

Geointeresting Podcast Transcript

Episode 9: Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook

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Welcome to Geointeresting, presented by the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency. For today's podcast we sat down with Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook to talk about his role as the spokesman for the Department of Defense. Cook was previously a correspondent for Bloomberg TV where he covered Congress, the White House, the U.S. Treasury and the Federal Reserve. Now for the Department of Defense he conducts daily press conferences and frequently uses information from NGA to keep the public informed.

NGA: I wanted to start by talking a little bit about your background. You started in journalism and news media, so kind of on the other side of the camera. What was it like making that transition? And how did you transition from being a member of the media to now being the spokesperson for the Department of Defense, telling the stories from the inside.

Peter Cook: It was an unusual transition, I didn't necessarily expect to be doing the job that I'm doing. I loved my career in journalism, about 25 years in journalism. Started as a local news guy, in various parts of the country, before I came to Washington. I was covering Washington for Bloomberg Television. And like I said, I did not expect to become a spokesman. It was a significant transition. It was not an easy choice to make. I thought about it long and hard because I did enjoy my job in journalism so much. But I think that what's been interesting to me, the most, is how my journalism skills serve me in this job. And that is, I understand very much what reporters are doing. Why they're doing it, the importance of their job. The questions they're asking. I come up with the list of questions myself before I go to a briefing. These are the questions I would ask myself if I was out there in the audience. So I think my background as a journalist certainly prepares me, and I have a pretty high threshold, high tolerance for, again, reporters pressing me for information...because I would have been doing just the same thing. I also have a pretty good understanding of maybe when reporters have crossed the line because I know what that line is pretty well.

NGA: What would you say is the most surprising thing about the transition or about your role?

Peter Cook: Most surprising thing...gosh, there are a lot of meetings in the Pentagon. Just the sheer volume in the Pentagon. I thought I had a pretty keen appreciation for the incoming flow of information, the need to respond to events around the world. And I still, even if you come in thinking one thing, there's more. I am guaranteed, as soon as an issue lands in my lap, a crisis somewhere in the world...that's my cue that there are going to be three more that are even bigger within about an hour. And it happens all the time...got to juggle a lot of things, I got a great team at the Pentagon that helps me handle these issues...and great team around the world, for that matter. Public affairs officers who help distribute this information. It doesn't all fall to me but there is a steady flow of information.

NGA: Can you walk us through a day in the life...what's a typical day like for you?

Peter Cook: It's hard, but I try in the morning to at least see...I have two boys, I try and see them in the morning before I head off to the office. I arrive a little after seven o'clock and one of



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the first things I do, I get an intelligence briefing from very capable people at NGA, which I very much appreciate. And after that we have a morning meeting in the Secretary's [of Defense] office, sort of senior leaders, we call it the stand-up meeting where we walk through issues that might be present that day. And then I'm off to the races at that point. I generally -- if the Secretary has a high-profile meeting and a topic of some consequence that could have, of course, press interest, I'm generally at those meetings. If he goes to Capitol Hill, I'll travel with him. If we travel somewhere, I'll go wherever the Secretary goes. So my schedule closely matches his. And of course on days when I have a briefing, and I don't have a briefing every day, but on days that I do I try and have a session with my team to try and figure out what's going on in the world, prepare for that, what are the questions likely to be asked, how are we responding. I have that session in the afternoon, it's more meetings in the afternoon. At some point, throughout the course of the day, I have reporters, of course, coming in my office all the time, engaging with me, asking me questions. One of the strengths of the Pentagon is that the Press Corps is allowed to freely roam the building, and they're able to walk right into my office if the door is open...it's not always open.

NGA: Thanks. I want to switch gears a little bit and talk about risk taking and innovation. Here at NGA, our employees have been encouraged to take calculated risks to come up with new ways of doing things or better ways to serve our customers. So, as one of our biggest customers, how do you feel about risk-taking and how it could affect innovation?

Peter Cook: Well, as someone who works for the Secretary of Defense, who tells us every day to think outside our five-sided box, these are things that Ash Carter is very much in favor of. All we talk about is the innovation agenda he has, the willingness to take risks. We just launched a program where we invited hackers to hack the Pentagon. That is, I can tell you the first time that idea came up, there were a lot of people saying, 'What are you talking about?' The end result of this, and there's some really great people at our Defense Digital Service who pushed this idea through, got it through a lot of people who were, quite honestly, trying to stand in the way...was a program that allowed 'white hat' hackers to come in, identify vulnerabilities in our systems. Super successful, very cost efficient, first ever in the federal government, and now other agencies are going to, quite confidently, follow the DoD's lead.

NGA: Great. Another thing we talk about a lot, and we talked about it earlier today, is transparency and the importance of transparency. And, obviously that's a big part of your job, explaining to the public what the Pentagon is doing. But here at NGA we talk about geospatial intelligence and really, how it lends itself to being transparent and to helping tell a story. Do you find that imagery and maps are an effective tool for you in helping to convey information or understand a situation better?

Peter Cook: Oh my gosh, I came from the TV world. The first lesson in television -- show, don't tell. And images in this day and age...if I show my son something written on paper, maybe he'll look at it. If I show my son something written on paper with a picture attached to it, he absolutely will look at it. Pictures matter. Our brains need, crave, images to try and attach that to words that explain things. And certainly the images that you all put together absolutely tell a story and they're vitally important. We don't do a good enough job at the Department of Defense to utilize the images we have in an effective way. And a lot of that again is just tradition, obviously the classification issues. Some things we can't show. But to the extent we can, one of the things I've

tried to do is push the system to allow us to show more images and help tell the story, help tell things to the American public because ultimately that's what my job's all about.

NGA: What else can we do to help improve our storytelling, or improve transparency?

Peter Cook: Always ask the question 'why aren't we releasing this?' Push the envelope. I had a conversation with some foreign military public affairs officers, who came for a tour of the Pentagon the other day, and challenge them when they go back to their countries. How would you approach some of these issues? How have you pushed the envelope? I think we have the responsibility to try and ask the question 'why aren't we releasing this?' And many times there's a perfectly, plausible answer why we're not going to release certain images. But if there isn't a good answer, then we need to push it. And we need use every tool we have to try and the American people, the taxpayer, what it is we're doing with their money and what we're doing on behalf of the United States.

NGA: Great, that's all I had, is there anything else you wanted to add?

Peter Cook: No...I really enjoyed my day here, I'd like to come back because you guys have cool stuff.

NGA: Thank you, we appreciate that. Thanks for taking the time to come sit with us and for taking the time to come down here at all.

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