described in the words of Hunter S. Thompson, when he wrote, 'When things turn weird, the weird turn pro.'"

John Walter Rendon Jr. rises at 3 a.m. each morning after six hours of

sleep, turns on his Apple computer and begins ingesting information -- overnight news reports, e-mail messages, foreign and domestic newspapers, and an assortment of government documents, many of them available only to those with the highest security clearance. According to Pentagon documents obtained by Rolling Stone, the Rendon Group is authorized "to research and analyze information classified up to Top Secret/SCI/SI/TK/G/HCS" -- an extraordinarily high level of clearance granted to only a handful of defense contractors. "SCI" stands for Sensitive Compartmented Information, data classified higher than Top Secret. "SI" is Special Intelligence, very secret communications intercepted by the National Security Agency. "TK" refers to Talent/Keyhole, code names for imagery from reconnaissance aircraft and spy satellites. "G" stands for Gamma (communications intercepts from extremely sensitive sources) and "HCS" means Humint Control System (information from a very sensitive human source). Taken together, the acronyms indicate that Rendon enjoys access to the most secret information from all three forms of intelligence collection: eavesdropping, imaging satellites and human spies.

Rendon lives in a multimillion-dollar home in Washington's exclusive Kalorama neighborhood. A few doors down from Rendon is the home of former Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara; just around the corner lives current Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. At fifty-six, Rendon wears owlish glasses and combs his thick mane of silver-gray hair to the side, Kennedy-style. He heads to work each morning clad in a custom-made shirt with his monogram on the right cuff and a sharply tailored blue blazer that hangs loose around his bulky frame. By the time he pulls up to the Rendon Group's headquarters near Dupont Circle, he has already racked up a handsome fee for the morning's work: According to federal records, Rendon charges the CIA and the Pentagon \$311.26 an hour for his services.

Rendon is one of the most influential of the private contractors in Washington who are increasingly taking over jobs long reserved for highly trained CIA employees. In recent years, spies-for-hire have begun to replace regional desk officers, who control clandestine operations around the world; watch officers at the agency's twenty-four-hour crisis center; analysts, who sift through reams of intelligence data; and even counterintelligence officers in the field, who oversee meetings between agents and their recruited spies. According to one senior administration official involved in intelligence-budget decisions, half of the CIA's work is now performed by private contractors -- people completely unaccountable to Congress. Another senior budget official acknowledges privately that lawmakers have no idea how many rent-a-spies the CIA currently employs -- or how much unchecked power they enjoy.

Unlike many newcomers to the field, however, Rendon is a battle-tested veteran who has been secretly involved in nearly every American shooting conflict in the past two decades. In the first interview he has granted in decades, Rendon offered a peek through the keyhole of this seldom-seen world of corporate spooks -- a rarefied but growing profession. Over a dinner of lamb chops and a bottle of Chateauneuf du Pape at a private Washington club, Rendon was guarded about the details of his clandestine work -- but he boasted openly of the sweep and importance of his firm's efforts as a for-profit spy. "We've worked in ninety-one countries," he said. "Going all the way back to Panama, we've been involved in every war, with the exception of Somalia."

It is an unusual career twist for someone who entered politics as an opponent of the Vietnam War. The son of a stockbroker, Rendon grew up in New Jersey and stumped for McGovern before graduating from Northeastern University. "I was the youngest state coordinator," he recalls. "I had Maine. They told me that I understood politics -- which was a stretch, being so young." Rendon, who went on to serve as executive director of the Democratic National Committee, quickly mastered the combination of political skulduggery and media manipulation that would become his hallmark. In 1980, as the manager of Jimmy Carter's troops at the national convention in New York, he was sitting alone in the bleachers at Madison Square Garden when a reporter for ABC News approached him. "They actually did a little piece about the man behind the curtain," Rendon says. "A Wizard of Oz thing." It was a role he would end up playing for the rest of his life.

After Carter lost the election and the hard-right Reagan Revolutionaries came to power in 1981, Rendon went into business with his younger brother Rick. "Everybody started consulting," he recalls. "We started consulting." They helped elect John Kerry to the Senate in 1984 and worked for the AFL-CIO to mobilize the union vote for Walter Mondale's presidential campaign. Among the items Rendon produced was a training manual for union organizers to operate as political activists on behalf of Mondale. To keep the operation quiet, Rendon stamped CONFIDENTIAL on the cover of each of the blue plastic notebooks. It was a penchant for secrecy that would soon pervade all of his consulting deals.

