

Information has always been a weapon. But in the amorphous 'war on terror,' bombs and bullets are becoming background noise in the battle to frame reality.

MIND GAMES

BY DANIEL SCHULMAN

When the United States launched Operation Iraqi Freedom in March 2003, Sam Gardiner, a sixty-four-year-old retired Air Force colonel, was a regular on *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* on PBS, where it was his job to place the day's events in context. As the campaign wore on, and he monitored the press coverage and parsed the public statements of military and administration officials, he at first became uneasy, then deeply concerned.

A longtime Defense Department consultant who has taught strategy at three of the military's top war colleges, Gardiner had participated throughout the 1990s in a series of war games that simulated attacks on Iraq. He was familiar with Iraq's military and was therefore surprised to hear officials, such as the Army Brigadier General Vincent Brooks, the deputy director of operations of Central Command's headquarters in Qatar, tell the press of ongoing operations to eliminate "terrorist death squads." The allegation struck Gardiner as odd. Matter-of-fact and precise in their speech, military officers would not typically refer to irregulars as "death squads." More important, as far as Gardiner knew, in 2003, when the invasion began, Iraq had no "terrorist death squads."

Gardiner believes that this formulation, which first entered the official vernacular a week after the invasion began, was a skillful execution of a

classic propaganda technique known as the "excluded middle." The excluded middle is premised on the idea that people, provided with incomplete but suggestive information, will draw false assumptions — in this case that Saddam Hussein had ties to terrorism and therefore to Al Qaeda (a connection that administration officials actively pushed during the run-up to the war).

As Gardiner further analyzed the coverage in the early days of the invasion, he saw what he believed was a pattern of misinformation being fed to the press. There was the report, carried by The Associated Press, CNN, and *The New York Times*, among many other news outlets, that Iraq was seeking uniforms worn by U.S. and British troops ("identical down to the last detail") so that atrocities carried out on Iraqis by Saddam's Fedayeen could be blamed on the coalition. There was the claim that prisoners of war had been executed by their Iraqi captors, and there was the announced surrender of Iraq's entire Fifty-first Division. Government officials eventually eased off the POW assertion, and the story of the uniforms was never corroborated and soon disappeared. As for the Fifty-first Division, on March 21 a cascade of news stories, citing anonymous British and American military officials, reported its mass surrender. "Hordes of Iraqi soldiers, underfed and overwhelmed, surrendered Friday in the face of a state-of-the-art allied assault," the AP reported. "An entire divi-

sion gave itself up to the advancing allied forces, U.S. military officials said." Unnamed "officials in Washington" told *The Washington Post* that the division had been taken "out of the fight for Basra." Days later, however, coalition troops were still clashing with units of the Fifty-first there. And two days after it was reported that General Khaled Saleh al-Hashimi and the 8,000 men under his command had surrendered, the general was interviewed in Basra by Al Jazeera. "I am with my men . . . We continue to defend the people and riches" of this city, he told the network. Was this the fog of war or was something else at play?

Gardiner believes that the story of the Fifty-first's mass capitulation may have been part of a psycho-

logical operation, its goal to "broadcast to the other units in Iraq that troops were giving up en masse and very quickly, so there was no reason to resist," he said. "That's a valid psychological operation. But it was directly entered into a press briefing." Gardiner eventually concluded that the flow of misinformation to the press was no accident. It was a well-coordinated campaign, intended not only to confound Iraqi combatants but to shape perceptions of the war back home.

Throughout the summer of 2003, Gardiner documented incidents that he saw as information-warfare campaigns directed both at targeted foreign populations and the American public. By the fall, he had collected his analysis into a lengthy treatise, called "Truth from These Podia," which concluded that "the war was handled like a political campaign," in which the emphasis was not on the truth but on the message.

As his paper circulated among government and military officials that fall, Gardiner says he received a call at home one night from a spokesman for the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He told Gardiner that his conclusions were on target. "But I want you to know," the spokesman added, "that it was civilians who did this."

The weaponization of information is not original to the war in Iraq, nor is it unique to any military engagement during what has come to be known as the information age. Journalists have always encountered wartime spin, they have been the targets of propaganda and selective leaks, and, on occasion, have been used for purposes of deception (which has resulted, in certain cases, in saving the lives of American soldiers). In *The Art of War*, which remains an influential text among military strategists though

it was written during the sixth century B.C., the Chinese general Sun Tzu writes: "All warfare is based on deception. Hence, when able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must seem inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe that we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near."

In Iraq then, and indeed in the broader war on terror, it is not the use of information as a weapon that is new, but rather the scale of the strategy and the nature of the targets. Increasingly, the information environment has become the battlefield in a war that knows no boundaries, its offensives directed not just at the insurgents in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan, or at regimes that take an adversarial

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— Donald Rumsfeld

posture to U.S. policy, but at the world at large. Technological advances, meanwhile, have made access to information instantaneous and ubiquitous, erasing longstanding barriers, legal and otherwise, that in the past have protected the American public and press from collateral damage in propaganda campaigns.

