

The black-and-white video starts with a mini-van locked in the crosshairs and the sound of a missile launching. A ball of fire suddenly consumes the van and a palm grove somewhere in Iraq.

"Good shot," says a voice squawking over what sounds like a military radio. Before the one-minute video clip is over, two more SUVs are destroyed by Apache helicopters.

The video is one of dozens brought to viewers around the world by Maj. Alayne Conway, the top public affairs officer for the 3rd Infantry Division. When her unit was in Iraq, her office sent out four to six videos a day to media outlets around the world, as well as posting them on YouTube.

"You want to make sure you edit it in the right way," Conway said. "You have to go through the steps. ... Is this something that is going to make Joe Six-Pack look up from his TV dinner or his fast-food meal and look up at the TV and say, 'Wow, the American troops are kicking butt in Iraq?'"

Critics say the purpose of such violent material is not to inform the public about what the military is doing, but to promote it. Public affairs officers argue that they are in a battle with insurgents to shape the public perception of the wars they are fighting, and they will use every means available to push the military's version of events.

The Pentagon now spends more than \$550 million a year — at least double the amount since 2003 — on public affairs, and that doesn't including personnel costs. Public affairs officers are, in the words of the military's training manual, a "perception management tool." Their job is to provide facts but not spin to American audiences and the American media.

Over the past two years, the number of public affairs officers trained by the Defense Information School has grown by 24 percent to almost 3,500. The military is also expanding its Internet presence from 300 to 1,000 sites and increasing its free cable programming on the Pentagon Channel by 33 percent to 2,080 programs.

Along with putting out its own messages, the public affairs arm tries to regulate what other media put out.

In recent years, as reporting out of Iraq turned more negative, the public affairs department has increased its ground rules for media who embed with troops from one to four pages.

In mid-2008, Associated Press reporter Bradley Brooks was stepping off a cargo plane in Mosul en route to an embed when he saw pallbearers carry the flag-draped coffins of dead soldiers from Humvee ambulances onto a plane. Brooks talked to soldiers, who mentioned their anger with political leaders, and wrote a story.

Within 24 hours the military had expelled him from northern Iraq. He was told he had broken a new rule that embedded reporters could not write while in transit.

In 2008, eight journalists were detained for more than 48 hours, according to cases tracked by the AP, more than in any other year since the war began. Since 2003, the AP alone has had 11 journalists detained in Iraq for more than 24 hours. And a Reuters journalist has been detained by U.S. forces as "a security threat" since Sept. 2.

"All of these journalists, with the exception of the one being held now, have been released without charge. That troubles us because it suggests that they are not able to successfully charge these journalists with anything," said Joel Simon, executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Pentagon officials say commanders have the right to detain anyone they consider a threat to security, and that the U.S. Constitution does not apply to foreign battlefields.

"The U.S. military is going to control the battle space in which they operate," Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman told a gathering of journalists in April 2007. "The First Amendment provides no right of access to the battlefield — zero, none." Whitman's assertion has never been tested in court, and legal opinions vary.

The public affairs department has even arranged to fly friendly bloggers to Iraq and Afghanistan, according to documents made available through the Freedom of Information Act. The public affairs office decided who could take part in special "Blogger Roundtables" with Pentagon officials in 2005, and transcripts show that those chosen were overwhelmingly pro-military and repeated the information they heard on their own Web sites without always revealing its source.

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