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Nancy Youseff Tape 2 Transcript

Do guys know? Do you guys know about what happened to Jill? Everybody know? She was a sent to western Baghdad to do an interview and they kidnapped her and she was held for 80 days and released. Jill was a model hostage, you know I tell you like the consequences of your decisions, in all likelihood they will kidnap me, maybe I live maybe I die, they will kill the staff. And that's what happened in those days, they use one car, she only had one car, locked her in, killed Allen, her translator, right away, and took her from place to place to place to place to place, she was a model hostage, she did what they said, she made herself a person, she cooked for them, she played with their children, she made herself a person, not knowing how long it was going to be, it could have been months, and really having yourself alive, at one point when she thought she was going to die she said to them please don't behead me just shoot me, because we didn't ,you know when she was kidnapped, those were the longest 82 days of her life, because we didn't know, if she gets to Volusia that's it , they were going to kill her, yet she made it west of Baghdad and survived with that same spirit that you guys got to know and carry on her story and keep her alive. She was kind, she was patient, and the interesting story is they tried to convert her to Islam but she refused to do it, tactfully, because understood that if she converted, she would be held hostage anyway.

She was brilliant, she was brilliant and did a beautiful, beautiful job, we're all so grateful that she kept herself alive, and it was just brilliant, and people have done mistakes, like they would tell these guys they're dumb, and that would get you killed. But for 82 days she did, not knowing when and if she was going to get released, she said at one point I thought I was going to be held for years, she really believed that, but she ate everything on her plate, she didn't complain when she got up, she gained weight, she ate everything on her plate, because she didn't want to offend anybody, she was brilliant, brilliant, and I'm so grateful for her.

(Audience member asks a question) Talk about how excited you were to go to Baghdad and how it came up...

Yeah you think that sounds like some brilliant career, right? So I'm sitting in Macomb County and an email comes in asking, you want to go to Baghdad? Sure, I wrote back, yes, and that was that, and so the metro editor didn't really pass my name around our chain because he didn't want to lose correspondents, so the managing editor, I stopped by his office and I'm like, what happened to the whole Baghdad thing? And this was like three or four, and he said nobody passed their names up, I was going to go to Washington, so he thought there was nobody, so I said no no no I am interested, so he told Washington I was interested, bless his heart for doing it, so Washington called me and asked me if I had any work experience, and I said, nope. Do you have any reporting experience? Nope. What have you done outside of print? Nothing. Do you speak Arabic? Yes, come on, and that's how I got the job. And there's no training, like there's just that security training and then they just drop you in Jordan and you go. And that's how it happened.

(Audience member asks a question) What was the hardest part about being there and the worst story?

The hardest part was when I got to Baghdad I had never seen a dead child. I had never seen swarms of dead bodies before, you know when you're doing an interview and there's like a bodies sitting there. Like because of rotting smell it's impossible. So you would be literally standing in the street and there was a body with flies all over it, and you're doing an interview, so it was really jarring, and I have never seen anything like that before. And I wasn't prepared for that. It took me nine months to be ready to go back to work after that, because it just shook me to the core. And that's the thing if you want to do this job, you have to take care of yourself, you really really do, it's such an addictive story that you just want to stay and stay until you wear yourself out. And people won't take care of you if you do that, it you snap, you're not serving anybody, you're not serving the story, and you

will get pushed aside. Like you have to speak up, whatever your line is, and everybody has a different one and that's ok. I'm here now because I knew if I had stayed longer, I'd have to be crazy to. So I knew that, and some people are staying over there and are doing great, but some people push it too far, and that's the thing if you're going to go into this, you have to take care of yourself, you really do, because the companies will not, they will push you aside and go on to the next person, and you're not serving anyone, what's another six months in the grand scheme of things? Nothing.

