

THE FORBIDDEN WORLD OF “OFF THE RECORD”
NEGOTIATING FOR SUCCESSFUL AIR FORCE MEDIA ENGAGEMENTS

by

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Biography

Lt Col John J Thomas has served 20 years as an Air Force Public Affairs Officer at the Wing, Center, Major Command and Air Staff levels, and as a squadron commander. His most recent job was Director of Public Affairs for Air Force Global Strike Command, on the initial cadre launching the first new MAJCOM in almost three decades. As a squadron commander from 2008-2009 he led his squadron to best technical training squadron in Air Education and Training Command as well as to McClelland award recognition for best large communication squadron in AETC, twice. He was the Air Force's top PA professional in 2007. He organized and led the federal media center for hurricane Katrina response in 2005. He also served for three years as the Air Force's National Media Liaison in New York City. Deployments have included Saudi Arabia, Thailand, Iraq and Afghanistan. In Afghanistan he was lead spokesman for NATO's International Security Assistance Force, handling worldwide media. In Iraq he was lead project officer and media planner for the first Saddam Hussein legal proceeding. In 2001 he was rated the top instructor at the Defense Information School, where as a student in 1994 he was the top graduate from the joint public affairs officer course. He earned his bachelor's and first master's degree from the University of Virginia in Rhetoric and Communication Studies, and he worked for a time as a local newspaper reporter before joining the Air Force.

Abstract

Thirteen prominent Journalists and eight experienced military public affairs officers anonymously responded to questionnaires from the author asking about the frequency, importance and value of what are called off-the-record (OTR) interviews between news media and their military sources. The responses confirmed the author's own experience and sense that OTR engagements between the military and reporters are commonplace, especially at the national level, even though they are discouraged in Air Force and Department of Defense training and doctrine. Respondents suggest OTR interviews offer a unique and effective way to 'tell the Air Force story' through the news media. Reporters and public affairs officers have similar reasons for going OTR—including the desire to get timely and accurate information into news stories with the proper context—that sometimes is impossible under on-the-record constraints. Few public affairs professionals or reporters choose OTR as a first option. Since all parties perform a mental calculus of risks versus rewards before agreeing to OTR, the author highlights Negotiation theory as an analytical heuristic Air Force public affairs professionals could use to determine first *if* and then *how* public affairs officers or designated expert spokesmen would conduct OTR interviews. The author offers evidence that the military neglects OTR techniques and that the many public affairs officers who do use them tend either to have outside journalism training or they learn on the job. He suggests risk could be reduced if the Air Force recognized the legitimate role of OTR engagements and trained their PAOs on those techniques. At the same time, the Air Force could stop missing opportunities at strategic communication with the public because of a tradition that opposes using OTR. Finally, the author identifies cultural and structural hurdles that would stand in the way of openly training military spokespersons about OTR strategies.

Introduction

A public affairs axiom is ‘if you don’t tell your story, someone will tell it for you.’

Training and experience teach public affairs officers to seize the initiative and shape news stories so they can truthfully represent the facts instead of letting rumors, or even hostile parties, drive the headlines. Current public affairs training may not, however, necessarily equip public affairs officers with the full set of tools they might need. Specifically, off-the-record interactions are neglected and even scorned by the public affairs community. Off the Record (OTR) is a technique that is not trained to nor even condoned.¹ This research, however, shows that OTR conversations are happening regularly and that both journalists and PAOs see them as an effective tool—and sometimes the only way—for a PAO to inform a reporter with timely, accurate information that gives appropriate context on significant issues from the Pentagon to warzones.²

A dozen reporters voluntarily responded to six main questions by email. These reporters were selected because of their recent experience covering the military either at the Pentagon or in warzones, or both.³ I interviewed two others by phone.⁴ Public affairs officers with national and international experience were sent a separate questionnaire by email. I also interviewed several

¹ This paper makes a case for off-the-record media engagements that is counter to military public affairs culture, training and doctrine. Although OTR media engagements are nowhere prohibited, public affairs documents and training strongly discourage OTR. For instance, Public Affairs Operations, Joint Publication (JP) 3-61 says that the first “assumption” under Guidelines for Release of Information is that “All statements will be ‘on the record.’”

² According to JP 3-61, Public Affairs Operations, PAOs have a responsibility to “Tell the DOD Story. Although commanders designate only military personnel or DOD civilian employees as official spokespersons, they should educate and encourage all their military, civilian employees, and contractors to tell the DOD story by providing them with timely information that is appropriate for public release. See Appendix 3. (Department of Defense Joint Staff, 2010)

³ For a list of the questions, see Appendix.

⁴ Various reporters known to me or my PAO colleagues as professional and experienced and who have national or international experience covering the U.S. military had the chance to fill answer questions sent to them by email for this paper. The questions were kept short in order to encourage participation. The reporters included well-known and longtime Pentagon reporters, war correspondents and one national news anchor. They work or have worked for outlets like the New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, the Associated Press, Agence France Presse, wire services, USA Today, aviation trade journals and a broadcast television networks.

PAOs in person.⁵ These verbal and email interviews show that both PAOs and journalists use OTR conversations with regularity. Going off the record “is absolutely critical” said a PAO with years of prior experience as a civilian reporter. “You want to be seen as a trusted resource, someone who will level with you, someone who can appropriately explain why the organization is doing what it is doing for the good of the mission, its people, and the nation...often that can’t be done ‘on the record.’”

Importantly, PAOs who say they employ OTR as a technique indicate they never received training on it through public affairs channels, even as they acknowledge they are taking on some risk when doing so. This research shows PAOs do not *need* to go off the record. If they are uncomfortable with OTR, reporters will not hold it against them. But without OTR as a tool available to them they risk ceding the initiative to others. Unable to engage OTR, a reporter can simply find another source and the PAO becomes irrelevant. To be fully successful the responses seem to indicate that both PAOs and reporters recognize that in some situations useful conversations can only occur OTR.

A Conundrum. Within months of taking charge of my first unit public affairs office, I found myself in a position where it seemed the only way to successfully tell the Air Force’s story was by “going off the record.” By doing so, I violated my military training only 18 months after graduating from the Public Affairs officer course at the Defense Information School (DINFOS). I felt I had to go off the record to successfully tell the Air Force’s story and respect the public’s

⁵ To see the questions posed to public affairs officers, see Appendix.

right to know, in an attempt to comply with the Department of Defense’s “principles of information.”⁶

Having some experience as a civilian journalist before joining the Air Force, I found myself conflicted by my recent training and ill-equipped to face this, my first tricky media case.⁷ It was a potential murder-suicide involving two Airmen, both of whom had faced disciplinary punishments. How was I to talk about this case when what I could say on the record was restricted by privacy laws, concerns about propriety and impartiality, and the need to protect the ongoing investigation?⁸

PAOs are obligated to release bad information right away. PAOs are also charged with managing an organization’s reputation so as to preserve its capability as a trusted agent of the government, and also to never say ‘no comment,’ which suggests there is something to hide. At the same time, PAO training is to never go ‘off the record’ (OTR). By contrast, in my brief time as a reporter, I had found it beneficial to talk OTR with officials. Back to my example, the reporter agreed to let me talk off the record. The resulting story was fact-based and lacked sensationalism. My commander was pleased: we’d succeeded in getting the information out without interfering with the ongoing investigation and without violating anyone’s privacy.⁹ The gamble paid off. Twenty years into my career as a PAO, it is no longer such a gamble. It’s a

⁶ See Appendix 3: Of course Maximum Disclosure, Minimum Delay comes with commonsense restrictions that balance the public’s right to know with the public’s need to know, which means protecting information that is classified, violates the 1973 Privacy Act, or may harm an ongoing or planned military operation, etc.

⁷ Throughout, reporters and PAOs mentioned in this paper will remain anonymous. Granting anonymity allowed me to elicit honest answers from those I interviewed. In this case the reporter worked for a Salt Lake-area newspaper. The incident involved Airmen at Hill Air Force, Utah, where I was stationed at the time.

⁸ Which in later years a colleague of mine when I was an instructor at the same school refined to as “go ugly, early.” One never wants to sit on bad news that will dribble out over several stories. Getting all the bad news out at one time reduces the number of negative headlines and shortens the life of the story to days instead of weeks.

⁹ Importantly, what I told those reporters did not violate privacy laws or the ongoing investigation by the FBI and the Air Force Office of Special Investigations, with whom I consulted to get the facts straight. Knowing all of the facts allowed me to understand and steer clear of investigatory sensitivities and laws when I did talk with the reporter

technique I've employed in a range of cases from my time as a spokesman for nuclear issues, to time in Afghanistan and Iraq warzones.

But how would I have known the rules of the game if I'd not been a civilian reporter first? How does any PAO navigate and negotiate what seems to them the shadowy off the record realm? Should PAOs never go OTR, as trained? This paper raises questions about whether the Air Force needs to stop treating "off the record" as a forbidden activity. More specifically, since OTR conversations seem common, is neglecting to train PAOs on OTR techniques akin to asking them to join in a high-stakes poker game after only teaching them how to play Go-Fish? The cards are the same, but the game is far more complex.

It is a conundrum. How should Air Force public affairs deal with a practice that is officially discouraged but regularly used by its most successful PAOs, and by journalists covering the Air Force at the highest levels? This paper applies negotiation concepts to media engagements and suggests negotiation theory as a helpful heuristic for PAOs to decide whether and how to judiciously use OTR. Negotiation theory provides a well-developed set of concepts that can be readily and usefully applied to media engagements, and is suitable for both training and real-time application.

Using "Off the Record"

As far as media relations responsibilities, to be a PAO it is not necessary to use OTR. To be an effective PAO, it may be. "A PA who is not experienced enough to go off the record under appropriate circumstances will be ineffective at the national or international level," said one reporter. Responses to the questionnaire show reporters will simply work around a PAO who refuses to go OTR. They will turn to other sources when they can. This is what economists might

call the ‘opportunity cost’ of not using OTR—while it’s not necessary to use OTR, by not using it PAOs miss the opportunity to be a valued source. Reporters also said that on the record answers are often so stilted and cautious as to be of little help in getting to the heart of an issue.¹⁰ “A candid conversation is always better,” said one television reporter. “Many stories would not exist if I was not told the information first off the record,” said another.

An international journalist with time covering the U.S. military in Afghanistan emphasized the importance of OTR in combatting enemy propaganda. A PAO who is unable to go OTR “cannot present their side of the story,” she wrote.

This can be damaging for the source themselves because they turn down a chance to contradict false or inaccurate information...[going off the record] is enormously appreciated and important in an environment where non-military sources such as the Taliban can issue inaccurate information almost immediately, meaning they grab the headlines and mould the narrative...[off the record] has to be another way to react in these cases, to take the initiative, be present in the story, showing a willingness to take the matter seriously in a way that respects the people involved, including journalists. Blind stonewalling is not an effective tactic.

An American wire service reporter who has covered the military in warzones had this to say:

[In] Breaking news off the record conversations can be vital... Let’s use a helicopter crash as an example. Before solid information gets out, the rumor mill is running wild. Let’s say we have an Afghan source saying that 25 Americans are dead...if I can get a US military guy even off the record to say – no, no way it’s that high, the bird was empty at the time – then we can dismiss that scenario and not get pressured into running with the 25 number if other outlets are reporting it. *That’s vital...there were those [PAOs] who refused to do it, and that’s fine, though I think it’s limiting for them in their job role.* [My emphasis.]

¹⁰The point here is about staying exclusively on the record versus having the flexibility to employ other attribution categories represented here broadly as “off the record.” It’s important to note that the individual responses from PAOs and journalists varied widely. Some reporters say they abhor going off the record. But those same reporters say they use “background” and even “deep background” conversations which share many of the attributes of OTR.

