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Profile

Operation Desert Fraud

How Keith Idema marketed his imaginary Afghan war.

By [Stacy Sullivan](#)



Jonathan Keith Idema, awaiting his verdict outside an Afghan court. (Photo credit: Reuters/Ahmad Masood/Landov)

In January 2002, As U.S. Forces in Afghanistan were hunting down Al Qaeda suspects, the CBS news show *60 Minutes II* got its hands on some sensational footage: seven hours' worth of videotape showing Al Qaeda terrorists training in an Afghan camp. The source of the tapes, a former U.S. Special Forces soldier named Jonathan Keith Idema—known familiarly as Keith—was more than a little dubious. Idema claimed to be working as an adviser to the Northern Alliance, but he was also an ex-con who had served three years in federal prison for wire fraud and had a criminal record in three states. He was, in addition, a serial litigator who had once sued CBS. But the tape's content—featuring masked men in a bullet-scarred compound training to assassinate and kidnap world leaders—proved a TV producer's dream.

It may have also proved too good to be true. Mary Mapes, who famously vouched for the documents purporting to show that George W. Bush was given preferential treatment by the Texas Air National Guard, was the producer of the segment. CBS News arranged for Dan Rather to fly to Kabul for an interview with Idema. *60 Minutes II* touted its footage with the promise that it was “the most intimate look yet at how the world's deadliest terrorist organization trains its recruits and what it wants them to do to the West.”

Special Forces soldiers, other journalists, and Army Intelligence immediately questioned the tapes' authenticity. Tracy-Paul Warrington, formerly a chief warrant officer with U.S. Special Forces who now advises American police forces on counterterrorism, says the tapes are not an intimate look at anything—except clumsy military playacting. “Eighty-five percent of terrorists' attacks in the last decade have been bombings,” Warrington says. “In this film we see raids. This was a method that went out in the seventies, when Idema was in the Army. I was looking at seven hours of tape of something that Al Qaeda doesn't do.” Another retired Special Forces soldier, and a longtime acquaintance of Keith Idema's, contacted CIA sources and learned the agency had similar concerns about the tapes' authenticity. “The CIA ran voice analysis on the tapes and concluded they were staged,” he says, adding that the agency didn't publicize its findings because it “didn't want to waste its time on someone it considered harmless.” Contacted about this claim, CBS spokeswoman Kelli Edwards said the network “showed the tape to three former British Special Forces officers, who verified the tactics being practiced in the video were consistent with those of Al Qaeda, and to a top U.S. military official in Aghanistan, who told us that, in his opinion, the video was authentic.” In the terror-charged atmosphere of early 2002, in any event, there was no public outcry over the piece's authenticity.

That could well change soon, as many things concerning the life and career of Keith Idema already have. Among other things, it is now clear that Idema was anything but harmless: On September 15, an Afghan court sentenced Idema to a ten-year prison term on charges of entering the country illegally, running a private prison, and torture. Idema had been

accused of operating a detention–cum–interrogation center in concert with another former U.S. soldier and a TV cameraman, who were sentenced alongside him the same day. When Afghan police arrested the trio on July 5, they said they saw a smaller-scale version of the gruesome prisoner-abuse photos from the Baghdad interrogation cells in Abu Ghraib. Early press reports indicated that three prisoners found in Idema's custody during the raid were blindfolded and beaten and strapped to the ceiling by their feet; five others were tied to chairs with rope in a small, dark room down a hall that was littered with bloodied clothing. All of the prisoners in Idema's custody were subsequently released; none was shown to be connected to Al Qaeda.

Intelligence experts analyzed the CBS tapes and “determined they were staged,” one source says.

Just days before Idema's arrest, CBS News received a video feed from this same Kabul house of horrors, featuring Idema in U.S. Army fatigues and brandishing an assault rifle as he arrested supposed terror suspects. “Idema had been in regular contact with Dan Rather since 2002,” says Idema's lawyer, John Edwards Tiffany, of Bloomfield, New Jersey. “Rather was planning to go over to Afghanistan to interview Idema again before his arrest because he hoped to get access to the Al Qaeda suspects my client was capturing.” Tiffany insists you can distinctly hear Rather's voice over a cell phone in footage of Idema discussing network coverage; for its part, CBS says that one of its technicians in Kabul transmitted the feed to CBS News, but denies that there was any ongoing relationship between Idema and the network.