In addition, the aggressive manner in which this administration has pursued its information campaigns has in some cases blurred the bright line between two distinct military missions — providing truthful information about the war to the press and public, and waging psychological warfare. This blurring raises questions of credibility not only for the military but also for the press, which has been, on occasion, an unwitting conduit for psychological warfare campaigns. No reporter is immune to this. Nor is any reporter's public. In April, *The Washington Post* reported that Dexter Filkins of *The New York Times* had been used as part of a psychological operation intended to play up the role of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of Al Qaeda's operations in Iraq, in the insurgency. A story leaked to Filkins in February 2004, according to the *Post*, was part of a larger effort — aimed mostly at the Iraqi press — to exploit Iraqis' distrust of foreigners by exaggerating the importance of Zarqawi, a Jordanian, and the foreign element he represents. The *Post* suggests that this effort goes beyond Zarqawi and beyond Filkins, too. Internal military briefings, according to the paper, "indicate that there were direct military efforts to use the U.S. media to affect views of the war."

More than ever, information warfare is a military imperative. The problem is that in the government's haste to sow democratic seeds in the Muslim world, it has at times forsaken the very principles it has

sought to proliferate. "They are screwing with democracy," Sam Gardiner told me.

Indeed, after the Lincoln Group's Pentagon-funded propaganda campaign, in which Iraqi media outlets were paid to run stories written by military information operations troops, was uncovered in late November, the Defense Department announced that it would consider whether it must amend its current guidelines on communications and information warfare. In many ways, this could be a turning point.

Early this year, military and administration officials began to reframe the vague and fluid concept that has come to be known as the war on terror. Though it had always been fought in the informational realm, more and more the conflict was becoming one of values and ideologies, not bullets and bombs. Struggles of this sort are measured not in years but in decades, so officials took to calling it, simply, "the long war."

They also began conceding setbacks. In mid-February, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld addressed the Council on Foreign Relations at its Park Avenue mansion in New York, telling its members that the U.S. was losing the war of ideas. Now, he said, "some of the most critical battles may not be in the mountains of Afghanistan or the streets of Iraq, but in newsrooms — in places like New York, London, Cairo, and elsewhere. Consider this statement: 'More than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media We are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of [Muslims].' The speaker was not some modern-day image consultant in a public relations firm in New York City," Rumsfeld continued. "It was Osama bin Laden's chief lieutenant, Ayman al-Zawahiri."

The lines that Rumsfeld quoted come from a letter, dated July 9, 2005, said to be from Zawahiri to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Intercepted by the U.S. military, the thirteen-page document makes it clear that Al Qaeda understands that the battlefield has shifted. It must be conscious of its image, for it, too, is in a battle for world opinion. Admonishing Zarqawi for the scenes of brutality that had become his signature, Zawahiri wrote that "among the things which the feelings of the Muslim populace who love and support you will never find palatable . . . are the scenes of slaughtering the hostages." (Zarqawi has publicly declared the letter a fake.)

Two days before Rumsfeld's speech, the International Crisis Group, a nonprofit that focuses on preventing and resolving international conflicts, released a report that detailed just how sophisticated the insurgents in Iraq have become at disseminating their propaganda. The major players, which include Zarqawi's group and three others, all have published magazines and operated Web sites. Most have a spokesman who deals with the press. Seeking coverage, insurgent groups have delivered

videos depicting their military exploits to hotels that are frequented by foreign journalists and often strike locations that will ensure maximum exposure. At points, the report's description of their propaganda network begins to sound remarkably like America's own. ("Websites are used to announce new policy positions, alliances, or strategic shifts, react to breaking news, or comment on how the Western media is addressing the struggle.")

In this war, one thing the two sides have in common is their tendency to fault the media for portraying the conflict unfairly. Jane Arraf, CNN's former Baghdad bureau chief, who is now a fellow at the council, was listening to Rumsfeld's speech that day. She says she had been bothered for some time by the administration's frequent assertions that news accounts about Iraq don't reflect conditions on the ground. That was nothing more than political posturing, it seemed to her. Arraf had dressed in a bright orange jacket for the occasion, which she hoped might improve her chances of being called upon during the Q&A session that followed Rumsfeld's talk. She intended to pose a question to the defense secretary about the U.S. government's use of information. Had she been given the opportunity, which she wasn't, she would have inquired about the gap between the reality reporters see on the ground "and a lot of the comments we see coming out of the administration and the Pentagon." Arraf's observation reveals an interesting dimension of this war: it has become, in part, a contest over the framing of reality, and thus a hall of mirrors for the press.

As Americans struggled to make sense of the attacks of September 11, 2001, Rumsfeld and others within the Bush administration quickly realized that the nation had entered a new variety of conflict that would necessitate more than military muscle. Particularly in the Muslim world, where the motivations of the U.S. were regarded with suspicion.

In November 2001, a secretive Pentagon directorate took shape within the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict, known as SOLIC, whose purview includes aspects of military information operations. Headed by an Air Force brigadier general, Simon "Pete" Worden, an astrophysicist and the former deputy director of operations for the U.S. Space Command, its role was to harness a variety of informational activities to sway public opinion in the Middle East in favor of the administration's war on terror. It was called the Office of Strategic Influence.