OTR is a technique that may impact long-term media relations as much as breaking news. Good long-term media relations are a key to PAO success. The questionnaires asked about long term relationships as well. What emerged are indications of long-term benefits to a PAO having an ability to use OTR when needed. “People with whom I have a long-running relationship and whose insights I value can, over time, provide guidance that can lead to good stories,” wrote a reporter. Being willing to explain situations off the record is one effective way to foster trust and a long-term relationship.

A leading national news anchor who responded to the questionnaire offered this anecdote about how OTR can set context and build relationships.

I recently was invited to an OTR lunch with the president. The information was useful in that it helped me understand the presidents [sic] views on a variety of issues and helped me make sense of a number of future policy decisions...No quotes or other information from the lunch was used in my reporting. OTR can be extremely helpful because experts in certain areas may be willing to give a reporter an education on a complex subject on an OTR basis. The OTR information is invaluable to guide the reporter away from erroneous reporting and to place other information in the proper context.

Another reporter noted that he goes off the record “frequently” because it gives him “a depth of understanding of an issue that cannot be achieved in an on-the-record or background arrangement” and it sometimes “provides the sort of insights that make a story viable.”

Negotiation Theory

“Everything is a negotiation.”¹¹ With those words, the Air Force Negotiation Center of Excellence highlights a concept that applies well to what PAOs call media relations. Thinking about the entire media engagement as a negotiation takes the mystery out of attribution categories like “on” or “off” the record. Instead one can think of media queries as a

¹¹ (Eisen, p. 17)

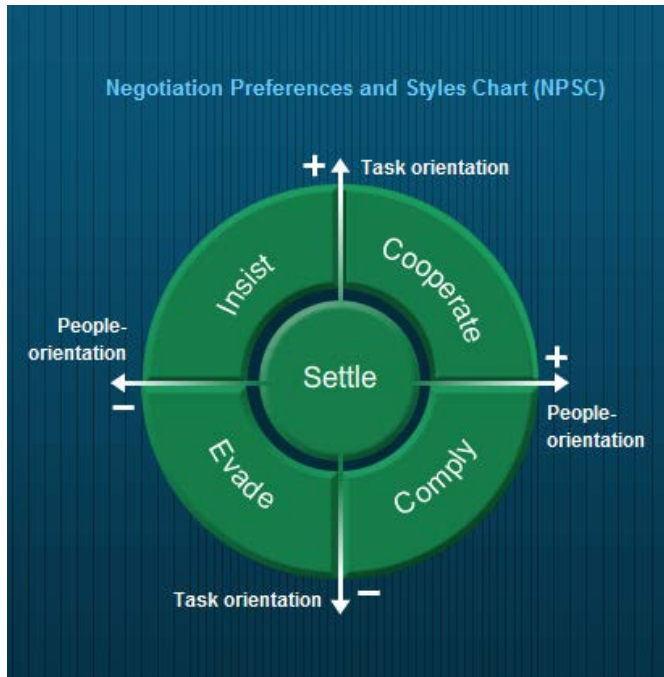
continuum—with OTR as one of several strategies. Negotiation theory frames decisions about *when, how* or even *if* the PAO will answer a query. Better than a knee-jerk reaction against OTR conversations, OTR becomes one strategy that must be evaluated based on the circumstances. Negotiation theory is a rich body of thought that is directly applicable to what PAOs do every day.

We'll look at two major ways that the vocabulary and concepts of negotiation theory apply. First, negotiation theory provides a set of decision criteria that can help PAOs decide *if* they should enter into an off-the-record conversation in any given instance. Second, negotiation concepts can guide thinking about *how* to conduct off-the-record negotiations.

The decision *if* a PAO should answer a query at all is something PAOs do every day. PAOs negotiate with the news media whether they intend to or not. Receiving even a standard media query is the beginning of a negotiation as the PAO decides whether to ignore it, act on it, or table it. Negotiation theory offers a vocabulary for this process. Options about whether to even engage are called negotiation *strategies*. There are five possible strategies which “all have value and serve a purpose.”¹² No strategy is inherently better than another, nor applies in every case.

¹² (Eisen, p. 9)

Figure 1¹³



The five strategies are: *Evade* (not respond); *Comply* (agree to give them what they want on their terms); *Insist* (try to get what you want on your terms); *Settle* (reach a compromise in order to get past the issue); or *Cooperate* (explore the possibilities for what is often called a win-win interaction).

One option, for instance, is to choose not to negotiate—to evade. In public affairs, evading would mean not answering a reporter’s request. That decision would be informed by analytical tools from negotiation theory. To illustrate, we can consider one of those concepts, what is called the “best alternative to negotiated agreement,” known as BATNA. The BATNA is an assessment of what one will do if one chooses not to talk—not to negotiate. One would also analyze the reporter’s BATNA, or what the reporter’s options would be if they do not agree to an interview. In public affairs, normal BATNAs include options like remaining silent, choosing to

¹³ (Eisen p. 2)

publish a news release, or holding a press briefing. Journalists' BATNAs might include going to another source for the information, delaying the story or killing the story altogether.

Next, if the choice is to engage, negotiation theory suggests a continuum of options. In practice that continuum already exists in journalism in what are called attribution categories: 'on the record'; 'on background'; 'on deep background' and 'off the record.'¹⁴ Basically these categories limit a range of possible restrictions on a using a source's name, as well as possible restrictions on the information obtained in an interview.

Off the Record has no single definition. Col. Rivers Johnson, a public affairs officer, for instance, had to spend considerable time in his Army War College paper synthesizing his own definition based on a newspaper article, a State Department media guide and his own experience, calling OTR "the most often misunderstood" attribution category.¹⁵ One widely used journalism textbook says only that OTR is information "for the reporter's knowledge only and is not to be printed or made public in any way."¹⁶ But our survey shows little agreement on even that concept. Since no clear definition exists, details must be negotiated every time.¹⁷

¹⁴ This textbook, used at Columbia Journalism School, pays scant discussion to such a fundamental topic. In the 596-page textbook, discussion about attribution categories takes up less than a page. The main thrust in the textbook is a caution for reporters to avoid anonymous sources, in general. It also says "[OTR] information also is not to be taken to another source in hopes of getting confirmation." But this is not a universal standard, based on my research.

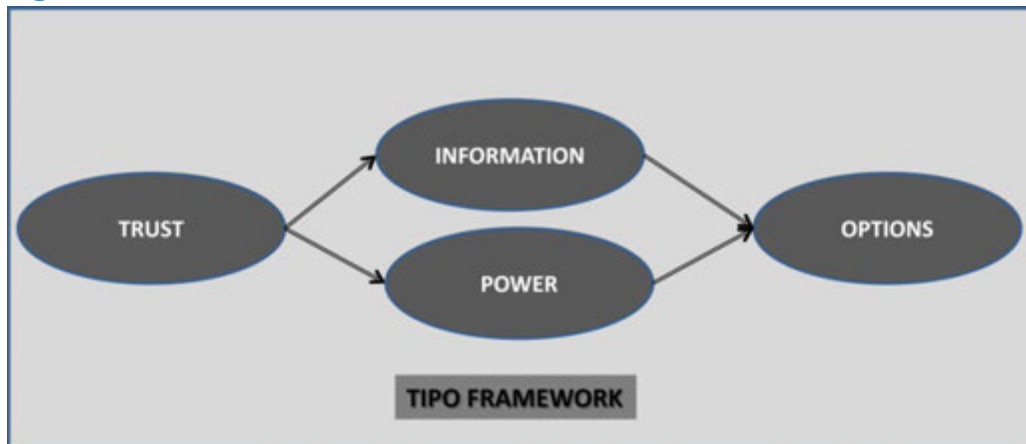
¹⁵ (Johnson, p. 11). "On the record" means that everything a person says can be directly quoted back to them by name. ... "On background" means that the information provided to the reporter is not attributed to the person by name, but in that person's official capacity. The person's official capacity could be identified as "a senior DoD official." ... "On deep background" means that information used in the story cannot be attributed to anyone... [and] may be used to help ... gain a better understanding on the subject. ... "Off the record"...the most often misunderstood....means that information given to the reporter cannot be used for the story. The information can be used for the reporter's background and to even shape the story, but the information cannot be used or attributed to a source. Some news reporters and organizations ... mean that the information is used, but not the source's name. ... If the information can shape the story or give them a better understanding of facts and events, then "off-the-record" can be useful ... [offering] the right context necessary to educate the reporter.

Col. Johnson notes: "Public affairs officers are taught in the Public Affairs Officer Basic Course (PAOC) at the Defense Information School at Fort Meade, Md., that everything is "on the record." From a practical standpoint and application at the strategic [level], it is vital for strategic leaders to learn to work with the media in other attribution categories than 'on-the-record.'"

¹⁶ (Mencher, 43).

¹⁷ A mastery of OTR must include understanding the variations of the related 'background' categories, which even are often confused and conflated. In fact, follow-up interviews with at least two of the PAO respondents revealed that although on the questionnaires they said they rarely went OTR, they did engage in what they termed 'background' discussions or even 'friendly

Figure 2¹⁸



Relevant negotiation concepts include *Trust*, *Information* (scarcity, accuracy and relevance) and *Power* to affect the outcome. Many negotiation theorists also address how *time* impacts negotiation. An assessment of the interplay of such variables opens up the possible options and strategies to a negotiator.

The importance of trust

In public affairs, relationships matter. And *trust* is perhaps the most important element in negotiation. Developing trusted sources is the lifeblood of reporters. Said one reporter: with PAOs willing to talk OTR “the relationship is better, more trusting, mutually beneficial – and also more valuable in terms of the accuracy of the reporting and recording world events. There is mutual professional respect.”

History shows that reporters can be trusted. It is in their best interests to be trustworthy. On stark example is when one respondent related how his TV network “was told off the record that [Osama] bin Laden had been killed,” but they respected the established groundrules and waited “at least two hours before we could find somebody who would tell us” on the record.

conversations’ which for purposes of this paper would be called OTR. Varying interpretations of OTR appear in journalists’ responses as well.

¹⁸ (Eisen p. 5)

Indeed, most journalists see themselves as public servants. “I became a journalist to service [sic] the country and the public interest,” responded one reporter.

Trust must be given to be reciprocated. As articulated by one journalist:

Some stories would have incorrect information if I was not guided by off the record information...I use people who will tell me the truth, that I can count on. People who do not just repeat talking points...Those who only give talking points and never say anything not approved, are usually not trusted sources...off the record conversations are useful for building up trust between reporter in source [sic], particularly in longer term relationships with a source...

Responses show that trust rises and negotiations become easier when there is an existing relationship. “The best sources I’ve ever had have talked to me with the understanding that everything was off the record unless I could get it from somebody else,” said one major network news reporter.

In contrast, low trust makes both PAOs and journalists less willing to engage with each other, less willing to take the risk of going OTR. Barriers to trust can be reduced if both partners in the discussion are aware not only of each other’s BATNA but the risks and potential rewards facing the reporter.

Negotiation theory can help PAOs navigate the risks and rewards of potential OTR engagements.

The Calculus

Apparent from responses to the research questions is that both journalists and PAOs do not normally turn to OTR as a first option because there are inherent risks for both sides. All parties seem to employ a mental calculus balancing risks and rewards before agreeing to OTR.

