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CHARLIE ROSE, host:

"Truth, War & Consequences" is a new documentary produced by "Frontline," WGBH

Boston. It examines a cause of America's current problems in rebuilding Iraq through interviews with key American and Iraqi government leaders. Joining me now is Martin Smith, the film's producer and correspondent. I am pleased to have him on this show for a number of reasons. First of all, I--I admire the work he's done here with--he has an extraordinary story to tell. Secondly, he did a story that I saw about the hunt for bin Laden.

What was that, Martin, about?

Mr. MARTIN SMITH (Producer, Correspondent, "Frontline"): Well, we started in '98. We were on the air in '99 with "Terrorist and the Superpower." That was our first one. It became "The Hunt for bin Laden" when we rebroadcast it after 9/11. We continued with other programs after that.

ROSE: "Frontline" is--for me, is the best documentary series on the--on American television. Tell me what got you there. I mean, how does Martin Smith arrive at "Frontline" with an interest in--in the Middle East and the Gulf?

Mr. SMITH: I've been with "Frontline" for 20 years. I've been there and--and--and left. I've gone back to the networks. I've bounced back and forth a little bit. I've worked both at CBS and ABC, but "Frontline" does the kind of work that I admire. And when I--an--and GBH in general has done remarkable documentary work, long-form work that I've always--for what reason I don't know--I've just gravitated towards.

ROSE: How did this hour come in to be?

Mr. SMITH: We were finishing up a program. I think it aired on April 10th, the day after the statues fell on North Korea--"Kim's Nuclear Gamble." It was on "Frontline." And I was sitting with David Fanning, the executive producer, and he just said, 'I think I'd like you to go to Baghdad.' And I said, 'Sure.' And two weeks later we were there, April 24th. So two weeks after

the forces got into Baghdad we went in there for our first trip and started to collect the material that became this program. We made another trip, subsequently, in July, August.

ROSE: But not in search of a particular question?

Mr. SMITH: Well, we were looking--thi--this is a moving target. I mean, if you go back to that era, Garner's in charge, General Jay...

ROSE: Right.

Mr. SMITH: ...Garner and this team called ORHA, the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance. Things changed during the period of time we were tracking the story. We had a set piece of history--the pre-war planning, and we could dig into that as well as the current work in Baghdad. But, no, we didn't have any--we didn't know what we were putting together.

ROSE: In--coming out at the end of this hour--which you show a lot of

principal characters here--but Ahmed Chalabi is one of them.

Mr. SMITH: Mm-hmm.

ROSE: Take a look at this clip. And this is where he talks about the connection between Saddam and al-Qaida. And we'll come to some of the questions that come out of Mr. Chabali's position with the governing council and other issues after looking at this. Roll tape.

(Clips from "Truth, War & Consequences," courtesy Frontline/WGBH Boston)

ROSE: And here, two days before airing the program, have you seen the document?

Mr. SMITH: We took a--no, I have not. But we typed out the transcript of that conversation and--and put a cover letter together and sent it to Dr. Chalabi, I'd say, a month and a half ago, and the re--the only response we got was, 'Well, I have it, but I just can't find it'; which is--you know, I can't buy it. I just don't--I just don't understand it, really. I mean, either he's being sloppy, making--making claims that he can't back up, or I--I don't

know.

ROSE: Tell me what you think the principal mistake the United States and its coalition partners have made with respect to the post-military action in Iraq.

Mr. SMITH: The post-military action? Well, first of all, we're in...

ROSE: I know, I know, I know. I understand that. We are. I know.

Mr. SMITH: ...we're in a guerilla war right now, and you know that and I know that.

ROSE: Of course I do, and--but I'm trying to explain.

Mr. SMITH: Sure.

ROSE: In terms of what they--when the president said...

Mr. SMITH: Mission accomplished?

ROSE: ...mission accomplished.

Mr. SMITH: Yeah, well, it's very hard to give you one single mistake, but...

ROSE: But having been there and talked to all the people you have talked to and--and people that are part of this documentary, you know, you see--you see experts saying they had a plan, but they didn't want it.

Mr. SMITH: Well, they...

ROSE: State was a--vs. Pentagon. The Pentagon said...