But the question still remains: How does a freelance torturer claiming false military credentials turn up in American living rooms as an expert on the war on terror? The short answer is that, like other con men, Keith Idema made a very powerful impression. Even in that 2002 broadcast, Rather allows, in his voice-over, that Idema is “controversial” but goes on to claim that his most troubling quality—his “murky past”—is what “makes him perfectly at home in Afghanistan's freewheeling Wild West atmosphere.” The anchor might also have added that Idema has made himself at home in all sorts of places: on military bases, at the head of a fictional company, in Lithuanian police-training camps, in dealings with U.S. embassies, and—as Idema now alleges—with American military officialdom. And at every stop along the way, Keith Idema increased his mastery of the fine art of press manipulation.

This is where the longer answer comes in. The war on terror has been a “Wild West” insofar as a loose—and growing—cohort of freelance military subcontractors is concerned. To this day, many veterans are in Afghanistan in the employ of private companies, as volunteer U.S. forces have been depleted or reassigned to Iraq. Even for uniformed soldiers, it can be difficult to tell who is and is not working for the government.

Keith Idema was in many ways tailor-made to exploit this sort of confusion. His time in the Afghan docket came at the end, not the beginning, of a very long and colorful career as a free agent at the strange intersection of paramilitary enterprise and sensational, on-the-scene media. And regardless of whether Idema's claims of government complicity in his actions prove true, they overlook the crux of this complicated saga: The Keith Idema story is a fable of fame, macho swagger, and opportunism in the age of terror, fueled most of all by the craving for ever more vivid and dramatic kinds of media attention. It's the kind of tale that Joseph Conrad might concoct if he were reincarnated as a screenwriter for *Fear Factor* or *The Apprentice*.

Much about Idema's life and times is disputed. But this much is clear: Well before he became a pariah, he was a military enthusiast and a media hound. When he was 12, he was inspired to become a soldier after seeing John Wayne in the movie version of Robin Moore's best-selling 1965 novel, *The Green Berets*—a stirring, heroic account of how Special Forces soldiers in Vietnam were vanquishing the communist enemy. By the time Idema, a Poughkeepsie native and only son of a Marine who served in World War II, was old enough to join the military in 1975, the Vietnam War was nearing its end. Recruits for Special Forces—a.k.a. the Green Berets—were thinning, and despite his diminutive height (five foot nine) and bad eyesight, the young man was accepted. But military records do not indicate that Idema was all that special a soldier. One particularly harsh evaluation, written by Captain John D. Carlson near the end of Idema's three-year tour, read: “[He] is without a doubt the most unmotivated, unprofessional, immature enlisted man that I have ever known.”

His post-enlistment career was none too distinguished either. He entered the Army Reserves and then drifted around Poughkeepsie. Eventually he founded a counterterrorism-training school in the upstate town of Red Hook. After numerous run-ins with Red Hook authorities over camp noise and alleged zoning violations, Idema pulled up stakes and moved to Fayetteville, North Carolina, near Special Forces headquarters at Fort Bragg. He set up shop as a supplier of nonlethal military equipment and began organizing Special Operations trade shows. He'd display new equipment and technologies while circulating among the show's regulars: active Special Forces personnel, Defense ministers and police chiefs from abroad, together with mercenaries and paramilitary hangers-on of the *Soldier of Fortune* stripe.

It was one such trade show that led Idema to his first contact with a subcontractor who set him up with a job training

police forces in the former Soviet republic of Lithuania. In 1993, not long after his arrival, Idema claimed to have stumbled onto a Russian Mafia plot to smuggle nuclear material out of the country. He briefed contacts at the Pentagon and the FBI about the conspiracy, but refused to provide them with the names of his sources.

Idema emerged from this episode with a renewed sense of his importance in global military affairs. Unfortunately, he was losing his grip on his civilian life. Returning Stateside to find his business in serious financial trouble, Idema devised an ingenious, albeit illegal scheme to set up a dummy company to procure additional supplies that he never paid for. In 1994, federal prosecutors convicted him of fraud, over Idema's loud protests that the FBI had set him up in retaliation for his refusal to name his Lithuanian sources.

Idema began what would be a three-year term in federal prison, but a *Soldier of Fortune* contributor named Jim Morris, a former Special Forces major, soon took up his cause in the pages of the magazine. A *Soldier of Fortune* convention, meanwhile, spurred the national news media to dig into Idema's original allegations about the Lithuanian nukes traffic. Ted Kavanau, a retired TV-news executive who was one of the founding partners of CNN, spoke with some conventioners about Idema. Kavanau brought the story to Andrew Heyward, then executive producer of CBS's *Eye to Eye With Connie Chung*, and now the president of CBS News.