PAOs assess factors like their organization's need to get information out; whether they have a reporter they can trust; and timeliness: PAOs assess whether there is an imminent need to try to shape the story before it is published.¹⁹

Risks. Both PAOs and reporters see hazards with OTR and proceed with caution. Ask a PAO or a senior military leader about off the record conversations and the response is often negative. The conditioned response is a fear of OTR as somehow reckless and perhaps even lacking in integrity.²⁰ Such fear stems from an unfamiliarity with OTR because they are warned against OTR throughout their careers.²¹ Likewise, the public affairs community cautions senior leaders that 'nothing is off the record' and to always be suspicious of reporters. Events like the demise of Gen. Stanely McChrystal are used to warn military members away from OTR. But PAOs who understand the nuances of OTR would be able to work through the fear to advise senior leaders on both the risks and rewards of OTR. One PAO with specific knowledge of the situation brought up this case in his response. It "was a clear example of when a reporter spent excessive time in an off-the-record environment for an excessive period of time and without any good

¹⁹Public Affairs officer respondents will also be kept anonymous. Anonymity allowed for more forthcoming responses. PAO respondents are or have been at the field grade level working in or with the Department of Defense in national and international media environments, all having worked with news media in war zones or at the Pentagon, or both. These PAOs have more than 15, often more than 20 years in the military, most, if not all of their time as public affairs officers.

²⁰However, there is a regulatory obligation of PAOs to inform the public and not withhold information unnecessarily. DoD Principles of Information state in part: "Information shall be withheld only when disclosure would adversely affect national security or threaten the safety or privacy of the men and women of the Armed Forces." See entire list of Principles of Information at Appendix 3

²¹July 2010, the secretary of defense signed a letter subject "media interaction" that likely had a chilling effect on senior leaders who might have otherwise considered being more open with the news media. It said in part: "I am concerned that the Department has grown lax in how we engage with the media, often in contravention of established rules and procedures. We have far too many people talking to the media outside of channels..." Further, the letter directed "prior to interviews or any other means of media and public engagement with possible national or international implications, all component leaders or their public affairs officers must notify OSD Public Affairs" See Appendix 4.

Importantly, a DoD news release clarified this restriction. "Defense public affairs officials can recommend against a commander engaging with media on a subject, but cannot forbid it. Commanders own the public affairs program for their units or areas of responsibility, [the spokesman] noted, and commanders can choose to ignore Defense Department advice." Since the secretary's letter seems at odds with DoD Principles of Information and other guidance directing maximum disclosure with minimum delay, the letter seems to be directed more at stemming leaks, than at legitimate PAO interaction with reporters. Not to mention that approval of every interaction that may have national or international implications would require its own bureaucracy to review each case and military-media interaction would grind to a halt. (Garamone, 2010)

reason or justifiable expectation of trust” he said. The unneeded risk was not because of an OTR interview, rather the lack of other appropriate groundrules. It was poor management of the situation that was to blame, according to this PAO. The full negotiation scenario was not thought through. Still, the risks of OTR are real. That is why training PAOs how to reason through those risks seems necessary. One way the Air Force could mitigate the risks of OTR would be to train PAOs how best to employ it.

One fear among PAOs is the risk that going OTR could seem disloyal. OTR is inherently “an unregulated form of information flow within a highly regulated organization,” as one respondent phrased it. Whether senior leaders are aware of it or not, PAOs are using OTR to benefit the Air Force. But the practice is often driven underground and outside the chain of command. It is better for commanders to also understand OTR and to work with their PAOs to employ it wisely. OTR should not be one of the dark arts.

Similar to reporters, PAOs feel they risk credibility and integrity when using OTR—or at least the perception that they are acting deviously. There is a sense of risk among PAOs because OTR can fall outside normal procedures. PAOs who understand the necessity of maintaining the trust of their superiors are normally careful to seek prior permission to go off the record. “Under no circumstances, however, should the Commander or PAO not be in agreement,” said one PAO.²² But one can surmise from the responses to this research that PAOs sometimes go OTR without informing senior leaders for fear senior leaders may shut down the freedom to do so. In some sense OTR works because it is outside the normal rule-set. Openly acknowledging OTR, if done haphazardly, might invite over-regulation of the technique. In one of the simplest but also

²² OTR it is an activity not sanctioned by doctrine. Because of the associated risk, it is sometimes undertaken without the knowledge of superiors, thereby risking the PAO’s credibility, his or her organization’s credibility, and perhaps the boss’s credibility. “The problem,” said a former Defense Secretary, “is that 99 percent [of reporters] will be trustworthy, and one percent isn’t [sic]...and it may not be deliberate... It just may be an accident.” (Aukofer, p. 67)

most difficult to implement statements from the questionnaires, one PAO said “The military needs to give its spokesmen the latitude needed.” It is an open question whether the Air Force would doctrinally and culturally tolerate openly granting the latitude to PAOs to go OTR. Recognizing OTR could, ironically, remove it from the PAO toolkit.

Reporters see a risk when they stay *on* the record of getting the story wrong, or not putting the information in the right context. When a reporter is in a position where he fears getting a story wrong, a PAO’s relative power rises. Relative power certainly changes the BATNA of both the reporter and the PAO. Understanding this principle of negotiation could allow a PAO to set the terms of attribution or to put necessary restrictions on how the information can be used by a reporter in that case.

Journalists, too, express concerns about the risks being off the record. One risk to both parties is definitional. What is meant by “off the record,” “background” or “deep background” is not always understood. To overcome this confusion, PAOs and reporters said they have to be careful to agree on what those groundrules mean before each interview.

Journalists also say OTR can reflect badly on their credibility because full and open reporting is the hallmark of credibility for them. But even reluctant reporters note circumstances when they will accept OTR restrictions, despite the risks. Reporters who need information urgently enough will agree to obtain it OTR almost every time.²³

²³ Another reason for reluctance by reporters who responded was the chance that their trust may be violated and that a source might tell them something off the record, for instance, in order to tie the reporter’s hands so that they cannot use information they otherwise might be able to use. This is more an insider’s trick used by sophisticated political operatives, it was noted, not normally by PAOs.

One fundamental risk noted earlier is the risk PAOs feel employing techniques they were never trained to use. Aside from those PAOs with experience as civilian journalists,²⁴ PAOs surveyed for this research indicate they get no training in OTR.²⁵ A broad review of training curriculum and media-training briefings confirms this. Media-training curricula from DINFOS, from the Air Force’s Public Affairs Center of Excellence, and doctrine documents from the joint staff and Air Staff, show very little mention of OTR.²⁶ When OTR is mentioned, it is strongly discouraged.²⁷ PAOs are left to learn OTR by watching movies, watching others, and by trial and error. As one PAO with journalism training wrote: “Most important ... is to have someone who knows what they’re doing—going off-the-record isn’t something that should be done without careful consideration, proper procedure and an appropriate rationale.” Air Force Public Affairs training does not prepare PAOs to that standard at this time. Failing to do so may put reporters in the position to dictate terms and leave PAOs ill-equipped to advise senior leaders or decide when and how OTR might be useful.

Rewards. Even PAOs who do not actively seek OTR engagements are eventually put into situations when the rewards outweigh the risks. “Sometimes the ability to go off the record with a reporter made the difference between an inaccurate front page story and an accurate article published in the back pages – or no story at all,” said one PAO. One PAO reports successfully

²⁴ Importantly, a review of questionnaires returned from PAOs and follow-up contact with some respondents shows the PAOs who expressed the most comfort and understanding of the nuances and possibilities of OTR techniques are those with experience as reporters before coming in the Air Force, or who studied journalism in college. One 20-year PAO said “I was a reporter for several years [before joining the Air Force] so I know intuitively how the news gathering process works.” PAOs without outside training or experience with OTR are seemingly at a real disadvantage when placed in situations where OTR is *de rigueur*.

²⁵ Even reporters said they basically learn on the job, with one saying “everyone has seen All The President’s Men, right?”

²⁶ See Bibliography.

²⁷ One pamphlet from PACE states “[t]he best rule of thumb to avoid embarrassment is to grant only ‘on the record’ interviews. There is no such thing as an ‘off-the-record’ interview. Anything you say to or in the presence of media can be reported.” While this caution is well-intentioned it is presented at an elementary level, as a caution to avoid off-hand comments during an otherwise on-the-record interview. However, the same cautions recur even in briefings to generals, who do not operate at the elementary level of media engagements.

creating a “win-win situation” that helped a reporter publish “an objective, accurate story” absent sensitive information that the PAO asked him to omit because it would have had a “major negative impact” on U.S. relations with an ally nation in a warzone. “I spoke to the reporter off the record, explained our concerns and asked him to consider not using that particular detail in his story. He agreed. In my opinion, because I was able to provide a logical, fact-based rationale off the record.”

If the PAO doesn’t tell the story, the reporter will seek out someone else who will.²⁸ The primary concern for reporters is being the first to get accurate information and off-the-record information can help assure them of accuracy. “Nothing is more important than getting stories correct,” one reporter told me. He almost never goes OTR, he said, but “if a military or senior civilian says let’s go off the record because you’re going to be wrong, I listen intently.”

While OTR is a good solution in many cases, reporters also indicated that they prefer by far talking with subject-matter-experts and decision-makers more so than a PAOs.²⁹ This suggests PAOs need to have a strong understanding of the OTR process to be able to prepare and persuade senior leaders to sometimes talk OTR as well.³⁰

There is a chance for real rewards in breaking news scenarios when power tilts away from a reporter and toward the PAO. Recognizing that makes analyzing the options easier. Normally, as we have seen, a reporter has power to publish a story when he or she chooses, with or without giving a chance for a PAO to comment. But with breaking news, a reporter does not have time to develop alternate sources, thus the power shifts. One journalist wrote “for breaking

²⁸ JP 3-61 says it is the PAO’s responsibility to help “media representatives understand ...events and occurrences so that media coverage is accurate.”

²⁹ JP 3-61 makes multiple references to commanders needing to be accessible to the media during operations—in crises, up to several times a day, it suggests—and that PAOs should be facilitators of contact between media and commanders.

³⁰ One major network anchor once told me “I don’t think much about PAOs. No offense, but they normally just get in the way.”

news, off-the-record information is essential.” A reporter who is normally reluctant to go off the record might readily agree to restrictions the PAO may need to set. One final example of how negotiation theory can empower a PAO: One reporter who claims to use OTR “sparingly ... [and only] in the most sensitive situations” derived “real value” by going OTR in the case of a military aircraft crash. This reporter readily accepted OTR information —something he normally refuses to do—under what is called an ‘embargo,’ an agreement that he couldn’t use the information until hours later. Understanding negotiation situations like this allows PAOs to propose agreeable and viable courses of action to senior leaders.

Conclusion

This paper surveyed many of the PAOs and civilian journalists who engage in the most consequential military-media interactions in war and peace to explore “off the record” as a technique, its pervasiveness, its effectiveness and its risks. This paper raised the issue of whether “going off the record” is a competency toward which the Air Force public affairs community should train and educate its PAOs and senior leaders or whether on-the-job training is adequate. The conclusions here also lead to important questions about whether bringing OTR into the open might actually work to tie the hands of PAOs; and, haltingly, questions about whether OTR is inherently inimical to the chain of command. On the other hand, including senior leaders as potential OTR experts, used judiciously, could be just the tonic for frustrated leaders casting about in the “strategic communication” realm, trying to find ways to lead-turn media stories. With senior leader participation, more openness to OTR engagements might be a boon to Air Force strategic communication efforts.

This research shows that when reporters and PAOs have trust in each other and in the process of OTR, they have the chance to build a long-term relationship that allows both sides to get what they want—and what they need—from each media engagement. Having the ability to employ the full spectrum of engagement strategies, including the oft-maligned “off the record” strategy, increases the options available to both journalists and military spokesmen who share and interest in getting at the truth. PAOs confined to staying on the record deprive themselves of the full range of options. “Military sources [PAOs and spokespersons] with more experience with reporters know that they can use off the record information to improve their credibility with sources and shape the ultimate story, or—in the best circumstances—provide truth even when it is not politically palatable,” one journalist said.

If the Air Force wants to improve public affairs effectiveness in the mass media information space it may want to consider training OTR techniques. PAOs discomfort with using OTR stems from unfamiliarity with it. Another question that arises from this paper is if the Air Force decides to train OTR techniques, at what level of experience would it best be introduced? Not in dispute, is that official scorn of OTR makes PAOs reluctant to use it, at least openly. So, many PAOs learn on the job, even when they are dealing with sensitive issues at a high level.