Budgeted at \$100 million for its first year of operations, OSI's staff of twenty consisted of experts in psychological and cyber warfare, authorities on the Middle East and Islamic studies, and contractors from Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC), the Fortune 500 research and engi-

neering firm that considers itself a specialist in "information dominance." OSI envisioned itself as an incubator for the development of novel information-warfare strategies and a focal point for the coordination of interagency influence operations, Worden, who is now retired from the military, told me. Its staff members had big ideas, but even before they could fully formulate their strategy, let alone carry it out, the office had become the focus of controversy within the Pentagon. Members of the Pentagon's public affairs staff, in particular, were concerned that the methods OSI might use to carry out its mission, specifically those related to the development and dissemination of propaganda, could undermine the Pentagon's credibility. Several people I spoke with, including Worden and another

tremist causes. It would also seek, according to Worden's paper, to "undermine anti-United States regimes through providing unfettered access to global information," possibly directing satellite-fed radio transmissions at repressive nations. Finally, it would combat "negative perceptions of the United States and its goals" wherever they existed — "throughout the world, not just the Islamic world."

Worden saw the Internet as a powerful tool that could be used to divert Muslims from fundamentalist ideology. With tactics pioneered by Internet marketers — such as offering a free music download, or some other lure — young Muslims might be steered to Web sites carrying pro-U.S. messages. Worden reasoned that satellite uplinks and downlinks could circumvent government censors and

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— *Information War: Strategic Influence and the Global War on Terrorism*

er former Pentagon official, are convinced that, in the end, OSI was sabotaged from within the Pentagon when word of its reported mission was leaked to *The New York Times* in February 2002. The *Times* and other news outlets reported that OSI had entertained plans to dabble in the darkest arts of persuasion, including planting false news stories in the foreign press. "It goes from the blackest of black programs to the whitest of white," a senior Pentagon official told the *Times*.

Worden, however, contends that OSI was not the Orwellian enterprise that reporters and their Pentagon sources believed it to be. He denies that the office had any plans to misinform or otherwise manipulate the media, which he said was confirmed by a review of OSI documents, computer files, and proposals by the Pentagon's general counsel that was completed in the spring of 2002. In March, Worden provided me with a seventy-page document he co-wrote, along with two former OSI staff members, Air Force Colonel Martin E.B. France and retired Air Force Major Randall R. Correll, following OSI's demise. Worden has not sought to publish the paper, titled "Information War: Strategic Influence and the Global War on Terrorism," believing that bringing up the controversial office will not endear him to the Bush administration as he seeks a federal job. It contains, however, what is to date the most detailed account of OSI's rise and fall.

As the office formulated its influence plan, Worden and his staff came to see OSI's mission as threefold. First, it would use the informational tools at its disposal to stanch the flow of young Muslims to ex-

provide exposure to Western influences. In "Information War," Worden and his colleagues note that young men often use the Internet to connect with the opposite sex, "sometimes pornographically!" "A focus on the charms of Western women in the here-and-now might divert would-be terrorists from contemplating the purported charms of virgins in the afterlife as a reward for Martyrdom."

Discrediting extremist groups among foreign populations, Worden realized, would take "respected authorities such as journalists, clerics, and artists within that group to denounce" them. But "simply paying them to do so is likely to boomerang," he believed: "Even if some can be so induced, the likely exposure of such tactics will do more to discredit our objectives than any gain achieved." Therefore, "a subtle mesh of inducements and disincentives must be developed. At the outset, we may offer free or increased access to the increasingly high technology means of communications . . . to moderate voices."

A large-scale information offensive using cyber warfare tactics and forms of propaganda, Worden understood, would probably make the press, the public, and even some government officials uneasy, but he made no apologies for it.

Within the United States we must come to a consensus within our society that we will conduct an energetic information war to defeat global terrorism The American public will need to accept that certain information warfare tactics may not seem, on the surface, to be consistent with a global free press. Clearly, this debate will identify some things

that will generally be considered "off-limits," such as deliberate disinformation distributed through open press sources.

While Worden believed that the best informational weapon the U.S. could employ was "the truth and unlimited access to it," he also saw a place, under rare circumstances, for deception. "There is little doubt that disinformation and lies can be initially effective, and that outright lies can be effective, particularly when the promulgator has a long history of apparent 'truth telling.' This suggests that outright disinformation in the case of the United States is somewhat like an information warfare analog to using nuclear weapons."

Though OSI was disbanded, it's likely that it disappeared in name alone, its duties delegated elsewhere within the Pentagon. Donald Rumsfeld said as much when, referring to OSI in November 2002, he told reporters that "you can have the name, but I'm gonna keep doing every single thing that needs to be done, and I have."

Whether or not OSI continued to operate under different auspices, many other organizations, inside and outside the Pentagon, were simultaneously or subsequently created to focus on the information effort overseas.

The Defense Department's Information Operations Task Force, created shortly after September 11, was to focus on "developing, coordinating, deconflicting, and monitoring the delivery of timely, relevant, and effective messages to targeted international audiences."