(Audience member asks a question, microphone feedback too loud to make out)

Yeah that's a great question, we're a real team, like we shared numbers, all sorts of craziness, because I needed that guy to be my friend because he might be the difference between life and death, he might have gone through some experience and I needed him to put me on his email list and say by the way this happened to me today, so it is a real sense of camaraderie but it's still competitive, I mean we would share numbers and things and we would even go out and tell stories together, it was a real sense of camaraderie but I always wanted to beat that person whoever it was journalistically, but because it was so life or death you would do anything, I mean, we put together email lists, I got shot at here, I almost got kidnapped here, so people who woke us up, and in doing so I was telling people what I was working on and I didn't, you know you don't have to tell people the details of your story, but if it was security, I told them, because I wanted somebody to tell me, and in doing so you sort of gave away what you were working on and your approach, but we needed each other, we had no social outlook besides that, you know what I mean? My going to the neighbor's house was going to the fourth floor to see the LA times, really, that was it, or going downstairs and going to the time house, that was it, so we needed each other.

(Audience member asks a question, There's a lot of runners right now with the 2008 presidential election coming up and I was wondering what your sense is of how much things will really change if a democrat is voted into office...)

I don't know, I don't know because the problem is, to answer that question you have to answer first, what influence we have on Iraq, what voters are influenced, there's a big difference between stopping the civil war and slowing it down and actually having an influence, do you know what I mean? We can stand in between, you know what I mean, and say hey don't shoot each other, but can we really change the course of events, I don't know, I really don't know. You know it will be really interesting in the South, I don't know if you guys know but the British troops are leaving Basrah this summer, the southern part of Iraq, and it will be interesting to see what happens in Basrah, if Basrah breaks out and is fundamentally different or gets more private, then that tells us that we are having a big influence, and if it doesn't then that might shape our decisions here about how long we stay, because the truth is we have no idea, nobody has any idea what kind of influence we have any measures on such a thing, I think Basrah will answer a lot of that this summer, we'll see, how much it has changed.

(Audience member asks question, too difficult to hear from feedback, man asks about this story's affect on Rumsfeld and George W. Bush spin on things took on a life of its own and then there was the media running around spinning lies of their own, so what's going on?...)

Well we were aware of it, we fought for years doing story after story after story saying things like normal, I wrote the first story on April 20th, and it was 2 years ago that people started to say, not even, a year and half ago, that things weren't going so well, thousands of stories were written in between saying that, aggressively saying that, and people didn't want to believe it, my own personal sense, and I don't know, I think it's hard to believe that your own administration would lie, right it just sounds insane, what lie to that degree? Say that something is perfectly rosy when it is actually catastrophic? I think up until now it was inconceivable, like ok spin, that's one thing, but lie, overtly lie? I think it was hard for a lot of people to accept, especially when it was like the vice president versus some crackpot walking around Baghdad because she answered some email. You know what I mean, who's going to win that battle, in terms of the world of credibility, you know what I mean? I

think that was the challenge, and I think that up until thousands of stories, thousands of stories between before people started looking up and saying maybe this isn't going so well, that and our troops not coming home, and our casualties going up, our rates of casualties going up. Like at some point the evidence was overwhelming. Like that is my own theory, I don't know how else to explain it.

(Audience asks a question, do you think the United States is a catalyst for this civil war.)

I have a theory, I have a theory, I haven't proven it, and it's just my own theory, look ok is there a suni shia schism, yes, there is, I was raised suni and all I was told about shia was that they were crazy, that's all I knew ok, but the suni were dirty and not educated, ok there is a schism there, I can see that, and Saddam oppressed shia, absolutely, he did it, and the higher you went up in the rankings the more important it was whether you were suni or shia. But I don't think it was that clean I think it was complex, more complex than that, I personally think that we were catalyst because after the first gulf war when the shia rose up, remember that, the first gulf war happened and they thought were coming in and taking out Saddam, so they went up in arms, and talking out against Saddam, and what did he do, he went out and killed shia in a very wide scale massacre, in terms of the suni shia schism, it was the first time that Saddam had gone after people and persecuted them and killed them by the thousands.

By the thousands for being shia and I really believe that was the first seed in planting sectarianism in Iraq, because no one could ever, he persecuted people like on an individual basis, you know what I mean, it was a little bit more than, he was micromanager so he persecuted on micromanaging right away and that was a wide scale killing, and that to me was what planted that, now you talk about now what we've done, just by virtue of not providing stability and security and holding elections too soon, right because when the elections were held people were not voting on the candidates but were voting for set, that was not an election in my mind it was a census, it was a census because if you don't know who the candidates are and you don't know what they stand for, because the people were too afraid to give their names, you divide a nation, it ends up dividing a nation because all you're voting on is based on your sectarian laws.