Negotiation theory is a ready-made heuristic that can be useful both for training Air Force PAOs and for use in the field to help PAOs analyze engagement options, advise senior leaders and choose media engagement strategies that give them the best chance to tell the Air Force story.

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Appendix 1

Questions for reporters:

1. What does off the record mean (as you use that term)?
2. In defining and using off the record, are you guided by commonly understood journalism convention? a textbook journalism definition, or ad hoc agreements about what off the record means with each source?
3. Why do you use off the record?
4. How often do you use off the record?
5. What do you notice about the long term relationship with sources who will go off the record and those who won't?
6. Briefly, can you describe the difference between breaking news off-the-record conversations versus how off the record are used as part of longer-term relationships with a source?
7. What is your overall experience with the willingness of U.S. Air Force/U.S. military sources to talk off the record? How is it comparable to the willingness of non-military sources to do the same?
8. How important is it for you to speak (on- or off-the-record) to a technical expert or decision-maker instead of a spokesperson?

Response 1

What does off the record mean (as you use that term)?

I have found it has different nuances in different places and circumstances. One has to check. Sometimes it means as background only, never to be quoted; sometimes it just means one cannot identify the source but one can use their quotes.

In defining and using off the record, are you guided by commonly understood journalism convention? a textbook journalism definition, or ad hoc agreements about what off the record means with each source?

Ad hoc. I check.

Why do you use off the record?

Often it is the only way to get essential information, for example, to confirm something or to give a missing side of the story. An off-the-record briefing can steer a journalist in the right direction in a confusing situation, or provide key background that one may not be aware of and without which a story could be inaccurate.

Obviously sources sometimes use the arrangement to their own benefit, for example, to release something to the media without putting their name to it. Journalists should realise this and independently assess the value of the information, aware how one can be used to spread propaganda.

One tries to avoid using an off-the-record interview as the sole source for a story but in some situations there is no other way. In such cases, one needs to really be confident the source knows what they are talking about. No journalist can afford to be burned by a source.

How often do you use off the record?

Unfortunately, I am not reporting at the moment. In Afghanistan, we had to use it fairly regularly because of the sensitivity of many topics and difficulty in getting accurate information.

How does the option to go off the record affect your stories?

It is often a lifeline. It can help one confirm an event and not present a situation incorrectly. It can provide essential missing elements; it can be a way to access sensitive and important information that one might not get otherwise.

If going off the record is not something your source is willing to do, how does not being able to go off the record with that person affect your ability or willingness to use them as a source? The best would be if they spoke on the record. If they cannot and also refuse to go ‘off’, one cannot present their side of the story or may end up presenting someone-else’s version of it. This can be damaging for the source themselves because they turn down a chance to contradict false or inaccurate information.

I can understand why some sources might be wary, but as a responsible journalist I am disappointed that a source might think I would not respect our off-the-record agreement. However, I concede there does have to be some element of trust, and some journalists may be less professional than others. Both sides need to absolutely clear what off-the-record means. In cases where the two sides do not know and trust each other, this agreement should be established before any information is exchanged.

Things are more complicated in briefings/interviews that switch between on and off the record -- all the more reason to check.

Essential is how one can refer to a source without compromising their condition of anonymity. Obviously one wants to identify them as closely as possible, to illustrate why their

information is trustworthy, but without compromising their identity. This has to be negotiated and agreed.

What do you notice about the long term relationship with sources who will go off the record and those who won't?

With the first category, the relationship is better, more trusting, mutually beneficial -- and also more valuable in terms of the accuracy of reporting and recording world events. There is mutual professional respect, which is good too. Both have to honour the side of the bargain, though.

Briefly, can you describe the difference between breaking news off-the-record conversations versus how off the record are used as part of longer-term relationships with a source?

They are not mutually exclusive. Often building a longer term relationship with a sometimes off-the-record source means one can also turn to that person as a trusted and accurate source of breaking news in situations where they cannot speak on the record. For breaking news, off-the-record information is often essential to clarify events in confusing situations, where others with no qualms about accuracy are issuing inaccurate information on the record, and very quickly.

What is your overall experience with the willingness of U.S. Air Force/U.S. military sources to talk off the record? How is it comparable to the willingness of non-military sources to do the same?

It varies, depending on the person: in some cases it has worked well and enabled me to issue good information quickly, and steer away from bad information. This is always enormously appreciated and important in an environment where non-military sources such as the Taliban can issue inaccurate information almost immediately, meaning they grab the headlines and mould the narrative. In the case of a major incident, consistent refusal to acknowledge events and provide usable information or guidance -- especially when it is clear something has happened -- can be seen as an attempted cover up. The wish to only issue verified and accurate information is understandable and correct, but there has to be another way to react in these cases, to take the initiative, be present in a story, showing a willingness to take the matter seriously in a way that respects the people involved, including the journalists. Blind stonewalling is not an effective tactic. In the case of other non-military sources, for example the United Nations, they often go off the record in a way that can be helpful all round. But often one has to be vague about how one refers to them, eg, a diplomat or something. The first prize is always a named on-the-record source.

How important is it for you to speak (on- or off-the-record) to a technical expert or decision-maker instead of a spokesperson?

Often it is extremely useful, especially in difficult situations. To speak to a decision-maker is always a privilege as their information carries enormous weight and is considered most accurate.

How is that different for breaking news versus more in-depth reporting?

It is the same, I think. The best is always a decision-maker, named and on the record (exclusive, too!) -- this in itself is likely to be breaking news, depending on the position of the source. A spokesman of a major group also hold much weight as a representative of that organisation.

Response 2

What does off the record mean (as you use that term)?

I am not sure. So many people interpret these sorts of terms in different ways that I never use them when I am interviewing someone. I try to make sure, in clear and plain terms, that we both agree on what we're doing. Otherwise there is too potential for misunderstanding.

In defining and using off the record, are you guided by commonly understood journalism convention? a textbook journalism definition, or ad hoc agreements about what off the record means with each source?

See above. I try to stay away from terms.

Why do you use off the record?

This is an important question. The better way to phrase this question would be: Why do I agree to refrain from printing someone's name. The answer is: only when I have to. I became a journalist to service the country and the public interest. It's never—never—in the public's interest to print information that cannot be attributed to a real, identifiable source. I only do it when I have to; that is, if the person I am interviewing won't talk otherwise, and I can't get the information any other way. In any case there needs to be a discussion, and an agreement. The person being, particularly if it's a government official, needs to make a compelling case as to why he cannot be quoted. If it is just a matter of convenience to the source, that's not enough. If the source refused to be quoted unless he/she is granted some kind of anonymity, and I can get the information another way, then I will do that. Agreeing to refraining from printing a person's name is a last resort. I don't like to do it. No good journalist should.

There is one general exception to this rule. I work in a lot of dangerous places, where people who speak out publicly can be hurt or killed. In those cases—again, decided on a case-by-case basis—I will agree to take out a person's name. But the case has to be clear.

One note: There have been plenty of cases in my career when someone I have interviewed as asked me to go off the record in some way and I have refused. Basically, on those occasions, I have said: "I can't let you go off the record. I need to quote you by name. So, if you decide to talk, then please do so with the understanding that I will print your name."

How often do you use off the record?

Only when I have to. It's usually in two instances: When a government official is afraid of losing his or job, or, in dangerous countries—where I work a lot—where people are afraid of losing their lives.

How does the option to go off the record affect your stories?

They are necessarily not as strong or authoritative.

If going off the record is not something your source is willing to do, how does not being able to go off the record with that person affect your ability or willingness to use them as a source?

See above. Depending on the circumstance, I may not be able to use the information.

What do you notice about the long term relationship with sources who will go off the record and those who won't?

That's a very broad question. It depends on the source and their circumstances.

Briefly, can you describe the difference between breaking news off-the-record conversations versus how off the record are used as part of longer-term relationships with a source?

For me there is no difference.

What is your overall experience with the willingness of U.S. Air Force/U.S. military sources to talk off the record? How is it comparable to the willingness of non-military sources to do the same?

I hate to say this, but the way this question is written suggests to me that your premise is wrong. I don't want anyone to go off-the-record ever. No journalist does. It's something that they have to accept, sometimes, and only grudgingly. I want people to speak freely and openly, always, all the time.

How important is it for you to speak (on- or off-the-record) to a technical expert or decision-maker instead of a spokesperson?

If there is only one way to get the information—off the record—then it can be very important.

How is that different for breaking news versus more in-depth reporting?

No difference.

Response 3

What does off the record mean (as you use that term)?

Technically speaking, "off the record" means I can't use the information in any shape or form; that's it's so sensitive that even raising questions based on the information might reveal the source. So I like to stay away from this altogether.

In defining and using off the record, are you guided by commonly understood journalism convention? a textbook journalism definition, or ad hoc agreements about what off the record means with each source?

I work out agreements in advance with sources. Many times, "off the record" to them simply means "background" (attributable to "a Defense Department" or "State Department" official -- just not by name) or "deep background", meaning I can use the information but can't attribute it to a specific person, even if they're unnamed.

Why do you use off the record? **see above.**

How often do you use off the record? **see above**

How does the option to go off the record affect your stories?

If going off the record is not something your source is willing to do, how does not being able to go off the record with that person affect your ability or willingness to use them as a source? Again, I try to persuade a source to go on background or deep background, often times offering to conduct an interview on deep background with quotes cleared later on background.

What do you notice about the long term relationship with sources who will go off the record and those who won't?

Sources with whom I have a long term relationship are more likely to tell me stuff on deep background (again, not "off record")

Briefly, can you describe the difference between breaking news off-the-record conversations versus how off the record are used as part of longer-term relationships with a source?

If I have a long-term relationship with a source, they're more willing to convey information and perspective on background/deep background, than individuals whom I don't not know well.

What is your overall experience with the willingness of U.S. Air Force/U.S. military sources to talk off the record? How is it comparable to the willingness of non-military sources to do the same?

All depends on the individual, military or civilian.

How important is it for you to speak (on- or off-the-record) to a technical expert or decision-maker instead of a spokesperson?

How is that different for breaking news versus more in-depth reporting?

Very important for both in order to gain information, perspective, context and other sources.

Response 4

What does off the record mean (as you use that term)?

It means different things to different people so I try at the end of a conversation to define what it means. My assumption going in, is that I should know the material but not use it.

In defining and using off the record, are you guided by commonly understood journalism convention? a textbook journalism definition, or ad hoc agreements about what off the record means with each source?

Ad hoc agreements. I have some sources who use off the record to guide what I do not print. I have some who want to see off the record information in print, but just want deniability that they are the source. Some people are okay with me “shopping” off the record information to others and put it on the record. Some or not.

Why do you use off the record?

It is the first step toward getting new, never before reported information. But with some sources it is a way to get them comfortable discussing an issue. If I can prove I understand the nuance, they may let me put some or all of the information on background.

How often do you use off the record?

Everyday

How does the option to go off the record affect your stories?

Many stories would not exist if I was not told the information first off the record. Some stories would have incorrect information if I was not guided by off the record information that something I was told was wrong or partially wrong.

If going off the record is not something your source is willing to do, how does not being able to go off the record with that person affect your ability or willingness to use them as a source?

I use people who will tell me the truth, that I can count on. People who do not just repeat talking points. That rather than a willingness to go on or off the record affects my willingness to use them as a source.

What do you notice about the long term relationship with sources who will go off the record and those who won't?

With my long term sources, I generally deal with background or deep background. Those who only give talking points and never say anything not approved, are usually not trusted sources.

Briefly, can you describe the difference between breaking news off-the-record conversations versus how off the record are used as part of longer-term relationships with a source?

Of the record conversations take place in all contexts. In breaking news they are most useful for steering you away from incorrect information. For developing scoops and other enterprise stories they are most useful in steering you toward information.