To a large degree, the Rendon Group is a family affair. Rendon's wife, Sandra Libby, handles the books as chief financial officer and "senior communications strategist." Rendon's brother Rick serves as senior partner and runs the company's Boston office, producing public-service announcements for the Whale Conservation Institute and coordinating Empower Peace, a campaign that brings young people in the Middle East

in contact with American kids through video-conferencing technology. But the bulk of the company's business is decidedly less liberal and peace oriented. Rendon's first experience in the intelligence world, in fact, came courtesy of the Republicans. "Panama," he says, "brought us into the national-security environment."

In 1989, shortly after his election, President George H.W. Bush signed a highly secret "finding" authorizing the CIA to funnel \$10 million to opposition forces in Panama to overthrow Gen. Manuel Noriega. Reluctant to involve agency personnel directly, the CIA turned to the Rendon Group. Rendon's job was to work behind the scenes, using a variety of campaign and psychological techniques to put the CIA's choice, Guillermo Endara, into the presidential palace. Cash from the agency, laundered through various bank accounts and front organizations, would end up in Endara's hands, who would then pay Rendon.

A heavysset, fifty-three-year-old corporate attorney with little political experience, Endara was running against Noriega's handpicked choice, Carlos Duque. With Rendon's help, Endara beat Duque decisively at the polls -- but Noriega simply named himself "Maximum Leader" and declared the election null and void. The Bush administration then decided to remove Noriega by force -- and Rendon's job shifted from generating local support for a national election to building international support for regime change. Within days he had found the ultimate propaganda tool.

At the end of a rally in support of Endara, a band of Noriega's Dignity Battalion -- nicknamed "Dig Bats" and called "Doberman thugs" by Bush --

attacked the crowd with wooden planks, metal pipes and guns. Gang members grabbed the bodyguard of Guillermo Ford, one of Endara's vice-presidential candidates, pushed him against a car, shoved a gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger. With cameras snapping, the Dig Bats turned on Ford, batting his head with a spike-tipped metal rod and pounding him with heavy clubs, turning his white guayabera bright red with blood -- his own, and that of his dead bodyguard.

Within hours, Rendon made sure the photos reached every newsroom in the world. The next week an image of the violence made the cover of Time magazine with the caption POLITICS PANAMA STYLE: NORIEGA BLUDGEONS HIS OPPOSITION, AND THE U.S. TURNS UP THE HEAT. To further boost international support for Endara, Rendon escorted Ford on a tour of Europe to meet British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the Italian prime minister and even the pope. In December 1989, when Bush decided to invade Panama, Rendon and several of his employees were on one of the

first military jets headed to Panama City.

"I arrived fifteen minutes before it started," Rendon recalls. "My first impression is having the pilot in the plane turn around and say, 'Excuse me, sir, but if you look off to the left you'll see the attack aircraft circling before they land.' Then I remember this major saying, 'Excuse me, sir, but do you know what the air-defense capability of Panama is at the moment?' I leaned into the cockpit and said, 'Look, major, I hope by now that's no longer an issue.'"

Moments later, Rendon's plane landed at Howard Air Force Base in Panama. "I needed to get to Fort Clayton, which was where the president was," he says. "I was choppered over -- and we took some rounds on the way." There, on a U.S. military base surrounded by 24,000 U.S. troops, heavy tanks and Combat Talon AC-130 gunships, Rendon's client, Endara, was at last sworn in as president of Panama.

Rendon's involvement in the campaign to oust Saddam Hussein began seven months later, in July 1990. Rendon had taken time out for a vacation -- a long train ride across Scotland -- when he received an urgent call. "Soldiers are massing at the border outside of Kuwait," he was told. At the airport, he watched the beginning of the Iraqi invasion on television. Winging toward Washington in the first-class cabin of a Pan Am 747, Rendon spent the entire flight scratching an outline of his ideas in longhand on a yellow legal pad.