So that was like the second seed that was planted, but I think the first one was in 1991 and the first time we did it in this war, in this war, was when the CTA, you guys remember the CTA, Paul Brimmer and Jay Garner and company, do you remember them? In 2003 when they set up the first of 56 governments right, the first one they said in the interest of democracy, ok of the 100 seats 60 are going to be shia, 20 are going to be suni, and 20 were going to be Kurdi, and suddenly there was no such thing as Iraqi nationalism. Your power was within your set, and that was the first time we planted it this time, because it destroyed what it meant to be an Iraqi nationalist. Now who know what it is now, this time we planted it that way, but I think the very first seed was in 1991, and this time when we start naming people, you're shia? Come join the government. I was outside the convention center, the one that got hit the other day, after the first meeting of the new government, and this guy comes up to me and he says, can I get a ride? I say you're like a big important guy in the government, what do you need a ride from me for? He said, they pulled me off the streets and said come join the new government, because you're shia, ok, you know what I mean, that's now how governments are formed, and it kills Iraqi nationalism, whatever, however their struggle is, I don't know.

(Audience member question, talk about the antiquities of the loss...)

Um, you guys know that Baghdad museums were looted? Right, right after the, like we're not talking about just Baghdad history but world history, right, were looted and taken out, and so there's a real movement going on to save, you know and you could go into the museums and take what you want, and we went down to Babylon three days after the war and the museum had been looted, the polls

ruined it when they were guarding Babylon, when you went down the mount it was probably destroyed, or severely damaged, and there's a real movement going on now to save the antiquities.

Just so you know the challenge of it, Downey George, who is a Christian, and loved the museum, he fled the country just a few months ago because his son got a death threat I think, and that's what I mean about those people that can't be replaced because they are the core of the country, and he fled, but they are getting some of them back because some of them were taken by Iraqi's trying to protect them and some of them were taken by people trying to make money, but the museum is closed and they have a new wing, they have a storage now where they put all the stuff from Saddam's palaces, they have a modern Iraqi history museum, but the movement by the way is happening outside of Iraq, not in Iraq, because people are so consumed with the immediate that who can think about antiquities yet.

(Audience asks question, feedback too loud to hear)

Yeah, I mean being a journalist what is it? I mean you're reporting the story even as you learn it and you're bringing your bias to it and you always have to be aware of that, and you have to address it, and those guys are loveable, I mean how can you not love the guys in the army, like you hang out with them, they're fun, they're from places that you know, they love the united states, they're so easy to fall in love with and to want to take care of, and their life is in your hands, their life is in your hands literally, so how do you reconcile that, I mean I think you are aware of that bias and you understand that in a sense by telling people what is happening to them, you are doing people much more of a justice than to sugarcoat what they are going through. I think people sort of equate criticizing their mission as somehow un-American however I would argue that it is more American to tell people what is being asked of this army, people are now saying this army is devoted, you got guys going now on their fifth rotation, fifth rotation! Into Iraqi, so we have a responsibility to tell people what is being asked of them, and I think in due to time they have come to appreciate it, when you're on your fifth rotation, criticizing the commander who hit the policies being asked of him, it doesn't sound so bad.

(Audience member asks question, have you or your staff ever written a story.....)

Yes, and a lot of people have been killed just for being journalists, the staff doesn't put the people's full names on their stories because they don't want to be tracked down, but yeah, there have been people that have been in danger, and you have to balance that all the time, you call these sources and you tell them, like you know in Iraq it's your first name, your father's name, your grandfather's name and then your tribal name, but we try to pick it apart, sometimes it's your first name father's name, first name tribal name, first name grandfathers name and so that's how we try to do it so we're being accurate but without giving too much information away about who these people are. And they are very aware of that, people are reading that, there was an Australian who was kidnapped, and they said he was a spy, and he said, no I'm a journalist, and they googled his name to confirm that he was a journalist. One of my stories had been printed out and distributed, the Arabic press they translate all of our stories so they all know what we're doing, so yeah, you're very aware of that.