The Office of Global Communications, under Tucker Eskew, a deputy assistant to the president and a longtime Republican communications consultant, touted a similar mission. A government organizational chart, dated July 2003, places this office at the nexus of the government's strategic communications apparatus. But Daniel Kuehl, a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel who directs the Information Strategies Concentration Program at the National Defense University, believes the global communications office never lived up to its mandate.

Nor, perhaps, did it ever intend to. "In my opinion, the global issue wasn't the reason why they were created," he told me. "They clearly had a completely domestic focus. They were part of the effort to re-elect the president . . . I'm going to be real pejorative here: Their goal was psychological operations on the American voting public. That was part of the political arm doing that." He added, "You'll notice that not long after the election, the Office of Global Communications no longer existed." (Technically, it still exists, though it has been without a director for more than a year. No new content has been posted on its Web site, once updated regularly, since March 2005.)

The government also outsourced part of the war of perceptions to private-sector firms, including John Rendon's strategic communications consultancy, the Rendon Group, whose services have been retained during "nearly every shooting conflict in the past two decades," as James Bamford, an investigative reporter, wrote in *Rolling Stone* last fall. Hired by the CIA after the first gulf war to pave the way for regime change in Iraq, John Rendon helped to organize the Iraqi National Congress, Ahmed Chalabi's dissident group (which was later responsible for feeding bogus stories about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction to the press). More recently, though, as Bamford has reported, Rendon's firm received a Pentagon contract to mount "a worldwide propaganda campaign deploying teams of information warriors to allied nations to assist them 'in developing and delivering specific messages to the local population, combatants, front-line states, the media and the international community.'"

Meanwhile, the concept of military information operations, or IO, was undergoing a remarkable transformation. On October 30, 2003, Donald Rumsfeld signed a secret Pentagon directive, in the works for at least a year, known as the Information Operations Roadmap. The work of Christopher Lamb, then the Pentagon's deputy assistant secretary of defense for resources and plans, it established IO as a "core military competency, on par with air, ground, maritime, and special operations." Until then IO, which includes such subspecialties as military deception, psychological operations (psyops), and electronic warfare, had been considered an activity that merely supported combat operations, but it has taken on a prominent role in the war on terror.

"It really reflected the personal sense of the secretary of defense that information operations are going to be a larger component of war-fighting in the future than they had ever been in the past," Lamb told me.

The roadmap recognizes that the globalization of the information environment has eroded boundaries that have protected the public and the press from consuming propaganda aimed at foreign populations, making it likely that "psyop messages . . . will often be replayed by the news media for much larger audiences, including the American public."

The Smith-Mundt Act, signed into law in 1948, was designed to prevent the American people from being targeted with propaganda meant for foreign audiences (specifically, it prohibited the broadcast of the Voice of America within the U.S.). But technology has rendered it effectively moot. The question of legality may now rest on the very subjective test of whom the government means to influence. The roadmap itself, which was recently declassi-

fied, puts it this way: "The distinction between foreign and domestic audiences becomes more a question of USG [U.S. government] intent rather than information dissemination practices."

Dressed in desert camouflage — to the amusement of the press corps — James R. Wilkinson, a deputy assistant to the president and the deputy national security adviser for communications, presided over press conferences at Central Command's forward base in Doha, Qatar, as the invasion of Iraq commenced in March 2003. Along with Tucker Eskew, Wilkinson was a member of a tight-knit cadre of government communicators that Dan Bartlett, the former White House communications director (and now a counselor to the president), once referred to as "the band." Its members were responsible for orchestrating the public-relations blitz that accompanied the invasion of Afghanistan, as well as the communications effort that rallied public support for out-

formation that was provided to the press often proved false. In an updated version of *The First Casualty*, a classic exploration of journalism during times of war, Phillip Knightley writes that at Central Command:

stories were floated, picked up, exaggerated, confirmed and then turned out to be wrong. Basra was secured — it fell seventeen days later. Um Quasa fell daily. Saddam Hussein had been killed; Tariq Assiz had defected — both stories were wrong. There was an uprising in Basra that never happened even though Central Command announced at a briefing that it had. Was this deliberate strategic disinformation?

Some reporters, including Paul Hunter of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, concluded that this was likely the case. In 2003, he told the BBC: "So if word comes out of Centcom that there is an uprising against Saddam's regime, well certainly they can be thinking, planning, hoping that that information

'To use the news media to disseminate [psyop] information — that's where we've gone just terribly astray.'

— *Retired U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Pamela Keeton*

ing Saddam Hussein. Wilkinson, in fact, had been instrumental in drafting "A Decade of Deception and Defiance," a background paper released by the White House in September 2002 that purported to lay out the various ways in which Saddam's regime had flouted UN resolutions. (Based in part on faulty intelligence, including the testimony of an Iraqi defector, Adnan Ihsan Saeed al-Haideri, who had failed a CIA lie-detector test nine months earlier, many of the document's claims about Iraq's weapons programs have since been discredited.) Installed as Central Command's director of strategic communications in November 2002, Wilkinson was charged with managing the military's communications operation in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The idea had been that reporters embedded with the military would offer a narrow, on-the-ground perspective of the war, while reporters at Central Command's headquarters in Doha, updated regularly by military spokesmen, would be able to fill in the larger picture for readers and viewers back home. It was, however, the lack of information reporters received there that would become legend. "It takes about forty-eight hours to understand that information is probably more freely available at any other place in the world than it is here," *New York* magazine's man in Doha, Michael Wolff, wrote of his time there.