But you are right off record conversations are useful for building up trust between reporter in source, particularly in longer term relationships with a source.

What is your overall experience with the willingness of U.S. Air Force/U.S. military sources to talk off the record? How is it comparable to the willingness of non-military sources to do the same?

My recent experience is with Washington reporting where sources are very familiar with the rules of off the record/deep background/background. People who have dealt with journalists on a regular basis are much more familiar with off the record.

Military sources with more experience with reporters know that they can use off the record information to improve their credibility with sources and shape the ultimate story, or—in the best circumstances—provide the truth even when it is not politically palatable.

The Air Force is no different than any other service, though perhaps because there were fewer air force embeds during the war the current generation of mid-level Air Force officers has less experience dealing with reporters than other services.

Still everyone has seen All The President's Men right? Everyone knows how to give an off the record tip.

How important is it for you to speak (on- or off-the-record) to a technical expert or decision-maker instead of a spokesperson?

Extremely important to speak directly to the expert or decision maker, even if it is only the spokesperson who can be quoted on the record. Very much helps stories.

How is that different for breaking news versus more in-depth reporting?

With more indepth reporting, where time is more plentiful it is more important to speak with decision makers and experts. But the best spokespeople are facilitators, connecting reporters with newsmakers,

Response 5

What does off the record mean (as you use that term)?

In defining and using off the record, are you guided by commonly understood journalism convention? a textbook journalism definition, or ad hoc agreements about what off the record means with each source?

When speaking with American military sources, I assume that we both understand that off the record means that none of the information can appear in print anywhere. I would note here that I believe you are assuming both reporter and source in your scenario here are American. But “off the record” can mean something wildly different to a British reporter, for example, or a British military officer. That’s led me to believe that when we agree on an “off the record” chat that actually needs to be specifically defined between source and reporter.

Why do you use off the record?

Two reasons: It gives me an understanding to what might be really going on in the big picture. Second, it allows me to explore that thread with other sources.

How often do you use off the record?

Pretty often, i.e. it might be discussed with every source – “is there anything else you can or want to tell me off the record?”

How does the option to go off the record affect your stories?

If going off the record is not something your source is willing to do, how does not being able to go off the record with that person affect your ability or willingness to use them as a source?

Every source has different uses. Sometimes you need an on the record rebuttal or denial. I’m wouldn’t stop going to a source just because he does not “do” off the record chats. Some sources you want to be your off the record sources. Some sources you want as on the record sources.

What do you notice about the long term relationship with sources who will go off the record and those who won’t?

I don’t think I view my source relationships through that prism.

Briefly, can you describe the difference between breaking news off-the-record conversations versus how off the record are used as part of longer-term relationships with a source?

Breaking news off the record conversations can be vital for ensuring a bad information isn’t published early in a story’s cycle. Let’s use a helicopter crash in Afghanistan as an example. Before solid information gets out, the rumor mill is running wild. Let’s say we have an Afghan source saying that 25 Americans are dead. Well, I’m not going to use that source, first of all, but if I can get a US military guy even off the record to say – no, no way it’s that high, the bird was empty at

the time --- then we can dismiss that scenario and not get pressured into running with the 25 number if other outlets are reporting it. That's vital. Longer term off the record conversations just have to be about how strong the source-reporter relationship is.

What is your overall experience with the willingness of U.S. Air Force/U.S. military sources to talk off the record? How is it comparable to the willingness of non-military sources to do the same?

IN my experience it has depended entirely on the individual. For the most part I found US mil spox to be pretty helpful off the record, but not always. There were some who refused to do it, and that's fine, though I think it's limiting for them in their job role. But that's the same with many sources, not just military.

How important is it for you to speak (on- or off-the-record) to a technical expert or decision-maker instead of a spokesperson?

I think on your "average" story, a spox is fine. But bigger stories, investigations or important stories, it's much, much, much preferable to speak with that technical expert. It gives the story more breadth and depth and makes it more authoritative.

How is that different for breaking news versus more in-depth reporting?

I'd say it's more vital for in depth reporting.

Response 6

And on your background/off the record distinction – I’d say that we use the standard definitions. Off the record means you can’t report it, and ‘on background’ means you can report it without identifying the source by name. We have strict guidelines on how we use anonymous sources. And reporters generally talk over with their sources to go over the rules and to determine how the source wants to be identified (military official, US official, Air Force official etc.). We also have to include the reason why the source is not speaking on the record (to discuss intelligence, they don’t have authorization to speak publicly, or because the report or whatever has not yet been made public etc.).

We also can’t use an anonymous source to state opinions. We can only use anonymous sources to disclose facts.

What does off the record mean (as you use that term)?

Off the record means that you can’t use it in any story, but it can inform your reporting and your understanding of an issue.

In defining and using off the record, are you guided by commonly understood journalism convention? a textbook journalism definition, or ad hoc agreements about what off the record means with each source?

We use our own organizations definition, which is largely the commonly understood journalism description. And it simply means that you can’t use it, report it.

Why do you use off the record?

I only use off the record to listen to briefings or do interviews that will inform my understanding of a complex issue.

How often do you use off the record?

Not often.

How does the option to go off the record affect your stories?

Off the record is only useful to better understand an issue, or to get information that you can later ferret out with others who might speak on background or on the record.

If going off the record is not something your source is willing to do, how does not being able to go off the record with that person affect your ability or willingness to use them as a source?

Off the record is only marginally better than someone not speaking at all.

What do you notice about the long term relationship with sources who will go off the record and those who won’t?

I very seldom use sources that will only talk off the record – I reserve that for higher level people who can really provide important context that you can’t get elsewhere. Otherwise, it’s not particularly useful and I don’t do it.

Briefly, can you describe the difference between breaking news off-the-record conversations versus how off the record are used as part of longer-term relationships with a source?

As I said, it's not particularly useful in source development. A good source will usually talk on background, rather than only off the record. But when reporting in theater, reporters are often exposed to operational details that can't be reported, In those cases, keeping those details secret can help strengthen relationships with the sources, that could build over time.

What is your overall experience with the willingness of U.S. Air Force/U.S. military sources to talk off the record? How is it comparable to the willingness of non-military sources to do the same?

Again, I very seldom seek information off the record, because I can't use it. Often military sources are willing to talk on background, and that is much more valuable. Politicians are much more willing to talk on background.

How important is it for you to speak (on- or off-the-record) to a technical expert or decision-maker instead of a spokesperson?

It is critical to talk to people other than the spokesperson. The SMEs have much more expertise and usually can better explain the issue/mission/etc.

How is that different for breaking news versus more in-depth reporting?

It's always better to talk to someone other than a PAO because of the level of expertise.

Response 7

What does off the record mean (as you use that term)?

People differ on the meaning of the term, and therein lies one of the pitfalls of an “off the record” conversation. That said, here is my view: It means the matters discussed may not be published or repeated.

In defining and using off the record, are you guided by commonly understood journalism convention? a textbook journalism definition, or ad hoc agreements about what off the record means with each source?

As noted in my previous answer, there is no commonly understood convention – at least not common enough to ensure that all parties in all circumstances have the same understanding of its meaning. Thus I always make my own understanding explicit in advance of such a conversation.

Why do you use off the record?

It provides me with a depth of understanding of an issue that cannot be achieved in an on-the-record or background arrangement. It can be useful to formulating questions for others on the same topic.

How often do you use off the record?

Frequently but not daily.

How does the option to go off the record affect your stories?

It depends; sometimes not at all, other times it provides the sort of insights that make the story viable.

If going off the record is not something your source is willing to do, how does not being able to go off the record with that person affect your ability or willingness to use them as a source?

Again, this depends on the circumstance. The person may still be a valuable source in other respects.

What do you notice about the long term relationship with sources who will go off the record and those who won't?

Not sure what you mean by this.

Briefly, can you describe the difference between breaking news off-the-record conversations versus how off the record are used as part of longer-term relationships with a source?

I generally don't get off-the-record information on breaking news, because if I did, I wouldn't be able to report it. On the other hand, people with whom I have a long-running relationship and whose insights I value can, over time, provide guidance that can lead to good stories.

What is your overall experience with the willingness of U.S. Air Force/U.S. military sources to talk off the record? How is it comparable to the willingness of non-military sources to do the same?

It often depends on the person, whether military or civilian. I don't see much difference in the willingness of either. It is situational dependent.

How important is it for you to speak (on- or off-the-record) to a technical expert or decision-maker instead of a spokesperson?

VERY important. Crucially important... Which is not to say that conversations with a spokesperson have no value. But decision-makers are, by definition, at the leading edge of decisions, and that is where news is made.

How is that different for breaking news versus more in-depth reporting?

It's the same.

Response 8

What does off the record mean (as you use that term)?

In defining and using off the record, are you guided by commonly understood journalism convention? a textbook journalism definition, or ad hoc agreements about what off the record means with each source?

Why do you use off the record?

How often do you use off the record?

Off the record is the most loosely defined term in Washington. It means different things to different people. To some, usually the media savvy, it means you can't use the information in a story. Some people take it even further to mean you can use it to even ask questions of someone else. Other people, usually the least media savvy, take it mean "you can't quote me by name." Unless specifically defined by the person I'm talking to, I interpret it as meaning you can't use it in a story but you can use it in your reporting – i.e. if you can get somebody else to tell you the same thing, then you can use it. But the bottom line in Washington is: if you really want it off the record, don't tell your mirror.

How does the option to go off the record affect your stories?

If going off the record is not something your source is willing to do, how does not being able to go off the record with that person affect your ability or willingness to use them as a source?

That's totally situational. If he gives you useful information under some other attribution – background or deep background – but refuses to go off the record on a particular subject, that would not limit by willingness to use him as a source.

What do you notice about the long term relationship with sources who will go off the record and those who won't?

The best sources I've ever had have talked to me with the understanding that everything was off the record unless I could get it from somebody else. As long as I'm free to follow up on the information, a candid conversation is always better.

Briefly, can you describe the difference between breaking news off-the-record conversations versus how off the record are used as part of longer-term relationships with a source?

If somebody tells you something off the record, you can't use it to report breaking news. [Network] was told off the record that bin Laden had been killed, but it was at least two hours before we could find somebody who would tell us that under ground rules that permitted us to report it.

What is your overall experience with the willingness of U.S. Air Force/U.S. military sources to talk off the record? How is it comparable to the willingness of non-military sources to do the same?

My experience is that people don't go off the record with you unless they have enough prior dealings with you to trust you to treat it as off the record.

How important is it for you to speak (on- or off-the-record) to a technical expert or decision-maker instead of a spokesperson?

Critical. There's no substitute from hearing it from the horse's mouth. Ask yourself; would you rather speak to a technical expert or a spokesperson about the stealth drone?

How is that different for breaking news versus more in-depth reporting?

With breaking news you have to rely on the first person or persons you get to. Usually when something's breaking all the experts are in meetings, so you have to rely on PAOs.

Response 9

What does off the record mean (as you use that term)?

I understand it to mean, with an American official or officer, that whatever is said cannot be used in any way, and cannot even be the basis for a question.

In defining and using off the record, are you guided by commonly understood journalism convention? a textbook journalism definition, or ad hoc agreements about what off the record means with each source?

this is the standard Washington definition of "off the record." The gradations are: On the record, on background (meaning a source name by type but not name); deep background, meaning you cannot indicate who said it or where; and Off the record. Please be aware that UK usage is different. Off the record in the UK is the same as background in the US.

Why do you use off the record?

I truly dislike it, as I cannot do anything with it.

How often do you use off the record?

The exception is if someone really tells the truth, i.e. the full story, in which case it is excusable.

How does the option to go off the record affect your stories?

It makes them more difficult to write; but if used by a source to really put me in the picture, then I would want to take additional time on a story to get another source.