Mr. SMITH: It's all about planning. It's all about planning, and they didn't--I mean, they planned the war. The Pentagon is very good at drilling. I mean, they've--they--they--they've got contingency plans for everything, except the Pentagon has not done nation building on the scale that they're being required to do here. This was an administration remember. They campaigned 'The president apposed the idea of getting involved in nation building.' We--we did have the US State Department putting together a project starting in the spring of 2002 called The Future of Iraq Project...

ROSE: Right.

Mr. SMITH: ...an effort to engage the Iraqi community in planning for keeping the water going or electricity and all these things.

ROSE: And--and--and as you say in this documentary, what happened to The Future of Iraq Project?

Mr. SMITH: Well, it kind of hits the meat grinder and gets--gets tossed out because of a rather bitter feud between the State Department and the Defense Department over this fellow here, Ahmed Chalabi, as to whether or not we were gonna go ins--backing him or not.

ROSE: He was very much apposed to the project...

Mr. SMITH: He was...

ROSE: ...at the conclusion of the project?

Mr. SMITH: Well, he didn't--we wasn't interested in the project so much as he was interested in who was gonna govern after the war. And there was a legitimate criticism about The Future of Iraq Project in that it was kind of--it was kind of headless. It had lots of seminars and people talking about it. And I'm not--I'm not proposing in the documentary that that would have saved everything, but it is an example of lack of coordination and lack of planning in fighting that produces that kind of paralysis.

ROSE: At the end of the day, what is your judgement about Mr. Chalabi?

Mr. SMITH: I think Chalabi is a very skilled lobbyist. He's worked very hard on this for a long, long time and he's gotten thus far exactly what he wanted out of this. He--he got...

ROSE: Does he--he...

Mr. SMITH: ...the Americans to finally come in and use their muscle and get rid of Saddam Hussein. I mean, I think that...

ROSE: And did he do it for all the right motives...

Mr. SMITH: I don't know...

ROSE: ...i.e, did he...

Mr. SMITH: ...all his motives. You know, I would pre--I'd have to presume to know all his motives. But, clearly, his motivations for getting rid of Saddam can't be the same as ours. He's an Iraqi exile. He's gonna live in Iraq after.

ROSE: He wants to go home?

Mr. SMITH: He wants to go home.

ROSE: Yeah.

Mr. SMITH: That's his whole try.

ROSE: A--and he--he--on this program, he was enormously critical of the CIA. On the other hand, you have defense--DOD, according to your documentary, relied heavily on what he and his exiles said about the situation on the ground in Iraq.

Mr. SMITH: Well, and I think that that--that perhaps will turn out to be one of the biggest mistakes.

ROSE: That we relied on him?

Mr. SMITH: That we listened--that we listened so much to this one man.

ROSE: Both in terms of weapons of mass destruction and also the condition of the infrastructure, which presented a problem, too.

Mr. SMITH: Well, there was a kind of rosy scenario, a...

ROSE: Yeah.

Mr. SMITH: ...set of rosy scenarios that came out of the Iraqi National Congress, Chalabi's organization.

ROSE: Oi--oil revenue will pay for everything.

Mr. SMITH: Oil revenue will pay for everything and that people will accept this as liberators, as the vice president said, as many of them said, and it just didn't turn out to be so easy, and we weren't set up with the kind of planning that we would need in order to, you know, fix that.

ROSE: No one in the administration, certainly at the top, had--would talk to you, would give you an interview, not Chaney, not Condoleezza Rice, not Rumsfeld...

Mr. SMITH: That's right.

ROSE: ...not Powell, not Armitage. I don't know how many of these you asked, but you did...

Mr. SMITH: Well, I think we asked...

ROSE: ...ask Doug Feith, and--and he agreed, and then you show up and one hour before the interview is to take place, interview canceled.

Mr. SMITH: Oh, I--I had my necktie on. I was ready. I had my notes together. I was ready to sit down with him. I'd just finished breakfast and I got a call saying it--that it was called off.

ROSE: For what reason?

Mr. SMITH: Well, actually, they didn't immediately call it off. They said, 'We're postponing it,' but within a couple of days we were told. And we were never given an explanation, but they--it was the White House that interceded and--and stopped this. And I--it's a--it's really unfortunate that the administration didn't take an opportunity to articulate their side of the story.