"I wrote a memo about what the Kuwaitis were going to face, and I based it on our experience in Panama and the experience of the Free French operation in World War II," Rendon says. "This was something that they needed to see and hear, and that was my whole intent. Go over, tell the Kuwaitis, 'Here's what you've got -- here's some observations, here's some recommendations, live long and prosper.'"

Back in Washington, Rendon immediately called Hamilton Jordan, the former chief of staff to President Carter and an old friend from his Democratic Party days. "He put me in touch with the Saudis, the Saudis put me in touch with the Kuwaitis and then I went over and had a meeting with the Kuwaitis," Rendon recalls. "And by the time I landed back in the United States, I got a phone call saying, 'Can you come back? We want you to do what's in the memo.'"

What the Kuwaitis wanted was help in selling a war of liberation to the American government -- and the American public. Rendon proposed a massive "perception management" campaign designed to convince the world of the need to join forces to rescue Kuwait. Working through an

organization called Citizens for a Free Kuwait, the Kuwaiti government in exile agreed to pay Rendon \$100,000 a month for his assistance.

To coordinate the operation, Rendon opened an office in London. Once the Gulf War began, he remained extremely busy trying to prevent the American press from reporting on the dark side of the Kuwaiti government, an autocratic oil-tocracy ruled by a family of wealthy sheiks. When newspapers began reporting that many Kuwaitis were actually living it up in nightclubs in Cairo as Americans were dying in the Kuwaiti sand, the Rendon Group quickly counterattacked. Almost instantly, a wave of articles began appearing telling the story of grateful Kuwaitis mailing 20,000 personally signed valentines to American troops on the front lines, all arranged by Rendon.

Rendon also set up an elaborate television and radio network, and developed programming that was beamed into Kuwait from Taif, Saudi Arabia. "It was important that the Kuwaitis in occupied Kuwait understood that the rest of the world was doing something," he says. Each night, Rendon's troops in London produced a script and sent it via microwave to Taif, ensuring that the "news" beamed into Kuwait reflected a sufficiently pro-American line.

When it comes to staging a war, few things are left to chance. After Iraq withdrew from Kuwait, it was Rendon's responsibility to make the victory march look like the flag-waving liberation of France after World War II. "Did you ever stop to wonder," he later remarked, "how the people of Kuwait City, after being held hostage for seven long and painful months, were able to get hand-held American -- and, for that matter, the flags of other coalition countries?" After a pause, he added, "Well, you now know the answer. That was one of my jobs then."

Although his work is highly secret, Rendon insists he deals only in "timely, truthful and accurate information." His job, he says, is to counter false perceptions that the news media perpetuate because they consider it "more important to be first than to be right." In modern warfare, he believes, the outcome depends largely on the public's perception of the war -- whether it is winnable, whether it is worth the cost. "We are being haunted and stalked by the difference between perception and reality," he says. "Because the lines are divergent, this difference between perception and reality is one of the greatest strategic communications challenges of war."

By the time the Gulf War came to a close in 1991, the Rendon Group was firmly established as Washington's leading salesman for regime change. But Rendon's new assignment went beyond simply manipulating the media.

After the war ended, the Top Secret order signed by President Bush to oust Hussein included a rare "lethal finding" -- meaning deadly action could be taken if necessary. Under contract to the CIA, Rendon was charged with helping to create a dissident force with the avowed purpose of violently overthrowing the entire Iraqi government. It is an undertaking that Rendon still considers too classified to discuss. "That's where we're wandering into places I'm not going to talk about," he says. "If you take an oath, it should mean something."

Thomas Twetten, the CIA's former deputy of operations, credits Rendon with virtually creating the INC. "The INC was clueless," he once observed. "They needed a lot of help and didn't know where to start. That is why Rendon was brought in." Acting as the group's senior adviser and aided by truckloads of CIA dollars, Rendon pulled together a wide spectrum of Iraqi dissidents and sponsored a conference in Vienna to organize them into an umbrella organization, which he dubbed the Iraqi National Congress. Then, as in Panama, his assignment was to help oust a brutal dictator and replace him with someone chosen by the CIA. "The reason they got the contract was because of what they had done in Panama -- so they were known," recalls Whitley Bruner, former chief of the CIA's station in Baghdad. This time the target was Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and the agency's successor of choice was Ahmad Chalabi, a crafty, avuncular Iraqi exile beloved by Washington's neoconservatives.