(Audience member's comments)

I like the story about the guy who was modeling himself after Jon Stewart, he did the equivalent of the daily show Iraq, I thought it was funny he was in Assyria filming it because they were going to track him if he did it here, and it was so fun, it was so fun, one because it was the first time I understood an Iraqi dialect that I could laugh at the same time at the staff versus waiting for translation, and it was smart and funny and we got to have a good time, and it wasn't death and destruction, it was just fun, you know? Just telling jokes, the guy was just so funny, I mean, my favorite jokes that he told was, it was this fat guy who wore a big fat wig and he just sat there and he did this fake newscast and he said "Breaking news, breaking news, George W. Bush has announced the

timetable for all of the Iraqi people”, and it was just smart and I loved it, you know, It was good to laugh, you know what I mean, where our whole job was to laugh and translate jokes, and I was downloading the daily show and it was an Arabic version of it, this guy was nice and smart and it felt like there was a sense of vitality in what he was doing and the Iraqis loved it loved that show, he was crazy, although he had to do the show from Assyria, but he was crazy. They also have a big brother in Kyrgyzstan they do, and there’s one in the region they do that’s like an American Idol, that’s sort of disturbing right? I mean this is what we brought? Good lord! (*audience chuckles*) And you know there’s Oprah now and Dr. Phil and they get the news on the satellite, they get Oprah, you remember Jill when she was kidnapped? And she said they gave me a remote control and said pick a show, she said how do you channel surf, she went with Oprah.

It is really funny the things that they picked up, all the American things that they picked up on, like they picked up all the curse words, you know, we got them cursing, so that was good, and they picked up cell phones, and they picked up computers, they were crazy about the electronics, these guys would spend \$400 on a phone, are you out of your mind? \$400 on a phone, they were crazy about the phones and satellite dishes, you know the Iraqi’s will say that if we had computers and cell phones, then we would have stayed with Saddam. So we brought consumerism to Iraq that’s what I love.

(*audience member asks, will you go back*)

Yes....maybe...for a short trip...I swear. Some people get mad about this, some, I’m addicted and I’ve put as much time in and I don’t know how you know the story from here, I feel lost, like people are asking me how the search is going and I hate that I cannot say that I was there and this is how it happened, but I’ll be sure I’ll never live there again, that game is done, because you put your whole life on hold, but I’ll be sure to go back, it’ll just be a matter of when I’ll be ready to go back, and bring a fresh eye to it.

(*audience member asks question, how has this changed your life in the U.S.? What about your car?*)

Yeah I don’t have a car, because every time I was in a car, it would either get attacked or chased or shot at, so there’s no way I’m going to have a car again, you know what I mean? I was sick of it by the time I got here. Every foreign job changes you, people said to me the transition will be easy but it is so hard to come back to this country after three years in Iraq because you are a fundamentally different person than you were when you left. To have experienced this, to have seen this kind of stuff, right? You’re different, right? And so everything looks different to you, everything, everything, everything, for the first month I couldn’t go into big box stores, that was out of the question, I was amazed at the consumption, I hated people complaining about how I bought something at regular price and now it’s on sale, my manicures canceled my appointment, shut up, you know I just couldn’t deal with it, and I am much more grateful, much, much, much more grateful, and it just changes you, and I think it changes you for the better, they told me it takes six months to re-adjust and they’re right, and now when I’m going places I’m always looking for the escape, like I’m on the subway and I think, ok if we get shot and it knocks it off and we go into a river, how could I get out, or explosions, I just assume they’re like a door slamming, or something like this, I was in Egypt like one week after I was out and some damn kid we’re in the market, in the market and he’s got this bag and he pops it and it makes a loud pop and that’s like the worst nightmare to be in a crowded place and an explosion go off. I almost killed him, I really almost killed him. I was furious, like those things, loud noises I can’t deal with. Which I should say, in defense of the U.S., I don’t know if this is or not, the first day I got back, Anna Nicole Smith died, and I was a little like, what have I come back to, I was just in a war-zone, what are we talking about here. So....