Not only was news scarce in Doha, but the in-

formation will be then picked up on and . . . then the local people will build on that and . . . the idea will become reality, even if it never existed in the first place." What Hunter described is the very definition of an information operation, which is designed to create a specific effect in targeted populations.

More than a year later, with the insurgency reaching a critical point, the military attempted what seems to be its most overt — and ham-handed — attempt at media manipulation in recent memory. In October 2004, as U.S. troops prepared to retake the insurgent stronghold of Fallujah, the military took the unusual step of contacting CNN's Atlanta headquarters to offer the network an interview with a commander on the ground who they said was prepared to discuss "major unfolding developments." The "commander" turned out to be a public affairs officer, Lieutenant Lyle Gilbert, who told Jamie McIntyre, CNN's Pentagon correspondent, that "troops crossed the line of departure . . . it's a pretty uncomfortable time. We have two battalions out there in maneuver right now dealing with the anti-Iraqi forces and achieving the mission of restoring security and stability to this area." Gilbert's comments seemed to signal that the long-expected offensive had begun. (Before he talked to Gilbert, McIntyre spoke to a senior aide to Donald Rumsfeld who told him that he would want to cover the pending announcement — it would be significant.) But even as

CNN broke this news, other reporters were being warned off the story by their military contacts. As it turned out, the offensive had not begun and wouldn't for another three weeks. It was widely reported that Gilbert's interview with McIntyre had been part of an apparent psychological operation.

"The purpose of this was actually a bit of deception," Christopher Lamb, the former Pentagon official, said. "We wanted to see how the insurgents we were monitoring would react to this news — that was the purpose." Lamb, now a fellow at the National Defense University's Institute for National Strategic Studies, said this operation was ill-advised. "That was a bad no-no. Public affairs guys must have credibility with the press and in my estimation ought not to be used for that purpose." (Gilbert, for his part, maintains that his comments to CNN were true; he contends it was McIntyre who overstated the import of the operation, which included air strikes on enemy positions and was itself intended as a feint.)

Mark Mazzetti, the former defense correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times* (he recently joined *The New York Times*) who, with Borzou Daragahi, would later break the news of the Lincoln Group's role in paying Iraqi newspapers to run U.S. propaganda, reported at the time that operations like this one were "part of a broad effort under way within the Bush administration to use information to its advantage in the war on terrorism." This, he reported, included using military spokesmen in psychological operations and "planting information with sources used by Arabic TV channels such as Al Jazeera to help influence the portrayal of the United States."

"The movement of information," a senior defense official told Mazzetti, "has gone from the public affairs world to the psychological operations world."

A line of departure had indeed been crossed.

There is a difference in mindset between soldiers who specialize in various military information disciplines. Public affairs officers view credibility as a responsibility, while information warriors tend to see it as a commodity. This mentality is summed up in an unofficial strategy paper titled "Information Warfare: An Air Force Policy for the Role of Public Affairs," written by an Air Force major at the School of Advanced Airpower Studies in Alabama. The paper suggests that public affairs could be the "ultimate IW [information warfare] weapon" since it is "so stalwart in its claims of only speaking the truth." It quotes an unnamed information warrior who says, "The reason I tell you the truth is so that when I lie, you will believe me."

In the military, it has been a longstanding practice to maintain a buffer, or "lanes," between information warfare disciplines, such as IO and psyops, and public affairs. This has been done to preserve the credibility of the officers who communicate with the domestic press. In general, public affairs

officers, or PAOs, believe it's best to tell the whole truth and quickly, even if that truth is damaging. Journalists who work regularly with the military say that PAOs are more often than not refreshingly candid. But the trust that has been built between reporters and the military is easily shattered by the appearance of manipulation, let alone deception. For this reason, the CNN incident sent shockwaves through the public affairs community.

There are several plausible explanations for why the lanes between public affairs and information operations began to break down. One factor could be the sheer frustration that had built in the military over its inability to publicize the real gains it was making in Iraq and Afghanistan, including paving the way for democratic elections in both countries, in news outlets that seemed only to cover setbacks. Then there was the IO Roadmap, which called for integration between public affairs, IO, and psyops. The directive, while noting that the "lanes in the road" must be clarified, was vague about what this coordination should look like in practice. Then, in September 2004, came a sobering report from the Defense Science Board, a federal committee that advises the Pentagon, which said that the government's strategic communications apparatus was "in crisis." It, too, called for greater synergy between public affairs, IO, and psyops to "energize" the communications effort.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, the military revamped its information efforts to conform to a strategic communications model — that is, one in which public affairs, IO, and psyops are supposed to be synchronized and mutually supportive. In Baghdad, the Office of Strategic Communications emerged, under the command of an Air Force brigadier general, Erwin F. Lessel III. In Kabul, a similar organization, known as Theaterwide Interagency Effects, was created to synchronize public affairs, IO, and psyops.