Chalabi was a curious choice to lead a rebellion. In 1992, he was convicted in Jordan of making false statements and embezzling \$230 million from his own bank, for which he was sentenced in absentia to twenty-two years of hard labor. But the only credential that mattered was his politics. "From day one," Rendon says, "Chalabi was very clear that his biggest interest was to rid Iraq of Saddam." Bruner, who dealt with Chalabi and Rendon in London in 1991, puts it even more bluntly. "Chalabi's primary focus," he said later, "was to drag us into a war."

The key element of Rendon's INC operation was a worldwide media blitz designed to turn Hussein, a once dangerous but now contained regional leader, into the greatest threat to world peace. Each month, \$326,000 was passed from the CIA to the Rendon Group and the INC via various front organizations. Rendon profited handsomely, receiving a "management fee" of ten percent above what it spent on the project. According to some reports, the company made nearly \$100 million on the contract during the five years following the Gulf War.

Rendon made considerable headway with the INC, but following the group's failed coup attempt against Saddam in 1996, the CIA lost confidence in Chalabi and cut off his monthly paycheck. But Chalabi and Rendon simply

switched sides, moving over to the Pentagon, and the money continued to flow. "The Rendon Group is not in great odor in Langley these days," notes Bruner. "Their contracts are much more with the Defense Department."

Rendon's influence rose considerably in Washington after the terrorist attacks of September 11th. In a single stroke, Osama bin Laden altered the world's perception of reality -- and in an age of nonstop information, whoever controls perception wins. What Bush needed to fight the War on Terror was a skilled information warrior -- and Rendon was widely acknowledged as the best. "The events of 11 September 2001 changed everything, not least of which was the administration's outlook concerning strategic influence," notes one Army report. "Faced with direct evidence that many people around the world actively hated the United States, Bush began taking action to more effectively explain U.S. policy overseas. Initially the White House and DoD turned to the Rendon Group."

Three weeks after the September 11th attacks, according to documents obtained from defense sources, the Pentagon awarded a large contract to the Rendon Group. Around the same time, Pentagon officials also set up a highly secret organization called the Office of Strategic Influence. Part of the OSI's mission was to conduct covert disinformation and deception operations -- planting false news items in the media and hiding their origins. "It's sometimes valuable from a military standpoint to be able to engage in deception with respect to future anticipated plans," Vice President Dick Cheney said in explaining the operation. Even the military's top brass found the clandestine unit unnerving. "When I get their briefings, it's scary," a senior official said at the time.

In February 2002, The New York Times reported that the Pentagon had hired Rendon "to help the new office," a charge Rendon denies. "We had nothing to do with that," he says. "We were not in their reporting chain. We were reporting directly to the J-3" -- the head of operations at the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Following the leak, Rumsfeld was forced to shut down the organization. But much of the office's operations were apparently shifted to another unit, deeper in the Pentagon's bureaucracy, called the Information Operations Task Force, and Rendon was closely connected to this group. "Greg Newbold was the J-3 at the time, and we reported to him through the IOTF," Rendon says.

According to the Pentagon documents, the Rendon Group played a major role in the IOTF. The company was charged with creating an "Information War Room" to monitor worldwide news reports at lightning speed and

respond almost instantly with counterpropaganda. A key weapon, according to the documents, was Rendon's "proprietary state-of-the-art news-wire collection system called 'Livewire,' which takes real-time news-wire reports, as they are filed, before they are on the Internet, before CNN can read them on the air and twenty-four hours before they appear in the morning newspapers, and sorts them by keyword. The system provides the most current real-time access to news and information available to private or public organizations."

The top target that the pentagon assigned to Rendon was the Al-Jazeera television network. The contract called for the Rendon Group to undertake a massive "media mapping" campaign against the news organization, which the Pentagon considered "critical to U.S. objectives in the War on Terrorism."

According to the contract, Rendon would provide a "detailed content analysis of the station's daily broadcast . . . [and] identify the biases of specific journalists and potentially obtain an understanding of their allegiances, including the possibility of specific relationships and sponsorships."

The secret targeting of foreign journalists may have had a sinister purpose.