ROSE: Because your documentary would have been better if you had their point of view.

Mr. SMITH: I think it's always better...

ROSE: You had Richard Perle and others who did sit for an interview and they

can articulate where the administration is.

Mr. SMITH: I think you can achieve fairness even if they don't come forward. They are on the record. There are clips, TV appearances on other programs they have chosen to--to deal with, but it's unfortunate. It was an opportunity for them. I think that on--one of the problems now is that they're not taking enough advantage of--I mean, they're not articulating what the policy is clearly enough.

ROSE: Was this policy, in the end, in your judgement, driven by the vice president?

Mr. SMITH: Well, yeah--that--that would be a hypothesis that I gave a lot of weight to...

ROSE: I know.

Mr. SMITH: ...there's no question about that, and a lot of the people that are driving this policy were formally--i--aides to him, Bill Luti over in the...

ROSE: Sure.

Mr. SMITH: ...Office of Special Plans, which was the Pentagon's war planning office--was his--his guy.

ROSE: Yeah, well, he was a former aide to Rumsfeld.

Mr. SMITH: So, yeah, Chaney's right at the center of a lot of this.

ROSE: And so does this...

Mr. SMITH: So--and Chaney was close to the INC. Chaney believes today that if we had r--if we would rely more on Chalabi that we would be in better shape than we are.

ROSE: How do you think they view the present situation as we speak here on this day, two days before the airing of your documentary--in terms of every day I get up and I read another story by someone, even the Post or The Times or the LA Times or some other paper or see some other story about how those

who appose us m--and even Putin saying this has the potential of being not another Vietnam, another Afghanistan?

Mr. SMITH: How do they feel when they read those papers?

ROSE: Yeah, do you think they comprehend that? Do you think they see it that way, that this is shaping up as to being...

Mr. SMITH: Sure they do. I think they know they've got big problems on their hands and it's much more expensive than they predicted. Th--th--they're saying that. They've just gone through what looks to be a reorganiza--you know, they're saying a major reorganization, putting Condi Rice more squarely in control of what's happening on the ground in Baghdad. We don't really know what that's all--is gonna mean. But, you know, they're--they're--again, they've had Jay Garner in there first, then they switched to Ambassador Bremer and now they're moving around again. There was a--one point...

ROSE: Condoleezza Rice. Now it's gonna be coming out of the White House now they say.

Mr. SMITH: Well, she's not going to Baghdad, and I--and so I don't really see how it's gonna change things tremendously.

ROSE: Well, but they are saying--they made a big point of saying that it's--they're moving the center of it to the White House.

Mr. SMITH: Right. Well, they've--you know, it's a--it's interesting because all along it's the White House and it's the National Security Council that's supposed to knock heads together and get the State Department and the Defense Department...

ROSE: Sure.

Mr. SMITH: ...to get on the same page.

ROSE: Honest broker for the president.

Mr. SMITH: So, you know, that should have happened months and months ago. So we--I just don't know. It--it was--it was Dr. Rice's responsibility. So w--we don't know where we're gonna--what the result is here. I mean, Bremer

is a capable guy. He's on the ground. He's still gonna run the policy. And as the White House has said, 'He's still gonna report to Rumsfeld,' so I--I don't know what this reorganization is except that it shows that they're--they're scrambling.

ROSE: I--I--I can imagine David Fanning saying this--a brilliant executive producer of "Frontline" saying something like we have just told the story up to a certain date. I mean, this story demands you, Martin, as going back, because it is now--what you have done is shown us how we got to where we are and some of the players and what they did. But it is--and, really, it's almost just prologue.

Mr. SMITH: David says it's the first dra--that these documentaries that--that "Frontline" produces are the first draft...

Mr. SMITH and ROSE: (In unison) ...of history...

ROSE: ...which is what journalism is.

Mr. SMITH: ...and this one was a quick draft...

ROSE: Yeah.

Mr. SMITH: ...'cause we--we...

ROSE: But I know there is--Don't you see? It's almost like you just--you just set the stage for the big story that is now with is.

Mr. SMITH: It's gonna be with us for a long time. It's gonna--and we're--and "Frontline" is--we're already putting our--a scratch in our heads and figuring out where--you know, where we go next, what--how do we--how do we get our heads around this story, how do we keep at it?