When Lieutenant Colonel Pamela Keeton of the Army arrived in Afghanistan in August 2004 to take over the coalition's public affairs operation, Effects, as it was known, had been in place for several months. The command structure had shifted to accommodate the new organization and Keeton found she would no longer report directly to the commanding general, as is typically the case. "Traditionally public affairs officers are special staff to the commander, just like his lawyer and his surgeon," Keeton told me. "Now I was reporting to a colonel" — who headed Effects — "that had no experience in public affairs, psyops, or information operations. He was being advised by me; he was being advised by his IO guy and by his psyops guy. He was trying to figure out who was right, what we should do." She felt she was in competition to get her point of view across, and, to an extent, kept out of the loop. "They were going to the director of IO for advice on messages," she said.

Shortly before Keeton's arrival, other, more dra-

matic changes had taken place. The officer in charge of information operations, Major Scott Nelson, had taken over as the command's chief spokesman. "He ran the press conferences," Keeton, who is now retired from the military, said. Nelson's dual roles would seem to be in conflict. Nelson, however, who has a background in public affairs, told me that he had no difficulty separating his IO and public affairs responsibilities. Keeton, for her part, made it clear that her gripe lay not so much with Nelson, who she said was simply performing the task that he'd been assigned, but with the system, which has allowed influence operations to bleed into public affairs and allowed IO officers to use the press as "a battlefield tool." Perhaps this was what Nelson was attempting to do when he told reporters, in the wake of a successful national election, that the Taliban had been demoralized. "The election further displays that the Taliban lacks the capability to conduct coordinated, sustained, and effective operations," he told reporters, asserting that Mullah Omar was losing the support of his followers. Information warriors often formulate what they call "truth-based" messages — information that is often vague and one-dimensional, sometimes misleading, and frequently includes statements that are subtly derogatory.

"He was stretching the truth," Keeton told me. "I think what they were trying to do was create an outcome with the Afghan people. They were trying to make the Afghan people feel like the Taliban was less influential than they might think, so it's safe to turn these people in. We're winning, they're losing, so get on our bandwagon." (Nelson told me his statement about the Taliban, like all of the information he provided to the press, was true. In this particular instance, he said, he was unable to back up his claims, when asked by reporters, because that information was classified at the time.)

Not long before Keeton left Afghanistan, in January 2005, public affairs was separated from Effects and returned to its proper lane, under the commanding general. This was something Keeton had fought for during her time there, but she believes it was a letter from General Richard B. Myers, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that forced the command in Afghanistan to reassess its communications model. "While organizations may be inclined to create physically integrated PA/IO offices, such organizational constructs have the potential to compromise the commander's credibility with the media and the public," Myers wrote in the letter, which was distributed among combatant commanders in the fall of 2004.

Keeton remains troubled by what she saw in Afghanistan, as well as by what she's observed from afar in Iraq, where the Office of Strategic Communications continues to operate. "Somehow in the actual implementation of information operations they have veered from the original mission defined in their regulations," she said. "I don't

know that anywhere in there it says to use the news media to disseminate that information. That's where we've gone just horribly astray."

In Iraq, the encroachment of IO into terrain traditionally controlled by public affairs has manifested itself somewhat differently. As the situation in Iraq has devolved, some PAOs have been enlisted to undertake tasks that would normally be the province of IO or psyops. A Marine public affairs officer who served in Iraq until last fall, primarily in the Sunni Triangle, told me of being asked in a number of cases to draft news stories that the officer believed would be translated and placed, perhaps covertly, in local newspapers. The officer was also asked to write stories that omitted the role of U.S. troops, in one case to obscure their involvement in spearheading an infrastructure project, making it seem as if it were solely a product of Iraqi initiative. (The officer refused to participate in the propaganda efforts.) Particularly when it comes to slanting news stories or press releases to emphasize the self-sufficiency of the Iraqis, that practice appears fairly widespread. Last summer, *Jane's Defence Weekly* reported that the technique has been used to make the Iraqi military appear more competent than it is, primarily by playing up the role of Iraqi troops in military operations. "We say what we want people to believe even if it's not fully grounded in facts or the truth, and that is becoming a very disturbing trend in the military," a Pentagon public affairs officer told the reporter, Joshua Kucera.

A senior PAO who recently returned from Iraq told me that he was most troubled by IO's dealings with the Iraqi press. "Normally all things media go through PA channels, where truth is the currency," he said, asking that he not be named since his candor may not serve him well during an upcoming Pentagon assignment. "When you have IO dealing with local media — especially in a country with no experience with a free press — I think you run the risk of undermining the military's credibility and/or sowing distrust with the local population when IO operators seek to influence, and use truth-based information rather than the simple truth." He continued, "Perhaps Iraq is a unique situation, but I think some of our IO efforts may have hurt our overall efforts at supporting an elected government and democratic, free institutions. Saddam fed the people propaganda for decades — should we continue to feed them propaganda and expect them to support us and/or their elected officials?"