If going off the record is not something your source is willing to do, how does not being able to go off the record with that person affect your ability or willingness to use them as a source?

I think what you're referring to here is 'background' rather than off -record. It's pretty rare that a source goes off the record, and I don't ask sources to do that, as I know the response cannot be used.

What do you notice about the long term relationship with sources who will go off the record and those who won't?

I don't mind officials going on background if by doing it they are genuinely able to say more and explain what is really going on.

Briefly, can you describe the difference between breaking news off-the-record conversations versus how off the record are used as part of longer-term relationships with a source?

Again, I think you are referring to "background," which is a frequent state of affairs, not off the record, which is rare.

What is your overall experience with the willingness of U.S. Air Force/U.S. military sources to talk off the record? How is it comparable to the willingness of non-military sources to do the same?

relatively little eagerness to go off record. What I like most about dealing with the US military in general is the willingness to be on the record. It enhances credibility of any story to have a commander speaking for the record. But put it this way: what i really want in a story, and the only reason I usually want to do a story at all, if I have a choice, is to say what really happened. That's what the reader needs: the real story. what I hate to put out is a story where a senior official ducks speaking on the record, and says something incomplete on background. Background should be used if it allows a spokesman to tell the truth.

How important is it for you to speak (on- or off-the-record) to a technical expert or decision-maker instead of a spokesperson?

Again, with the caveat that I think you're referring to "background," what I really want to provide is the full story, and it doesn't bother me where it comes from.

How is that different for breaking news versus more in-depth reporting?

Applies to both. There's just no way to claim we are committing journalism if we produce stories that leave the reader gasping to know what really happened. Obviously with in-depth, official obfuscation has no place at all. With a spot story done on deadline, you often have to go with what you've got.

Response 10

What does off the record mean (as you use that term)?

Off the record means that the information from that source cannot be used.

In defining and using off the record, are you guided by commonly understood journalism convention? a textbook journalism definition, or ad hoc agreements about what off the record means with each source?

I believe that's a fairly standard definition.

Why do you use off the record?

I generally avoid off the record. The most common time I do use it is fairly mundane. For example, a reference to a personal complication, such as a family illness, that I need to know in my dealings with an official. Other times, it might be a tip that I then have to get from someone else.

How often do you use off the record?

Again, rarely. I never accept ad hominem attacks off the record. If someone wants to besmirch someone (even if it's deserved), it should be on the record.

How does the option to go off the record affect your stories?

If going off the record is not something your source is willing to do, how does not being able to go off the record with that person affect your ability or willingness to use them as a source?

I have no problem with someone being unwilling to speak off the record. Bigger problem is when people want to tell me things off the record -- thus binding me to an honor agreement -- and it turns out what they say should not be off the record.

What do you notice about the long term relationship with sources who will go off the record and those who won't?

Not sure what you're asking here. I've had good sources who've gone off the record and good ones who never do.

Briefly, can you describe the difference between breaking news off-the-record conversations versus how off the record are used as part of longer-term relationships with a source?

It's far more common for me to have background conversations with a source.

What is your overall experience with the willingness of U.S. Air Force/U.S. military sources to talk off the record? How is it comparable to the willingness of non-military sources to do the same?

I'm a bit out of date here, since I've been editing for the past five years. My impression is that USAF/USMIL sources are willing to speak off the record to journalists they trust. It's also my

impression that too many reporters accept off-the-record or background conditions when they shouldn't.

How important is it for you to speak (on- or off-the-record) to a technical expert or decision-maker instead of a spokesperson?

It can at times be very important to have a subject matter expert or decision maker available. On the record is strongly preferred.

How is that different for breaking news versus more in-depth reporting?

With breaking news, I would expect a military spokesperson or decision maker to be on the record as soon as possible. However, it's possibly acceptable that supplemental information must be given on a background or off-the-record basis to make sure the context is understood.

Response 11

I gave your questions a quick scan, and I'm afraid that The [publication's] definition of off-the-record -- information that may never, ever be published in any way shape or form, but is used sparingly for guidance in the most sensitive situations -- means that most of your questions cannot be answered. Are you assuming that off-the-record means what The [publication] considers "deep background" -- information that can be used to shape reporting and guide reporting and can be verified elsewhere, but cannot be used with any attribution whatsoever to the original source? Those are two very, very different animals...

[Followed up with telephone interview]

Response 12

What does off the record mean (as you use that term)?

It means that whatever is said cannot be used.

In defining and using off the record, are you guided by commonly understood journalism convention? a textbook journalism definition, or ad hoc agreements about what off the record means with each source?

I believe I adhere to the commonly held belief in what off the record means.

Why do you use off the record?

I don't. Only if sources demand it.

How often do you use off the record?

Very infrequently.

How does the option to go off the record affect your stories?

I never volunteer it.

If going off the record is not something your source is willing to do, how does not being able to go off the record with that person affect your ability or willingness to use them as a source?

I won't use them. If I can't put it in the paper, it's not worth my time.

What do you notice about the long term relationship with sources who will go off the record and those who won't?

Not sure I know how to answer this.

Briefly, can you describe the difference between breaking news off-the-record conversations versus how off the record are used as part of longer-term relationships with a source?

I will on rare occasions let a source steer me away from a story or angle on an off-the-record basis if I trust them.

What is your overall experience with the willingness of U.S. Air Force/U.S. military sources to talk off the record? How is it comparable to the willingness of non-military sources to do the same?

I don't notice much of a difference.

How important is it for you to speak (on- or off-the-record) to a technical expert or decision-maker instead of a spokesperson?

Extremely important. Experts are by far preferred.

How is that different for breaking news versus more in-depth reporting?

No difference to me.

Response 13

What does off the record mean (as you use that term)?

There are three classifications of communication with a source of information.

On The Record, means the source can be quoted, directly by name.

On Background, means the source can be quoted but the quote cannot be attributed to the source.

Off The Record, means the information cannot be used publicly in any way, shape or form. OTR can be useful as guidance, it can help shape the direction of additional reporting, but the quotes and the information itself cannot be used in any public account.

I recently was invited to an OTR lunch with the president. The information was useful in that it helped me understand the presidents views on a variety of issues and helped me make sense of a number of future policy decisions. However, no one ever knew the lunch took place. No quotes or other information from the lunch was used in my reporting.

OTR can be extremely helpful because experts in certain areas may be willing to give a reporter an education on a complex subject on an OTR basis. The OTR information is invaluable to guide the reporter away from erroneous reporting and to place other information in the proper context.

Appendix 2

Proposed questions for Air Force Public Affairs Officers who have experience with national or international journalists:

1. Generally how often have you used off the record with reporters? Why or why not?
2. What are the risks, as you see them, of going off the record? What are the advantages?
3. What factors do you consider before going off the record?
4. How did you learn about what to consider before going off the record? How did you learn about the mechanics (conventions, terminology, methods) of off-the-record interviews? Any formal or informal training?
 - Is there a standard definition of what off the record means to all concerned?
5. How does the willingness or ability to go off-the-record affect your effectiveness as an Air Force spokesperson during breaking news stories differently than for interviews that are less time-sensitive (relationship-building media engagements)?
6. If Air Force PAOs or spokespersons are to go off the record, which PAOs do you think should do it, and under what circumstances?
7. Any specific case(s) where off the record was (or could have been) particularly important to a story...and was it because you did use it or because you did not use it?
8. Under what conditions would you go /have you gone off the record with a reporter?
 - How important are these factors when deciding?
 - timeliness/urgency.....very important, moderately important, unimportant
 - your level of trust with the reporter...very important, moderately important, unimportant
 - you see no better options.....very important, moderately important, unimportant
 - desire to get organization's views into the story.....very imp, moderately imp, unimportant

Response 1

Generally how often have you used off the record with reporters? Why or why not?

I have used it judiciously. There are time when I felt a reporter needed to know something for context, but I did not necessarily want my name quoted with it.

What are the risks, you see them, of going off the record? What are the advantages? Risks re them attributing it to you anyway.

Advantages are that you can sometime help a reporter with context and help them pull things things together to form a complete picture of the situation.

What factors do you consider before going off the record?

How long I have known and worked with the reporter. Also, the benefit the AF will realize with the reporting if I do provide some context.

How did you learn about what to consider before going off the record?

Just from other PAs I have worked with.

How did you learn about the mechanics (conventions, terminology, methods) of off-the-record interviews? Any formal or informal training?

No formal training, all on the job.

-- Is there a standard definition of what off the record means to all concerned?

Not attributed to anyone, unless the reporter can find another source who can provide it on the record.

How does the willingness or ability to go off-the-record affect your effectiveness as an Air Force spokesperson during breaking news stories differently than for interviews that are less time-sensitive (relationship-building media engagements)?

It increases your status both in the military and with reporters. Seasoned, professional Reporters love getting information that try feel others do not have.

If Air Force PAOs or spokespersons are to go off the record, which PAOs do you think should do it, and under what circumstances?

Matured ones who have the strategic picture.

Any specific case(s) where off the record was (or could have been) particularly important to a story, and was it because you did use it or because you did not use it?

Nothing really notable.

Under what conditions would you go /have you gone off the record with a reporter?

--How important are these factors when deciding?

--- timeliness/urgency.... **moderately important**

---your level of trust with the reporter. **very important**

---you see no better options.....**very important**

---desire to get organization's views into the **very important**

Response 2

Generally how often have you used off the record with reporters? Why or why not?

Only several times in my 18-year career.

What are the risks, as you see them, of going off the record? What are the advantages?

Risks: Reporter not honoring off-the-record or having a different understanding of its meaning.

Advantages: Provide context to an issue or story; educate the reporter on the issue

What factors do you consider before going off the record?

1) My relationship with the reporter, 2) how going off-the-record will put the story in context or add to the reporter's understanding of the issue

How did you learn about what to consider before going off the record? How did you learn about the mechanics (conventions, terminology, methods) of off-the-record interviews? Any formal or informal training?

Experience. I confirm with the reporter they have the same definition of "off-the-record".

-- Is there a standard definition of what off the record means to all concerned?

Not in my opinion. I believe many people confuse "off-the-record" and "on background".

How does the willingness or ability to go off-the-record affect your effectiveness as an Air Force spokesperson during breaking news stories differently than for interviews that are less time-sensitive (relationship-building media engagements)?

I have only used "off-the-record" for time-sensitive issues. I don't really see the need for a story that you have time to educate the reporter on or shape the story.

If Air Force PAOs or spokespersons are to go off the record, which PAOs do you think should do it, and under what circumstances?

Any PAO who has the relationship with a reporter and understands the definition and implications.

Any specific case(s) where off the record was (or could have been) particularly important to a story...and was it because you did use it or because you did not use it?

On several occasions going off-the-record delayed publication of a story that would have released erroneous information.

Under what conditions would you go /have you gone off the record with a reporter?

--How important are these factors when deciding?

--- timeliness/urgency.....**very important**, moderately important, unimportant

---your level of trust with the reporter...**very important**, moderately important, unimportant

---you see no better options.....very important, moderately important, **unimportant**

---desire to get organization's views into the story.....**very imp**, moderately imp, unimportant

Response 3

Generally how often have you used off the record with reporters? Why or why not?

Somewhat frequently to provide context as to why something may or may not be newsworthy. In addition, off-the-record discussions have been helpful to provide context to cover the on-the-record aspects of the story. For example: Leading the PA media efforts following the inadvertent flight of nuclear weapons via a B-52 to Barksdale in 2007 would have been a failed effort without the careful use of off-the-record discussions.

What are the risks, as you see them, of going off the record? What are the advantages?

The risks are significant. Some level of professional trust must be present. In addition, going off the record presents ample room for error if the reporter mistakes where on-the-record stops and on-the-record begins. Going back and forth in a single interview is especially challenging and should be avoided.

What factors do you consider before going off the record?