Heyward sent one of CBS's award-winning investigative reporters, Gary Scurka, to conduct his own jailhouse interview with Idema. Scurka told Idema that in exchange for the inmate's cooperation, he intended to air Idema's claim that the FBI had him framed. Chasing down some leads of his own, Scurka eventually helped coordinate a joint *60 Minutes*–*U.S. News & World Report* inquiry into the Lithuania story, which netted an Investigative Reporters and Editors Award in 1995. But this coup for Scurka was an enormous disappointment for Idema: Scurka says network executives nixed any Idema-related footage. Mindful of the slight, Scurka later gave the ex-con a leg up in journalism shortly after he was released in 1997.

Scurka and Idema soon scored a *48 Hours assignment* from CBS to consult on a story about retired Green Beret Colonel George Marecek, who they believed was falsely convicted of the murder of his wife. But the network released Scurka and Idema in a dispute over their advocacy on Marecek's behalf, and the two men started a Web site called Point Blank News (PBN) and posted information on Marecek's case. In 2001, Scurka and Idema won a National Press Club award for online journalism in recognition of their coverage of the Marecek story. Scurka, meanwhile, continued to try to work up interest in a film account of Idema's alleged framing by the FBI, budgeted at \$600,000, a project bearing the grandiose working title "Any Lesser Man: The Keith Idema Story."

According to an aid director, Idema announced that his aim in the country was "to kill every Afghan I see."

Idema pursued a host of side projects—including a string of lawsuits against *U.S. News & World Report* and *60 Minutes* (among others) in relation to the Lithuania story, and a plagiarism suit against DreamWorks, the studio behind the George Clooney–Nicole Kidman movie *The Peacemaker*, which Idema contended appropriated material from the treatment for "Any Lesser Man." That was the state of things on September 11, 2001.

According to Scurka, Idema called him a few weeks after the terror attacks and announced he was going to Afghanistan to do humanitarian-aid work. Idema was intending to work with Knightsbridge International and the Partners International Foundation, two aid groups run by former military personnel. (Each group now says that Idema misrepresented the reasons he was going to Afghanistan to gain their cooperation.)

Scurka says that "[Idema] asked if I wanted to go, and it seemed like a great story to me—a former Green Beret working with a humanitarian-aid group, combining talents so that they could be the first aid group into Afghanistan to help the refugees." Scurka pitched the story to *National Geographic*'s TV division, claiming he fully disclosed Idema's criminal past and his own friendship with the subject, and *National Geographic* decided to do the story.

Idema and Scurka arrived in Afghanistan in November 2001, together with a cameraman and a Special Forces vet named Greg Long, who was planning to deliver medical equipment to Afghan hospitals. Yet Idema, catching the whiff of military action—and mindful that he had his own cameraman in tow—sped rather quickly past the humanitarian work that *National Geographic* was hoping to document. Instead, says Long, Idema's behavior "changed 180 degrees"; he set about tracking the movements of the Northern Alliance troops then fighting the Taliban and gave little input in discussions of medical care and food supplies. According to Ed Artis, the former Army sergeant who heads Knightsbridge, Idema curtly announced on his arrival that he wanted "to kill every fucking Afghan I see."

Idema was more than simply obsessed with the Afghan war—he was, as other journalists on the scene have recounted, absurdly keen to capture dramatic war *footage*, even if it meant fudging the record of events. On November 11, Idema

and his three companions, Scurka, Long, and the cameraman, were scouting for war footage on a hill near the Taliban front lines. Idema left the group, again hoping to find Northern Alliance troops to hang out with. In the meantime, Idema's entourage, which had met up with reporter Tim Friend, then with *USA Today*, and a freelance TV journalist named Kevin Sites, started drawing fire from the Taliban. Scurka was hit with shrapnel in his right leg. As the group helped Scurka down the hill, and set about dressing his wound, Scurka's cameraman was capturing the scene on film. And this was when Idema returned, trailing clouds of camera-ready military glory: "Just when we finished [dressing Scurka's leg], Keith runs up screaming," Friend recalls. "He rips off the bandages and redresses the wounds. Basically, he was acting in front of the camera."