ROSE: This is the biggest story you've been at--doing?

Mr. SMITH: It's as a big--it's the biggest story I've ever been at--been on in my life, yeah, by far. I mean, this is as--as--as the fellow, Kanan Makiya, the other exile that we interview at length...

ROSE: Yeah.

Mr. SMITH: .. I mean, this is a huge engagement.

ROSE: He's a fascinating guy to me.

Mr. SMITH: Very much so.

ROSE: Tell me about him.

Mr. SMITH: Kanan...

ROSE: I wish we had a video of him. We don't, have we?

Mr. SMITH: Well, Kanan's a very interesting guy. We went into Baghdad with him.

ROSE: You see him in the car with you as you drive along.

Mr. SMITH: We were--in the opening scene of the--of the film were...

ROSE: Did he teach at Harvard or Brandeis or somewhere about?

Mr. SMITH: He's a professor at Brandeis.

ROSE: That's what I--yeah.

Mr. SMITH: I don't know his current status there because he's--he's in--involved in moving now to Baghdad.

ROSE: And--and every much a part...

Mr. SMITH: But he's an intellectual.

ROSE: ...of Chalabi, isn't he?

Mr. SMITH: He's--he's associated with the INC. He was...

ROSE: And--and...

Mr. SMITH: ...very close to Chalabi...

ROSE: ...the Iraqi National Congress, yeah.

Mr. SMITH: ...the Iraqi National Congress, which is Chalabi's organization, really the most organized and--and most prominent of the Iraqi exile groups. And--and so he's a--he's the Tom Paine of the movement. That's what they call him.

ROSE: Really?

Mr. SMITH: Yeah, he's the intellectual. And he had a lot to do with bringing credibility to the INC's case from journalists, from Democrats. The Chalabi has been closer to the neo-cons in Washington.

ROSE: But why does a guy like him--n--not that he shouldn't--but why--what's--how do you explain his affinity for Chalabi?

Mr. SMITH: I don't think his affinity is for Chalabi. As many of the people that I've--I've talked to that are around the INC, they're interested in going home. They're interested in building a democracy in Iraq. I--I don't--Chalabi is a vehicle for that.

ROSE: So how do they feel about Chalabi today?

Mr. SMITH: As he maneuvers and...

ROSE: Well...

Mr. SMITH: Yeah. I mean, I don't--I--the last time I talked to 'em was a month ago. Things are changing quickly. I don't know how they feel about Chalabi right now. Kanan Makiya is very interested in being a part--is part of the constitutional convention...

ROSE: Yeah.

Mr. SMITH: ...that's gonna take place.

ROSE: And--and do they believe in a--another part of this story: And we're over here. Another part of this story is the notion, you know, that they are doing much better than some of us might perceive them to be doing. I don't

mean to include myself in that, but that the administration will say the following things, and some reporters who have been there, that all of it--a lot of the good story has not been told because there's so much killing a...

Mr. SMITH: That's true. That's true. There's a lot of good stories probably to be told. I gotta say that the--the coalition provisional authority has had its hands full in terms of getting reporters out and covering the stories that they want them to cover because i--in the beginning, under--when it was Garner's operation, they didn't even have communications. You couldn't even get in touch with them to organize to go out with them to cover something. They could hardly leave the palace. Now there's a lot of disorganization. We tried very hard to go out and cover certain stories and just--it--it--it's--as any journalist that's over there knows, they may want to show you a lot of good stories but they have a hard time coordinating or helping you find them. On top of that, security; in a guerilla war war strikes randomly, anytime, anywhere at--at least especially in Baghdad and the area they call the Sunni triangle, and as long as the security situation is bad like that, it's hard for--for aid workers to go in. I mean, what's the UN down to--50 to 30 workers from a high of 650? If you wanna win hearts and minds, you've gotta come in and do programs that people want. But if there's no security...

ROSE: So can you s...

Mr. SMITH: ...the guerillas are winning...

ROSE: It's--we're...

Mr. SMITH: ...in that sense.

ROSE: We're looking at this from 20/20...

Mr. SMITH: Correct.