Trust, policy, law (esp regarding classified data), cost/benefit including impact, i.e. is it worth it?

How did you learn about what to consider before going off the record? How did you learn about the mechanics (conventions, terminology, methods) of off-the-record interviews? Any formal or informal training?

Formal training in college and DINFOS... was also the AF media trainer at SAF/PA. Most of it though is common sense and based on relationships, considering all of the above.

-- Is there a standard definition of what off the record means to all concerned?

Yes – any professional reporter know they cannot pass on the information or use it for a story, let alone attribute the information... in short, the conversation didn't happen... However, if they can confirm the information via other sources then the info is fair game.

How does the willingness or ability to go off-the-record affect your effectiveness as an Air Force spokesperson during breaking news stories differently than for interviews that are less time-sensitive (relationship-building media engagements)?

Reporters need to know they are going to get honesty from PAs and not be misled, either actively or passively. A PA who is not experienced enough to go off the record under appropriate circumstances will be ineffective at the national or international level.

If Air Force PAOs or spokespersons are to go off the record, which PAOs do you think should do it, and under what circumstances?

Experienced PAs with the exposure to the senior level information and decision-making processes who can adequately negotiate the interview challenges. BL: they need to be well-versed and have the needed depth to talk on the subject as well as understand the institutions higher level objectives. This quickly limits the pool of qualified PAs.

Any specific case(s) where off the record was (or could have been) particularly important to a story...and was it because you did use it or because you did not use it?

The nuclear cruise missile mistake – it was paramount. Again, could give you more... The grounding of the entire AF F-15 fleet us another example...

Under what conditions would you go /have you gone off the record with a reporter?

Think I covered above.

--How important are these factors when deciding?

--- timeliness/urgency.....**very important,**

---your level of trust with the reporter... **moderately important**

---you see no better options.....**very important**

---desire to get organization's views into the story.....**very imp**

Response 4

Generally how often have you used off the record with reporters? Why or why not?

More as I have grown as a media relations practitioner, but it depends completely on the relationship I have with the reporter.

What are the risks, as you see them, of going off the record? What are the advantages?

Risks: Misreading the level of trust established with the reporter and getting burned.

Advantages: Getting your story out there without getting burned.

What factors do you consider before going off the record?

Relationship with the reporter; need to move the story; mutually agreeable definition of off-the-record; are there alternatives?

How did you learn about what to consider before going off the record? How did you learn about the mechanics (conventions, terminology, methods) of off-the-record interviews? Any formal or informal training? -- Is there a standard definition of what off the record means to all concerned?

Discussions with colleagues and reporters; professional reading. My definition of off-the-record, which I review with any reporter before going down that path, is that whatever I say may not be attributed to me and cannot be used by the reporter unless another source confirms the information.

How does the willingness or ability to go off-the-record affect your effectiveness as an Air Force spokesperson during breaking news stories differently than for interviews that are less time-sensitive (relationship-building media engagements)?

I rarely use off-the-record during breaking news stories - I do not want to lose track of the storyline. To me, off-the-record is a strategic tool.

If Air Force PAOs or spokespersons are to go off the record, which PAOs do you think should do it, and under what circumstances?

Only senior PAOs who are comfortable with the practice and understand its consequences.

Any specific case(s) where off the record was (or could have been) particularly important to a story, and was it because you did use it or because you did not use it?

Yes, because of the multi-agency nature of the story.

Under what conditions would you go /have you gone off the record with a reporter?

--How important are these factors when deciding?

--- timeliness/urgency.....**moderately important**

---your level of trust with the reporter.**very important**

---you see no better options.....**moderately important**

---desire to get organization's views into the story...**moderately important**

Response 5

Generally how often have you used off the record with reporters? Why or why not?

Generally, do not. Paradoxical, to say "officially, This isn't an official statement" Easier to subtly drop comments through engagement. Based on the approach of the correspondent, if they appear not to know much about the subject (by accident or design) do a backgrounder. Better to use background interview to inform reporter of USAF's perspectives and motivations with SMEs. Breaking through the key message veneer and really just talk with them on background. Increases exposure to AF Point of view and give them possible other request for our SME's to do official interview if they razzle dazzle the reporter or in some cases the reporters staff.

What are the risks, as you see them, of going off the record? What are the advantages?
What factors do you consider before going off the record?

How did you learn about what to consider before going off the record?

How did you learn about the mechanics (conventions, terminology, methods) of off-the-record interviews? Any formal or informal training?

-- Is there a standard definition of what off the record means to all concerned?

I don't know this is my loose understanding; A declared statement or conversation that is made by one given access to information that one has access to through position and/or through duties as a USAF Airman that one does not want accountable to their person or the organization. Simply put to appear to have a divided loyalty where in one has information that one deems important to the situation. Based on one's perception. May or may not be condoned through one's supervisors or peers. In the end it IS an extend liability on a personal level to share information that for one reason or another is not officially releasable.

On a side note: Worse case scenario, it could appear to be an attempt to manipulate/influence information or perceptions of any element involved, senders/receivers or any media in which information is carried. Also, truly democratic nations never seem to fair as well those nations that don't attempt to hold themselves accountable to democratic principles.

How does the willingness or ability to go off-the-record affect your effectiveness as an Air Force spokesperson during breaking news stories differently than for interviews that are less time sensitive (relationship-building media engagements)?

If Air Force PAOs or spokespersons are to go off the record, which PAOs do you think should do it, and under what circumstances?

Any specific case(s) where off the record was (or could have been) particularly important to a story and was it because you did use it or because you did not use it?

Under what conditions would you go /have you gone off the record with a reporter?

--How important are these factors when deciding?

--- timeliness/urgency.....very important, moderately important, unimportant

---your level of trust with the reporter.very important, moderately important, unimportant

---you see no better options.....very important, moderately important,unimportant

---desire to get organization's views into the story...very imp, moderately imp, unimportant

Response 6

Generally how often have you used off the record with reporters? Why or why not?

Depending on the circumstances, I've used it quite a bit. However, it's primarily been with reporters with whom I have developed a professional relationship and a certain level of trust. In my engagements with them, it's sometimes useful to be able to speak off-the-record to help provide context to issues or background when an official comment on a matter wouldn't be warranted.

What are the risks, as you see them, of going off the record? What are the advantages?

The biggest risk in going off the record comes down to whether you can trust a reporter to abide by the ground rule agreed upon. I've had a few situations in which a reporter agreed to go off-the-record, but then used the materials anyway. This is another reason why I generally will only go off-the-record with reporters whom I have worked with extensively and with whom I have developed a mutual sense of trust.

The advantages of going off-the-record include being able to provide a deeper context or understanding of an issue to enable accurate and objective reporting on a topic. For example, sometimes information might not be ready for 'prime time' due to various reasons, but a reporter contacts you with only half the story or inaccurate information. In a case such as this, being able to go off-the-record and help the reporter understand where a matter stands and why the Air Force hasn't commented on it publicly can help mitigate misreporting or inaccurate information.

What factors do you consider before going off the record?

- Is there a compelling need to go off-the-record?

Journalists are in the business of writing/broadcasting, so you'd better have a good reason to talk off the record since they can't use what you provide.

- Can I trust the reporter to abide by the ground rules?

This can be based on past experience or feedback from other PAOs...or even just situational (for example, I rarely go off the record with foreign journalists since my experiences overseas have taught me that going off-the-record doesn't necessarily mean what we think it means In the U.S.)

- Before going off-the-record, I follow a specific process: I ask the reporter if we can go off-the-record and wait until they confirm before proceeding. In my mind and per journalistic custom, this now constitutes an agreement to abide by the ground rule established until we agree to go back on-the-record.

How did you learn about what to consider before going off the record? How did you learn about the mechanics (conventions, terminology, methods) of off-the-record interviews? Any formal or informal training?

Formal Air Force public affairs training on the various levels of media interaction began at DINFOS very early in my career. However, my first introduction to the concepts was during my undergraduate courses as a student in my university's college of journalism & mass communications. However, it wasn't until I was a field grade officer assigned to the DoD press desk that I really began to employ the off-the-record ground rule in the course of my duties. Much of this had to do with the frequency of daily contact I had with the Pentagon press corps, the scope of information I was dealing with at the 'seat of government' level, and the often short time frame between a reporter's query and a subsequent published news story. Sometimes, the ability to go off-the-record with a reporter made the difference between an inaccurate front page story and an accurate article published in the back pages – or no story at all.

-- Is there a standard definition of what off the record means to all concerned?

In my mind, there's a customary standard within US journalism circles, but it's important to clarify what it means to you with a reporter you haven't worked with before or when dealing with foreign press.

How does the willingness or ability to go off-the-record affect your effectiveness as an Air Force spokesperson during breaking news stories differently than for interviews that are less time-sensitive (relationship-building media engagements)?

I don't know that it affects my effectiveness as a PAO. It's a tactic to employ during certain situations. In some ways, it may help to develop positive relationships with certain reporters since they may feel that you're a resource they can call on to better understand a topic; this would, of course, be helpful during crises situations. However, there's also the potential for an opposite effect since reporters may not come to you if you're not willing to talk to them on-the-record and provide materials they can use.

If Air Force PAOs or spokespersons are to go off the record, which PAOs do you think should do it, and under what circumstances?

This is a tough question to answer since it's really situational. But in general, I'd say that the chief PAO or media chiefs of any operation should primarily be the ones authorized to discuss information off-the-record. Most important in all of this is to have someone who knows what they're doing – going off-the-record isn't something that should be done without careful consideration, proper procedure and an appropriate rationale.

Any specific case(s) where off the record was (or could have been) particularly important to a story...and was it because you did use it or because you did not use it?

Yes. I don't feel comfortable providing too many details in writing, but can recall a very specific situation during a deployment to a foreign country in which a prominent national

reporter came upon some information that was relatively inconsequential to the story he was researching, but that could have had major negative impact within the native population and press due to misperceptions and popular urban legends in the country. If revealed, it could have had serious consequences on our host nation relationships and ability to conduct our mission. I spoke to the reporter off-the-record, explained our concerns and asked him to consider not using that particular detail in his story. He agreed. In my opinion, because I was able to provide a logical, fact-based rationale off-the-record and because the omission of this particular piece of information didn't affect his overall story, we were able to create a win-win situation: the reporter published an objective, accurate story and we avoided unnecessarily incitement of the host nation population and press.

Under what conditions would you go /have you gone off the record with a reporter?

See above. Again, it's not a decision to be made lightly and should normally be used to help mitigate misreporting and/or to ensure the reporter has the proper context and understanding regarding an issue when talking on-the-record or on background isn't an option.

--How important are these factors when deciding?

- timeliness/urgency.....**very important**, moderately important, unimportant
- your level of trust with the reporter...**very important**, moderately important, unimportant
- you see no better options.....very important, **moderately important**, unimportant
- desire to get organization's views into the story.....very imp, **moderately imp**, unimportant

Response 7

Generally how often have you used off the record with reporters? Why or why not?

Frequently--daily during major combat operations and weekly while working at the Air Force or MAJCOM level. Most frequently on either breaking news or sensitive issues without the awareness of my chain of command to provide information that I was not allowed to release in order to prevent inaccurate reporting that would have been harmful to the command.

What are the risks, as you see them, of going off the record? What are the advantages?

Disadvantages: possibility that you will be disciplined for being identified as the source of the information or that the reporter will become increasingly reliant on you to go off the record in order to break news or independently confirm news others have broken using anonymous sources.

Advantages: anonymity and speed that comes with operating without bureaucratic staffing

What factors do you consider before going off the record?

Is there a feasible way to handle this on the record or on background? Do I trust the reporter to use the information responsibly? Will a failure to provide the information off the record result in the reporting of erroneous information harmful to the public interest or my organization?

How did you learn about what to consider before going off the record? How did you learn about the mechanics (conventions, terminology, methods) of off-the-record interviews? Any formal or informal training?