Among the missions proposed for the Pentagon's Office of Strategic Influence was one to "coerce" foreign journalists and plant false information overseas. Secret briefing papers also said the office should find ways to "punish" those who convey the "wrong message." One senior officer told CNN that the plan would "formalize government deception, dishonesty and misinformation."

According to the Pentagon documents, Rendon would use his media analysis to conduct a worldwide propaganda campaign, deploying teams of information warriors to allied nations to assist them "in developing and delivering specific messages to the local population, combatants, front-line states, the media and the international community." Among the places Rendon's info-war teams would be sent were Jakarta, Indonesia; Islamabad, Pakistan; Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; Cairo; Ankara, Turkey; and Tashkent, Uzbekistan. The teams would produce and script television news segments "built around themes and story lines supportive of U.S. policy objectives."

Rendon was also charged with engaging in "military deception" online -- an activity once assigned to the OSI. The company was contracted to monitor Internet chat rooms in both English and Arabic -- and

"participate in these chat rooms when/if tasked." Rendon would also create a Web site "with regular news summaries and feature articles. Targeted at the global public, in English and at least four (4) additional languages, this activity also will include an extensive e-mail push operation." These techniques are commonly used to plant a variety of propaganda, including false information.

Still another newly formed propaganda operation in which Rendon played a major part was the Office of Global Communications, which operated out of the White House and was charged with spreading the administration's message on the War in Iraq. Every morning at 9:30, Rendon took part in the White House OGC conference call, where officials would discuss the theme of the day and who would deliver it. The office also worked closely with the White House Iraq Group, whose high-level members, including recently indicted Cheney chief of staff Lewis Libby, were responsible for selling the war to the American public.

Never before in history had such an extensive secret network been established to shape the entire world's perception of a war. "It was not just bad intelligence -- it was an orchestrated effort," says Sam Gardner, a retired Air Force colonel who has taught strategy and military operations at the National War College. "It began before the war, was a major effort during the war and continues as post-conflict distortions."

In the first weeks following the September 11th attacks, Rendon operated at a frantic pitch. "In the early stages it was fielding every ground ball that was coming, because nobody was sure if we were ever going to be attacked again," he says. "It was 'What do you know about this, what do you know about that, what else can you get, can you talk to somebody over here?' We functioned twenty-four hours a day. We maintained situational awareness, in military terms, on all things related to terrorism. We were doing 195 newspapers and 43 countries in fourteen or fifteen languages. If you do this correctly, I can tell you what's on the evening news tonight in a country before it happens. I can give you, as a policymaker, a six-hour break on how you can affect what's going to be on the news. They'll take that in a heartbeat."

The Bush administration took everything Rendon had to offer. Between 2000 and 2004, Pentagon documents show, the Rendon Group received at least thirty-five contracts with the Defense Department, worth a total of \$50 million to \$100 million.

The mourners genuflected, made the sign of the cross and took their seats along the hard, shiny pews of Our Lady of Victories Catholic

Church. It was April 2nd, 2003 -- the start of fall in the small Australian town of Glenelg, an aging beach resort of white Victorian homes and soft, blond sand on Holdback Bay. Rendon had flown halfway around the world to join nearly 600 friends and family who were gathered to say farewell to a local son and amateur football champ, Paul Moran. Three days into the invasion of Iraq, the freelance journalist and Rendon employee had become the first member of the media to be killed in the war -- a war he had covertly helped to start.

Moran had lived a double life, filing reports for the Australian Broadcasting Corp. and other news organizations, while at other times operating as a clandestine agent for Rendon, enjoying what his family calls his "James Bond lifestyle." Moran had trained Iraqi opposition forces in photographic espionage, showing them how to covertly document Iraqi military activities, and had produced pro-war announcements for the Pentagon. "He worked for the Rendon Group in London," says his mother, Kathleen. "They just send people all over the world -- where there are wars."

Moran was covering the Iraq invasion for ABC, filming at a Kurdish-controlled checkpoint in the city of Sulaymaniyah, when a car driven by a suicide bomber blew up next to him. "I saw the car in a kind of slow-motion disintegrate," recalls Eric Campbell, a correspondent who was filming with Moran. "A soldier handed me a passport, which was charred. That's when I knew Paul was dead."