This officer was not speaking only of the Lincoln Group's pay-to-play operation, but of a broader effort that has been under way in Iraq for some time. It involves the funding of fledgling Iraqi media outlets around the country by IO detachments, some of which have provided the local press with covert propaganda. "I believe they view the press as a tool

to be used to influence adversary audiences," the senior officer said. The clandestine placement of propaganda in the Iraqi media appears to date back as early as June 2003, a month after major combat operations ended, and may have begun even earlier. (Near the end of a lengthy AP dispatch, dated June 5, 2003, I found this: "One Baghdad weekly prints articles supplied by the military, most of which don't appear to come from a U.S. or military source. In exchange the U.S. buys and distributes 70,000 of the newspapers.")

To be fair, the local media would not be thriving as they are today without the help of the military, which has gone out of its way to provide Iraqi journalists with access, training in the basics of reporting, equipment, and funding to operate newspapers and TV and radio stations. "But there's always a catch," the Marine public affairs officer told me. "You don't get something for free." Referring to an IO-funded newspaper that operated briefly in Fallujah, the officer said, "The compromise here was we'll fund your newspaper, mister Iraqi editor, but you may have to run coalition information." IO has pursued these quid-pro-quo arrangements quite aggressively, the officer told me, in one case muscling in on a handful of Iraqi news outlets that were already being helped along by a civil affairs unit, whose job it was to work on various infrastructure projects. "They went ahead and wrote an operations order saying that all media projects that had gone on in the past were under their operational control — meaning oversight, funding."

The State Department's Future of Iraq Project, which convened a series of working groups between the spring of 2002 and the spring of 2003 to focus on planning for post-Saddam Iraq, warned specifically against using the Iraqi press as a propaganda platform. "New forms of propaganda are totally out of the question, even with the best of intentions," the project's Free Media working group recommended in a December 2002 paper. "The help the media can give in keeping the social peace (which is actually their natural role in a democracy) . . . is too important to be spoiled by a continued lack of trust from the public." The document also discourages the idea that regional or Western governments should directly fund Iraqi news outlets, suggesting instead that governments "should be allowed only to contribute to a general fund." These, like most of the other recommendations made by this State Department initiative, were apparently ignored by the Pentagon. Rather, under the purview of IO, the Lincoln Group was designated to operate a government-funded propaganda franchise in Iraq that would ultimately be discovered.

Before the Lincoln Group's covert campaign began sometime in early 2005, the firm (then operating as Iraqex) had been chosen to carry out a p.r. contract, worth more than \$5 million, that was overseen by the

coalition's public affairs staff in Baghdad. An army officer, who was involved in selecting the Lincoln Group for the contract and who worked extensively with its employees when they arrived in Iraq in November 2004, told me it had initially been hired to provide basic communications support, such as polling and media analysis, not for the clandestine placement of news stories or paying off the Iraqi press.

"In terms of their proposal, they were head and shoulders above everybody," the officer said. "The problem was they couldn't do a third of what they said they were going to do." He continued, "They were my little Frankensteins. They were sending guys over there that had absolutely no knowledge of Iraqis whatsoever. It was like the Young Republican fucking group — some guy who was working for the governor-elect in Michigan, a guy from the Beltway who was part of some Republicans for Democracy group — not a fucking clue. It was a scheme written up on a cocktail napkin in D.C. They were just completely inept." The public affairs staff became increasingly frustrated with the contractor. Some officers, including two brigadier generals, refused even to work with them. "That's when they moved under IO," the officer said. Eventually, the Lincoln Group was responsible for planting hundreds of stories in Iraqi newspapers.

In late March, an investigation into the Lincoln Group's activities ordered by George W. Casey, Jr., the commanding general of Multi-National Force-Iraq, concluded that the IO campaign was not in violation of military policy. Despite the fact that some information warfare experts, among them Daniel Kuehl of the National Defense University, find this program potentially counterproductive to the government's overall information efforts, the practice of placing news stories covertly in the Iraqi media not only will continue, it will probably expand to other regions around the world unless the Pentagon revises its doctrine, a step it is currently considering. (General Peter Pace, the current chairman of the Joint Chiefs, has called for a formal review of the Pentagon's information policies. "At the end of the day we want the United States to be seen for what it is, an open society that supports free press not only at home but overseas," he told *The Associated Press*. "To the extent that our operations bring that into question, we should review how we're doing it.")

Last July, the Pentagon awarded contracts worth as much as \$300 million to three firms, the Lincoln Group among them, to carry out various psychological warfare campaigns, including the placement of propaganda in foreign media outlets. According to *USA Today*, the efforts, which will be overseen by the U.S. Special Operations Command's Joint Psychological Operations Support Element, will target audiences throughout the world, including those in allied countries. This program appears to flout at least the spirit of the IO Roadmap. "The line that

was drawn in the IO Roadmap," Christopher Lamb told me, is "we don't psyop friends, allies, and neutrals." He went on, "The psyop community has bridled against the restrictions placed on them in the IO Roadmap. They have fought a guerrilla war against those restrictions for years. Their view is that psyops can be directed toward global transregional audiences. My view is that that's not possible because it directs psyops against our own friends and allies and even at our own public." (The military denied my request to interview Colonel James A. Treadwell, the director of the Tampa-based Joint Psychological Operations Support Element.)