When Scurka returned Stateside to recover from his injury, Artis contacted him to say he would withdraw his consent from the *National Geographic* project if Idema were pictured in any footage featuring Knightsbridge workers. So Scurka finished still another documentary including no footage of Idema or his exploits. The publicity-hungry soldier on the make was suddenly adrift in a war zone without a cameraman. But with his usual brio, he reinvented himself again. He began calling himself Jack and telling journalists that he was working as an adviser to Northern Alliance troops; he also described himself as a Green Beret and claimed he was helping Special Forces round up Taliban and Al Qaeda suspects. Back in New York, Ted Kavanau, the TV producer who had originally put Scurka onto Idema's Lithuania story, set him up with an appearance on "The Barry Farber Show," a syndicated conservative talk-radio program.

Before long, Idema was turning up regularly, via satellite telephone, on American television. He would occasionally call himself a Green Beret, clearly implying he was on active duty. And sometimes he would claim, falsely, to be working for Partners International, which, like Knightsbridge, had severed all ties with Idema. Mainly, though, he characterized himself in tellingly vague terms, even as he boasted about his high-octane military credentials: "You must be held in high regard," he told Fox News host Linda Vester via sat phone in November 2001. "Because I think you're the only person ever to get an interview with a Special Forces-qualified guy inside this country."

While Idema was thumping his chest in this fashion, officials from Knightsbridge and Partners International tried to warn American authorities that they had a rogue operator on their hands. One letter from Knightsbridge to the chief of public affairs for Army Special Operations Command said that Idema was a threat both to senior Knightsbridge officials and to "the over all mission of the United States and the Coalition" in Afghanistan. Both aid groups say the alarms they raised went unacknowledged.

But Jack Idema, in his new incarnation as quote-ready ground warrior, was about to hit the media jackpot, in a moment of serendipity that would seem utterly implausible in a work of fiction. Robin Moore, the bard of the Green Berets, arrived in Afghanistan in December, and Idema wasted little time in tracking him down and nominating himself as a source for Moore's new book, to be titled *The Hunt for Bin Laden*. Moore—in his seventies, and debilitated by Parkinson's disease, moving slowly across Afghan war zones with the aid of a cane—was shadowing a group of Special Forces called A-Team Tiger 02, which was preparing to seize the Taliban stronghold of Mazar-e-Sharif in concert with the Northern Alliance.

Moore and Idema didn't spend much time in the field together—it behooved Idema to keep a low profile among active Special Forces, for obvious reasons. Instead, Idema focused on ingratiating himself to other reporters, who had descended on Afghanistan en masse. He boasted to war correspondents about the many Al Qaeda suspects he had apprehended, and embroidered his banter with tales of Special Forces daring in Central America. And it was more than just his speech that was growing too colorful for its own good. One heated argument over war coverage at a party ended with Idema's firing a pistol at Dallas *Morning News* correspondent Tod Robberson and barely missing his left arm. Many reporters began to regard Idema as a fraud and a menace. Still, he was quoted in many major newspapers as a Special Forces operative or a Green Beret. And come January 2002, when he produced the Al Qaeda training videos, all appeared to be forgiven: Under representation from the photo agency Polaris, Idema sold the footage to *60 Minutes II* for an undisclosed fee—and the rest of the press corps—including NBC's *Dateline* and the *Today* show—scooped up the sensational footage in the network's wake.

Idema had to return to the United States in June 2002, after his mother died in Poughkeepsie. It was then that he made his most fateful contact with Robin Moore, who was also Stateside, trying to work the manuscript for *The Hunt for Bin Laden* into shape for his publisher, Random House. Moore interviewed Idema extensively for additional background, and says the information "checked out very well." Moore's writing assistant, Chris Thompson, says that Moore brought on Idema as a "technical adviser," to help ensure the book's accuracy.

Moore's agent at the time, Marianne Strong, gives a very different account. She claims that Moore "conceptualized" the book but that he and Thompson turned in a rambling, dull manuscript. "Jack came along and rewrote the entire thing," Strong says. "He came up with terribly exciting, excellent copy." Moore wound up contributing only "a few pages" to the finished product, she claims, and Thompson only edited.