As the Mass ended and Moran's Australian-flag-draped coffin passed by the mourners, Rendon lifted his right arm and saluted. He refused to discuss Moran's role in the company, saying only that "Paul worked for us on a number of projects." But on the long flight back to Washington, across more than a dozen time zones, Rendon outlined his feelings in an e-mail: "The day did begin with dark and ominous clouds much befitting the emotions we all felt -- sadness and anger at the senseless violence that claimed our comrade Paul Moran ten short days ago and many decades of emotion ago."

The Rendon Group also organized a memorial service in London, where Moran first went to work for the company in 1990. Held at Home House, a private club in Portman Square where Moran often stayed while visiting the city, the event was set among photographs of Moran in various locations around the Middle East. Zaab Sethna, who organized the al-Haideri media exclusive in Thailand for Moran and Judith Miller, gave a touching tribute to his former colleague. "I think that on both a personal and professional level Paul was deeply admired and loved by the people at the Rendon Group," Sethna later said.

Although Moran was gone, the falsified story about weapons of mass destruction that he and Sethna had broadcast around the world lived on. Seven months earlier, as President Bush was about to argue his case for war before the U.N., the White House had given prominent billing to al-Haideri's fabricated charges. In a report ironically titled "Iraq: Denial and Deception," the administration referred to al-Haideri by name and detailed his allegations -- even though the CIA had already determined them to be lies. The report was placed on the White House Web site on September 12th, 2002, and remains there today. One version of the report even credits Miller's article for the information.

Miller also continued to promote al-Haideri's tale of Saddam's villainy. In January 2003, more than a year after her first article appeared, Miller again reported that Pentagon "intelligence officials" were telling her that "some of the most valuable information has come from Adnan Ihsan Saeed al-Haideri." His interviews with the Defense Intelligence Agency, Miller added, "ultimately resulted in dozens of highly credible reports on Iraqi weapons-related activity and purchases, officials said."

Finally, in early 2004, more than two years after he made the dramatic allegations to Miller and Moran about Saddam's weapons of mass destruction, al-Haideri was taken back to Iraq by the CIA's Iraq Survey Group. On a wide-ranging trip through Baghdad and other key locations, al-Haideri was given the opportunity to point out exactly where Saddam's stockpiles were hidden, confirming the charges that had helped to start a war.

In the end, he could not identify a single site where illegal weapons were buried.

As the war in Iraq has spiraled out of control, the Bush administration's covert propaganda campaign has intensified. According to a secret Pentagon report personally approved by Rumsfeld in October 2003 and obtained by Rolling Stone, the Strategic Command is authorized to engage in "military deception" -- defined as "presenting false information, images or statements." The seventy-four-page document, titled "Information Operations Roadmap," also calls for psychological operations to be launched over radio, television, cell phones and "emerging technologies" such as the Internet. In addition to being classified secret, the road map is also stamped nofor, meaning it cannot be shared even with our allies.

As the acknowledged general of such propaganda warfare, Rendon insists that the work he does is for the good of all Americans. "For us, it's a

question of patriotism," he says. "It's not a question of politics, and that's an important distinction. I feel very strongly about that personally. If brave men and women are going to be put in harm's way, they deserve support." But in Iraq, American troops and Iraqi civilians were put in harm's way, in large part, by the false information spread by Rendon and the men he trained in information warfare. And given the rapid growth of what is known as the "security-intelligence complex" in Washington, covert perception managers are likely to play an increasingly influential role in the wars of the future.

Indeed, Rendon is already thinking ahead. Last year, he attended a conference on information operations in London, where he offered an assessment on the Pentagon's efforts to manipulate the media. According to those present, Rendon applauded the practice of embedding journalists with American forces. "He said the embedded idea was great," says an Air Force colonel who attended the talk. "It worked as they had found in the test. It was the war version of reality television, and for the most part they did not lose control of the story." But Rendon also cautioned that individual news organizations were often able to "take control of the story," shaping the news before the Pentagon asserted its spin on the day's events.

"We lost control of the context," Rendon warned. "That has to be fixed for the next war."

James Bamford is the best-selling author of "A Pretext for War: 9/11, Iraq, and the Abuse of America's Intelligence Agencies" (2004) and "Body of Secrets: Anatomy of the Ultra-Secret National Security Agency" (2001). This is his first article for Rolling Stone. (Posted Nov 17, 2005)