-- Is there a standard definition of what off the record means to all concerned?

I believe there is some confusion among officials who talk to media between what background and off-the-record mean. I don't think there's much confusion on the media side, although it's complicated by a few reporters who have been willing to violate off the record agreements for a story and by the use of the quasi-status of "deep background." I had no training on how, why, when to go off the record. I simply figured it out by observing cases in which other people used it and applying that to my professional situations on a case-by-case basis.

How does the willingness or ability to go off-the-record affect your effectiveness as an Air Force spokesperson during breaking news stories differently than for interviews that are less time-sensitive (relationship-building media engagements)?

Being able to vector reporters in the right direction on a story by going off the record has allowed me to be more effective both by being able to collect information about issues/attitudes from them and by making them more receptive to my ideas for stories beneficial to my organization.

If Air Force PAOs or spokespersons are to go off the record, which PAOs do you think should do it, and under what circumstances?

I am opposed to proposing firm criteria for who should be allowed to go off the record or when, because that implies a rule set, and the whole point of going off the record is to recognize that there are circumstances in which the existing rule set doesn't apply. Bluntly stated, at multiple levels of a military organization operating according to set procedures in a complex environment, there are many circumstances that make the military's rules or the people strictly following these rules just plain dumb. The military needs to give its spokesmen the latitude needed to save the institution from this circumstantial stupidity. To try to regulate the use of this tool is to ignore the essence of its usefulness, which is that it's an unregulated form of information flow within a highly regulated organization.

Any specific case(s) where off the record was (or could have been) particularly important to a story...and was it because you did use it or because you did not use it?

Yes. Michael Hastings' profile of General McChrystal in Rolling Stone was a clear example of when a reporter spent excessive time in an off-the-record environment for an excessive period of time and without any good reason or justifiable expectation of trust. Otherwise, off the record was very useful in Afghanistan in cases where for propaganda or political purposes reporters had been provided incorrect information from other sources that could only be corrected by quickly providing the reporter with information that could not be released with attribution--either because the contrary information was grounded in intelligence that could not be declassified in time to provide it in an attributable fashion to the reporter, or because going on the record (or even on background as an anonymous defense official) would have put ISAF or DOD in political conflict with the person or organization peddling the story.

Under what conditions would you go /have you gone off the record with a reporter?

--How important are these factors when deciding?

- timeliness/urgency.....(**very important**), moderately important, unimportant
- your level of trust with the reporter...very important, (**moderately important**), unimportant
- you see no better options.....(**very important**), moderately important, unimportant
- desire to get organization's views into the story.....very imp, (**moderately imp**), unimportant

Response 8

Generally how often have you used off the record with reporters? Why or why not?

Answer: Often. It helps provide a reporter with context and with information that I can not be the source or have the organization be the source.

What are the risks, as you see them, of going off the record? What are the advantages?

Answer: I have never had my name or organization tied to information when going off the record so I see minimal risk. The advantage is that going off the record can often diffuse what is a potentially very negative story or help frame a story where there is significant rumor or misperception. It can also provide valuable background for a reporter in helping him or her go after the right sources and right information.

What factors do you consider before going off the record?

Answer: Is it necessary. Do I trust the reporter. If the reporter is local and someone I have built a relationship with and an understanding in the past. Does it ultimately help with ensuring the information is told accurately and truthfully without compromising security, federal policies or privacy – SAPP!

How did you learn about what to consider before going off the record? How did you learn about the mechanics (conventions, terminology, methods) of off-the-record interviews? Any formal or informal training?

Answer: I was a reporter for several years so I know intuitively how the news gathering process works. Experience as a PAO. I would not recommend that a new PAO even attempt to go off the record – there must be some level of top cover before going off the record takes place. I have always discussed ground rules with my boss before I go into any interview where the material is sensitive politically or from a policy perspective. Don't go "solo."

-- Is there a standard definition of what off the record means to all concerned?

Ummm....no....kind of like defining pornography (sorry for the metaphor but it's true).

How does the willingness or ability to go off-the-record affect your effectiveness as an Air Force spokesperson during breaking news stories differently than for interviews that are less time-sensitive (relationship-building media engagements)?

Answer: It is absolutely critical – you want to be seen as a trusted resource, someone who will level with you, someone who can appropriately explain why the organization is doing what it is doing for the good of the mission, its people, and the nation. Sometimes (often) that can't be done "on the record."

If Air Force PAOs or spokespersons are to go off the record, which PAOs do you think should do it, and under what circumstances?

Answer: The PAO that works directly for the Commander, period. The most senior spokesperson or the person that the Commander explicitly trusts to go off the record – it can be delegated depending on the situation and the availability of the senior PAO, i.e., the deputy or perhaps the chief of media if that person has been “assigned” to the particular story/issue or to the Commander. Under no circumstances, however, should the Commander or PAO not be in agreement – there is so much that can go wrong when the commander and PAO are not in synch on the message and what can be stated publicly and what needs to be offered off the record.

Any specific case(s) where off the record was (or could have been) particularly important to a story, and was it because you did use it or because you did not use it?

Answer: I have gone off the record – again with my supervisor’s permission – when it was believed the reporter had the story totally wrong but our organization could not speak on the record with authority (i.e., it was a larger release authority – DOD, Service, Department, etc.). In many cases, I would go off the record to corroborate what the reporter already knew and even had a direct source but he/she needed to bounce what he/she had with another entity/source. Anecdotally – crime story or investigation where it would be clearly inappropriate to talk about a cause of death or the cause of an accident but the reporter needed to see if he/she was going in the right direction. Anecdotally – to provide advance notification of a breaking story – to essentially embargo the information but to ensure the reporter had “advance warning” to get his sources lined up and the right information ready to ensure when the story was officially released, he/she could tell the story with the right context and had as much of the story complete as possible.

Under what conditions would you go /have you gone off the record with a reporter?

--How important are these factors when deciding?

--- timeliness/urgency.....very important, moderately important, unimportant

(urgency is very important – if story is about to break and reporter will get it “wrong,” the time to go off the record is imperative – run down the hallway and talk to your boss and once your boss is in agreement get the reporter on the line...

---your level of trust with the reporter.very important, moderately important, unimportant

(very important – won’t do it with an unknown entity)

---you see no better options.....very important, moderately important,unimportant

(weigh the options – what’s more important to the organization? Its reputation and mission effectiveness, security, privacy interests, etc., must be weighed before the decision is made. If you can protect security, policy, privacy interests and it works in favor of the organization’s reputation and standing with the public – via the media – do it.

---desire to get organization's views into the story...very imp, moderately imp, unimportant

(unimportant – this should not be the consideration in my opinion for going off the record – in fact, I don’t want the organization’s views even remotely construed or perceived to be part of the story...the whole idea is not to have the reporter use “according to sources...” or “according to a senior spokesperson.” This is where the definition of off the record must be clear in my mind. I want the reporter to have the background and the information but off the record has always meant to me (and stated to the reporter) that the information I am about

to tell you can not be attributed to me, the organization or used in the story. The reporter has to do his or her homework and go find a source or otherwise have the information to ensure the story he or she is about to send to the editor/producer is accurate. Sometimes going off the record is purely to effectively kill a story or advance a story depending on what needs to happen.)

Appendix 3

From Joint Publication 3-61, Public Affairs

Principles of Information

It is the responsibility of DOD to **make available timely and accurate information so that the public, Congress, and the news media may assess and understand facts about national security and defense strategy.** Requests for information from organizations and private citizens shall be answered quickly. In carrying out DOD policy, the following DOD principles of information shall apply:

Information shall be made fully and readily available, consistent with statutory requirements, unless its release is precluded by national security constraints or valid statutory mandates or exceptions. The provisions of the Freedom of Information Act will be supported in both letter and spirit.

A free flow of general and military information shall be made available, without censorship or propaganda, to the men and women of the Armed Forces of the United States, including civilian employees, contractors, and their dependents.

Information **will not be classified or otherwise withheld to protect the government from criticism or embarrassment.**

Information shall be withheld **only when disclosure would adversely affect national security or threaten the safety or privacy of the men and women of the Armed Forces.**

DOD's obligation to provide the public with information **may require coordination with other government agencies (OGAs).** Such activity is to expedite the flow of information to the public.

Propaganda has no place in DOD PA programs.

Tenets of PA

Effective application of the PA tenets normally results in more effective and efficient execution of PA operations and relationships with the media. They complement the DOD principles of information and describe best practices. The tenets should be reviewed and appropriately applied during all stages of joint operation planning and execution.

The tenets are:

Tell the Truth. JFC's PA personnel will release only accurate information of officially released information.

Provide Timely Information and Imagery. Commanders should be prepared to release timely, factual, coordinated, and approved information and imagery about military operations.

Practice Security at the Source. All DOD personnel and DOD contractors are responsible for safeguarding sensitive information.

Provide Consistent Information at All Levels. The public often receives simultaneous information from a variety of official DOD sources at various levels.

Tell the DOD Story. Although commanders designate only military personnel or DOD civilian employees as official spokespersons, they should educate and encourage all their military, civilian employees, and contractors to tell the DOD story by providing them with timely information that is appropriate for public release.

Appendix 4

**THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
1000 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, DC 20301-1000**

JUL 2 2010

MEMORANDUM FOR DEPUTY SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
SECRETARIES OF THE MILITARY DEPARTMENTS CHAIRMAN OF THE
JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF UNDER SECRETARIES OF DEFENSE
COMMANDERS OF THE COMBATANT COMMANDS ASSISTANT
SECRETARIES OF DEFENSE
GENERAL COUNSEL OF THE DEPARTMENT OF
DEFENSE
ASSISTANTS TO THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE DIRECTOR,
ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT

SUBJECT: Interaction with the Media

It is important that the news media have appropriate access to many aspects of DoD activities and operations. Consistent with applicable laws and procedures, we are obliged to ensure that the information provided to them is timely, accurate, credible, and consistent. I have said many times that we must strive to be as open, accessible, and transparent as possible.

At the same time, I am concerned that the Department has grown lax in how we engage with the media, often in contravention of established rules and procedures. We have far too many people talking to the media outside of channels, sometimes providing information which is simply incorrect, out of proper context, unauthorized, or uninformed by the perspective of those who are most knowledgeable about and accountable for inter- and intra-agency policy processes, operations, and activities.

We must deal with the media in a manner that safeguards information protected by law and that maintains the integrity of the government's internal decision making processes. Leaking of classified information is against the law, cannot be tolerated, and will, when proven, lead to the prosecution of those found to be engaged in such activity. Revealing unclassified, but sensitive, pre-decisional, or otherwise restricted information is also prohibited unless specifically authorized.

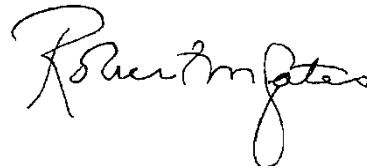
Current DoD policy, outlined by Directive 5122.05, "Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs," (attached) states that the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs is the sole release authority for official DoD information

to news media in Washington, and that all media activities must be coordinated through appropriate public affairs channels.

This policy is, all too often, ignored. Accordingly, we must enhance our internal coordination mechanisms to ensure that Department officials are aware of the most current departmental and inter-agency information and perspective on the topic at hand when they engage the media. We need to ensure that, as they do so, we avoid misunderstandings and miscommunications caused by insufficient situational awareness.

Accordingly, prior to interviews or any other means of media and public engagement with possible national or international implications, all component leaders or their public affairs officers must notify OSD Public Affairs which, in turn and as appropriate, will ensure that senior Department officials with the relevant overall knowledge and situational awareness have been consulted.

I have asked the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs to work with OSD component heads, military department heads, and combatant commanders to implement the attached additional guidance.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert M. Gates". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "R" and a long, sweeping tail.

Attachment
s: As stated