One thing is certain: Regardless of who claims ultimate authorship of the book, *The Hunt for Bin Laden* teems with characterizations of Idema as a titanic military presence in the Afghan war. It asserts outright that Idema was the only Green Beret gathering intelligence on the ground. And Idema routinely storms to the center of the book's action to perform heroic feats of bravery. It is as though, given the chance to influence a Robin Moore book, Idema had to cast himself in a 21st-century sequel to *The Green Berets*. Here is one only slightly purpler-than-usual passage:

"In January, Jack uncovered an al-Qaida plot to kill President Clinton. In March, standing in the middle of a Kabul street armed with a Russian assault rifle and six hundred rounds of ammunition, Jack held off Islamic fundamentalists for four hours as they tried to take eighteen foreign citizens hostage, keeping them at bay until Engineer Ali and the Northern Alliance arrived to back him up. By the end of March, Jack was in a Northern Alliance helicopter on his way to the Nahrin earthquake, where the Associated Press photographed the lone American rescuing a little girl. She wasn't the first child he would save, or the last."

How Idema became a virtual army of one in the pages of *The Hunt for Bin Laden* remains a hotly disputed subject. Strong says that the book's portrait of him fully accords with her own impressions: "He is a wonderful man, very brave and charismatic." Moore and Thompson, meanwhile, maintain that Idema overtook the narrative because Random House wanted it that way. The publishers "wanted an action hero in the book," Thompson says, "so they asked us to thread Idema all the way through." Moore says that it was also Random House's decision to put Idema on the book's cover.

The next promotional twist concerning *The Hunt for Bin Laden* was either poetic or perverse, depending on one's view of the publishing world. Having at the very least finagled a portrait of himself as the prime mover in the Special Forces' Afghan war, Idema now was tapped to stand in for the Parkinson's-weakened Moore in bookstore readings and media appearances for the title. In each radio interview he gave, he was described—as he is in the book's pages—as a Green Beret working as an adviser to the Northern Alliance. At times he was so bold as to offer policy advice to Pentagon brass. "We in Special Forces have been lobbying for a lighter, faster Army," he lamented to an interviewer for Bend, Oregon's Classic Rock 98.3. "But General [Tommy] Franks isn't listening."

Moore's book—the first allegedly insider account of the Afghan war—rocketed up the best-seller lists. But early reviews were harsh, and some called the book's reliability into question. Moore was troubled by the claims and asked some Special Forces officers to review it for corrections in later editions. He forwarded the proposed fixes to his editor, Bob Loomis, but the publishing house did not alter the text. Random House will not comment on why the book is not being revised, but spokeswoman Carol Schneider denies that the publisher insisted that Idema take center stage in the narrative. "It was not our intention to make [Idema] the main character," Schneider says. "We didn't even know who he was until Robin Moore introduced him to us."

When Idema got wind of Moore's efforts to change the text, he retaliated in what was becoming a reflexive fashion: He issued a press release and filed suit. The release declared that a shadowy group of Special Forces soldiers, jealous of the attention lavished on Idema, "allegedly threatened and coerced 77-year-old Robin Moore, who suffers from Parkinson's disease, into submitting the changes to the already copyrighted bestseller." Idema also sued the aid groups Knightsbridge and Partners International, claiming that they had also pressured Moore into changing *The Hunt for Bin Laden*. Idema initially alleged that the two aid groups had injured his reputation by causing Fox News to drop him as a regular commentator—but he was also suing Fox, on much the same grounds. Most of the suits were thrown out of court.

Moore and Thompson say they soon learned that they were victims of financial chicanery as well as what appeared to be an enormous media scam. *The Hunt for Bin Laden* contained an appendix encouraging readers to donate funds to assist Special Forces and their families and Afghan civilians. Moore says that Idema included an entry for the training camp he had founded in upstate New York, the US Counter-Terrorist Group. In the appendix, the group's stated mission was "to help the Northern Alliance and to fight al-Qaida."

Flush from the book's success, Thompson and Idema (who had since relocated to Fayetteville) formed a promotional company, The Hunt for Bin Laden, LLC. As he worked in closer business quarters with Idema, Thompson says, he saw the man's behavior grow increasingly erratic. In a deposition, Thompson said that Idema destroyed the interior of his own house with a samurai sword, that he choked his girlfriend in a fight, and that he forged a letter on Fox News stationery for use as evidence in his lawsuit against the network. A subpoena from the U.S. Attorney's office also arrived, followed by a letter from North Carolina's postal inspector, charging Idema with mail fraud for using a post-office box registered to the company to solicit funds for the US Counter-Terrorist Group. Thompson says that after he noticed \$18,000 from the company had gone missing, he drove down to Fayetteville to close the company bank account; he says that Idema followed him there and threatened to kill both him and his girlfriend.

