

The Man Who Sold the Iraq War

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John Rendon, Bush's General in the Propaganda War

Investigative journalist James Bamford examines how the Bush administration and Iraqi National Congress used the PR firm Rendon Group to feed journalists - including Judith Miller -- fabricated stories in an effort to sell the war. The firm has received millions in government contracts since 1991 when it was by the CIA to help "create the conditions for the removal of Hussein from power.

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Earlier this month, Democrats forced the Senate into an unusual closed session to question pre-war intelligence and claims of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. The move came one week after the indictment of Vice President Dick Cheney's chief of staff Lewis "Scooter" Libby for his involvement in the CIA leak case in which the identity of an undercover CIA operative Valerie Plame was exposed after her husband Joseph Wilson criticized the Bush administration's use of a debunked piece of evidence for WMDs in Iraq.

So how did the Bush administration sell the war to the American public? Well a new article in Rolling Stone magazine examines just that. In it, investigative journalist James Bamford looks at the role of one of the most powerful public relations firms in Washington D.C in setting the stage for the Iraq war.

The firm is the Rendon Group and it's founder and CEO is John Rendon - the former Executive Director of the Democratic National Committee.

Bamford writes that the Pentagon secretly awarded Rendon 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 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."

- James Bamford, investigative reporter and author of the new article "The Man Who Sold The War" published in the December 1st issue of Rolling Stone Magazine. Bamford is also the author of several books including "A Pretext for War: 9/11, Iraq, and the Abuse of America's Intelligence Agencies."

AMY GOODMAN: James Bamford joins us in our Firehouse studio here in New York, the author of several books including the first one ever written about the National Security Agency called The Puzzle Palace: Inside America's Most Secret Intelligence Organization. His latest book is A Pretext for War: 9/11, Iraq and the Abuse of America's Intelligence Agencies. We welcome you to Democracy Now!

JAMES BAMFORD: Thanks, Amy. I appreciate it.

AMY GOODMAN: It's great to have you with us. Well, this piece in Rolling Stone is quite a read. Why don't you start off by talking about a man in the Gulf of Thailand who was taking a lie detector test?

JAMES BAMFORD: Well, this took place in December of 2001. This was really the sort of opening shot of the propaganda war to get the United States into war. And the person being polygraphed was an Iraqi defector by the name of al-Haideri, and the Iraqi National Congress, the I.N.C., had brought him out of Iraq and brought him to Thailand primarily to expose him to the media and to try to get his story told. And what his story was was that Saddam Hussein had not only chemical and biological weapons but even nuclear weapons and precursors to nuclear weapons hidden in Iraq in various places. Some of the biological weapons were supposedly hidden under the main hospital in Baghdad, for example. So it was an amazing story.

And this was the -- up until this time there was a lot of speculation in the press and in Congress and other places about

what Saddam may have, what might have been left over from the Gulf War and so forth. But this was going to be the very first time that somebody could actually point to information as proof, having seen where these things were buried and so forth. So, the I.N.C., the Iraqi National Congress, which was led by Ahmed Chalabi, decided to call in two journalists to broadcast this information to the world.

AMY GOODMAN: Wait. First, the lie detector proved what?

JAMES BAMFORD: Exactly. Before he actually called these people in to broadcast this information, obviously the C.I.A. had a big interest in this and the Pentagon had a big interest in this, so the C.I.A. flew a polygraph operator with his machine all the way over to Thailand, Pattaya, Thailand, which is south of Bangkok, and they went into a hotel room, they strapped up al-Haideri, and they asked him all these questions. And they went over and over for hours his allegations regarding weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and they came away with charts that indicated he was deceptive, that he was lying, that this was not true. And they flew back to Washington and, presumably, assuming this was going to be the end of it. But that was information that was never made public. They didn't broadcast that information. So what happened was the I.N.C. and Chalabi decided to take that bogus information that al-Haideri was giving and broadcast it around the world. So, they called in two journalists. One of the journalists was Judy Miller, who was given the worldwide print exclusive rights to the story.

AMY GOODMAN: And who called her in?

JAMES BAMFORD: Chalabi called her in. Chalabi asked her if she wanted to do the story, and she flew from Washington all the way over to Bangkok to interview al-Haideri.

AMY GOODMAN: Chalabi on the payroll of the C.I.A.?

JAMES BAMFORD: At this time, Chalabi was -- he had been getting money from the C.I.A. up until the mid-1990s, and then he started getting money from the Pentagon after the C.I.A. failed to trust him any more. So, the other journalist that they called in was Paul Moran, who was a journalist working for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. And what makes this very interesting was how this came about. The people setting this up were members of the I.N.C. whose main goal all along from the very beginning was overthrowing Saddam Hussein anyway possible. And ironically, one of the people they called in, Paul Moran, had formerly worked for the I.N.C., and he had also worked for another company called the Rendon Group.

AMY GOODMAN: Hold it there. We have to break. When we come back, we'll take a look at the Rendon Group. We are talking to investigative reporter James Bamford, author of *A Pretext for War*, has just written a piece in *Rolling Stone* called "The Man Who Sold the War."