ROSE: ...hindsight. Could you argue that since mission accomplished, since General Franks' coalition forces rolled into Baghdad and the statute toppled and everybody was celebrating that, if, in fact, they'd had more troops and more security and if, in fact, they had had cover of UN and other kinds of people on the ground doing good and not so much looking like an American operation or an occupation force, there would be a much better place today,

with ease of hindsight?

Mr. SMITH: Well, with ease of hindsight, I--it's--it's--right, I can say yes. It would be easier if we had the UN or the international community on board to ask for more help from them as well. There's no question that having had people to come to them as the--as we show in the documentary, who said you're gonna need a constabulary on the streets; you're gonna--there's been looting in all these other postwar situations. You're gonna need help on the--on the police front. And to have ignored that, it's--it's hard to find an excuse for that. Things are hard. Plans--the best of plans meet the--meet the ground and things go wrong. I mean, I--that's--that...

ROSE: Mm-hmm, sure. That's what...

Mr. SMITH: Well, and that's what you're saying. I mean, it's hard. But this is a case where there was a lot of last-minute planning and--and a lot of infighting in the government, a lot of lack of coordination from the White House, and you gotta look to that as a reason for why we're in the situation we're in.

ROSE: Based on what you know today...

Mr. SMITH: Mm-hmm.

ROSE: ...which may have been changed and--when did you leave there for the last time?

Mr. SMITH: In the first week in August.

ROSE: OK. So now it's the first week in October, same time...

Mr. SMITH: I've been in an edit room, all the members of my team.

ROSE: ...two--two months later. Yeah, exactly, understandably so. Is it much worse than anyone might have imagined because of--it has become a place, as President Putin suggested, everybody who has a brief against the United States, with respect to, you know, whether it's Muslim fundamentalists or whoever they might be, wants to be there because they see this is a real opportunity to inflict great damage to the great Satan?

Mr. SMITH: We don't know the answer to that. I don't think we know who's behind all of the bombings and all of the RPG attacks on the troops, how many people coming in are jihadis or--are--are--are part of a--are Islamic fundamentalists who are looking to target America, and we've stepped into--into their--into a trap in a sense. We don't know because--I mean, the--when this was first talked about, I remember talking with Kerik, the police chief who was over there...

ROSE: Right.

Mr. SMITH: ...trying to help...

ROSE: ...fellow in New York City...

Mr. SMITH: Right.

ROSE: Commissioner of police.

Mr. SMITH: And he--he was--he was saying the people they were arresting were--that they were finding were responsible were more the Ba'athist than they were...

ROSE: Right. Right. Right.

Mr. SMITH: ...these guys. But now we hear more and more about this. Well, it's a--it's an irony if that's the case that--that the--that al-Qaida or jihadi types...

ROSE: The thing that Chalabi talked about in the beginning that there were links between al-Qaida and...

Mr. SMITH: Well, it's--it's coming--yeah, it's materializing when it didn't exist before that, so that's a...

ROSE: Yeah.

Mr. SMITH: ...that's a grand irony.

ROSE: You know, and--and the fear...

Mr. SMITH: 'Cause one--one general...

ROSE: ...and--and sort of the admonishment we're getting from Putin may have an element of truth there that...

Mr. SMITH: Yeah, one general said, 'Well, you know, better to fight 'em there than--than fight 'em on the streets of New York.'

ROSE: Well, even...

Mr. SMITH: But it kinda misses the point.

ROSE: But even Chaney has said that--Chaney said that on "Meet the Press." I mean, he said that--that--he said, in fact, you know, that this is the great battlefield in the war against terrorism, and better be there than here.

Mr. SMITH: Well, Sau--you know, when we had US troops in Saudi Arabia and many of the Saudis didn't want us there, that was--that was potentially becoming a battlefield. I mean, if we--if we put ourselves into the middle of the Middle East, we're likely--we are going to become a target.

ROSE: Martin Smith, "Frontline: Truth, War & Consequences." As I said before, this is an extraordinary story that he tells, and--and, clearly, because things are moving so fast--it is at a point in time--but you get a sense of--of the overwhelming challenge to make a difference, and for those people who had the best of intentions, how difficult that will be to accomplish. We've met a lot of the characters. We've mentioned some of them this evening. Friday--Thursday night, 9 PM on PBS, "Frontline: Truth, War & Consequences." Thank you.

Mr. SMITH: Thank you.

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