Moore, meanwhile, learned that Idema had ordered hundreds of copies of *The Hunt for Bin Laden* from Moore's account with Random House and never paid for them. "He got [the books] from my account and sold them at full price," Moore says.

But, as ever, Idema met mounting adversity by going on the offensive. In March 2004, when Moore, Thompson, and Moore's girlfriend were having lunch at Manhattan's Metropolitan Club, a bike messenger showed up to serve Thompson and Moore's girlfriend with papers for yet another Idema-filed lawsuit, seeking \$4 million in damages.

A month later, Idema was back in Afghanistan. He set up shop in a rented house in Kabul, telling the landlord he intended to start a rug-exporting business. Instead, he founded a paramilitary outfit called Task Force Saber 7, complete with its own fatigues and military insignia. Once more he had a former soldier, Brent Bennett, and a TV cameraman, Eddie Caraballo, in tow. They hired four Afghans, and began rounding up Afghan civilians to interrogate about ties to Al Qaeda. On at least three occasions, nato forces assisted Idema in his raids. On at least one occasion, troops took into custody a suspect Task Force Saber 7 had apprehended.

Idema's new Afghan campaign was all the more brazen, since Knightsbridge and Partners International had greatly stepped up their efforts to alert American authorities—from the embassies to the CIA to the State Department—that Idema was anything but the crusading soldier he pretended to be.

But Idema came to serious notice only when he committed the same oversight that the guards at Abu Ghraib did. On April 30, he e-mailed several Stateside friends with news of Task Force Saber 7's efforts. The e-mail included jpeg photos of Idema and company in interrogation mode, some of which were extremely graphic. One recipient was very disturbed by the images and forwarded the e-mail to American authorities. This time, there was a response: By mid-May, wanted posters were plastered across Kabul bearing Idema's name and image and charging him with interference in sanctioned military operations. Finally, Afghan police forces surrounded Idema's house on July 5, when, they claim, they discovered the infamous chamber of civilian abuse within.

At his trial in Kabul, Idema repeatedly denied that he had tortured anyone and alleged that he had been operating with the American military's full knowledge and consent. Court officials and the press dismissed these claims. But at least some of the evidence Idema's defense team presented hinted that there might be some truth to what Idema said. One videotape purports to show Idema talking with officials from General William Boykin's office about an impending assault on a terrorist cell.

The tape could, of course, have been faked—Idema's other exploits certainly cannot rule out such an explanation. But the presiding judge at his trial in Afghanistan, Abdul Baset Bakhtiyari, gave it only a cursory hearing before pronouncing Idema guilty. This was the pattern with most defense evidence throughout Idema's trial—a practice that drew no protest from the U.S. government, which normally monitors trials of American citizens abroad.

John Tiffany, the New Jersey defense attorney representing Idema, has filed an appeal. "It's unconscionable. The government announces \$25 million rewards for terror suspects, then acts surprised when people run over to Afghanistan to hunt them. People like Keith Idema are indispensable to this war."

This may be truer than any official of the U.S. government or military cares to admit—Afghanistan is rife with military subcontractors of no particular, or fixed, affiliation. Idema's troubles may stem largely from mistaking the warrior-for-hire model of combat for the real thing.

Then again, wars like this one are also indispensable to people like Keith Idema. Long before he arrived on the scene in Afghanistan, Idema was in destructive thrall to notions of solitary, *Rambo*-style heroism. It seems clear as well that as Idema plied his peculiar brand of combat make-believe before more and more media outlets, the stakes became incalculably higher. Even when he began to realize his cross-media strategy of self-promotion was unraveling as *The Hunt for Bin Laden* came in for serious critical scrutiny, Idema did not run for cover, as more sensible con men might. Instead, he replenished his morale with another tour of far more dubious duty on the Afghan fronts. There's a certain tragic symmetry in Idema's goading himself into ever greater and more reckless acts of self-dramatizing valor; in that sense, Idema was very much his own worst enemy.

But then, when one reviews the performance of Idema's many enablers in the press and the publishing world, the affair shrinks into a signature brand of media-driven American farce. Here, too, Idema's attorney Tiffany supplies a fitting (if unwitting) comment as he insists the military had to know of Idema's conduct: "My client was all over the media. He was an expert on news programs. He was on the cover of a best-selling book." In Keith Idema's war, that may indeed be the ultimate grounds for exoneration.

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