If the press, foreign and domestic, remains fair game for psychological operations, the military, as well as the media, could be headed for a credibility crisis. "There are some people who will say we have to do whatever it takes to win this war," said Pamela Keeton, who is now the director of public affairs and communications for the U.S. Institute of Peace, a congressionally funded nonpartisan organization that focuses on conflict resolution. "I think there are places where we need to draw the line — and one of them is using the news media for psyops purposes. It will get to the point where the news media won't trust anybody, and the people won't trust what's being quoted in news articles." Propaganda, even the kind intended for specific audiences, can turn up anywhere — on the news wires, in newspapers, on blogs or Web sites. "They're not going to know that they were written by some information-warfare guy," she said. In the hands of policymakers, she continued, these skewed stories can then be used for political ends — to show that the Taliban is disintegrating, say, or that Iraqis are taking the initiative to protect and rebuild their country, or that the war on terror is going better than it really is. She seemed less than hopeful that the damage could be contained. "It's a Pandora's box."

The Pentagon's "aggressive approach to winning hearts and minds" poses a threat to journalism, Sig Christenson, the president of the professional association Military Reporters and Editors, told me. "Disinformation campaigns," he said in an e-mail, "will in time cause the public to doubt the veracity of our reports." In a separate conversation, Christenson, a veteran military writer for the San Antonio *Express-News*, wondered, "How do you prevent Pentagon propaganda disseminated in Iraq from finding its way into stories back at home? You probably can't, given today's technology, and that means our government has now found a way to circumvent laws forbidding the propagandization of people in the United States — whether it intends to or not."

Among journalists there are varying levels of concern, ranging from significant to mild, over the media's role as a weapon in an information war that

seems destined to go on for decades. Mark Mazzetti, the former *Los Angeles Times* reporter, told me that there is now an increased likelihood that various forms of propaganda will enter the "bloodstream" of the press, and that he sees potential for abuse, but he is not personally concerned that this will affect his reporting. "You go to people you trust," he told me. "I don't trust the military less."

Jane Arraf, the former CNN Baghdad bureau chief, on the other hand, said the information environment has led to a loss of trust on her part and among many of her colleagues in the press, particularly, she said, after her network was used in an apparent military deception. "I've found that I've had to go back to really basic journalism 101," she said. "For me that has meant not really believing anything unless I see it. That doesn't mean I expect everyone I talk to will be lying to me, but it does mean that I recognize that some people have agendas." The problem, as she sees it, is one of politics. "There's so much political pressure on the military, and that sometimes supercedes what they know is the right way to deal with the media."

There is another concern now, too, which is not unique to journalists. It has also been expressed within the military, academia, and the Bush administration itself: Can the U.S. win the information war, as it's being waged?

"There's still a real tendency to think we're just not getting the message across," Arraf said. "But it's not that we're not getting the message across, it's the policies, especially when you're dealing with the Arab and Muslim world." She brought up Abu Ghraib, as many people I spoke to eventually did, which in the hands of America's enemies has become a powerful piece of propaganda, reinforcing notions of American cruelty, arrogance, and despotism that already flourish in the Muslim world — among the very same "fence-sitters," as the military calls them, that the U.S. government is trying to persuade to follow its path to freedom. This exposes a fundamental flaw in the current propaganda war: the message is only as good as the policies behind it. One need look no further than Guantanamo Bay, where men have been held for years with no prospect of a trial to confirm their guilt or innocence, to see that we are in for a long war indeed.

The administration does not seem to see it this way. In the administration's view, the press is partially — if not mostly — to blame for America's losses in the war of perceptions. During his speech to the Council on Foreign Relations in February, Donald Rumsfeld referred to "the false allegations of the desecration of the Koran" that appeared in *Newsweek* last May, which he charged had both incited anti-American riots and led to loss of life. "Our government," he said, "does not have the luxury of relying on other sources of information — anonymous or otherwise. Our government has to be *the* source. And we tell the truth."

It's interesting that Rumsfeld raised this issue in this way, for it is indicative of the way the government has chosen to communicate with the public, often using "truth-based" information — to borrow from the vernacular of the military specialists who deal in the manipulation of words and images — as a substitute for truth. While *Newsweek's* specific allegation turned out to be inaccurate, we now know that copies of the Koran were indeed mishandled in at least five cases at Guantanamo. As for the riots, it is simply disingenuous to say — or worse still, to believe — that the *Newsweek* story alone was responsible for inflaming the Muslim world. If truth is our greatest weapon, as Rumsfeld has said, how can the administration hope to prevail in an information war when it is not honest with itself?

Sig Christenson told me that our leaders now face an "integrity test," which will have a bearing on the war on terror. Considering this, he was reminded of a trip he took to the military academy at West Point in December, where he visited the Cadet Chapel, an imposing gothic church built of granite. Inscribed on a wall to his right as he entered the sanctuary, he saw the Cadet Prayer, which was written by Colonel Clayton Wheat, a former chaplain and English professor at West Point. Ever since, Christenson has reflected often on a particular refrain from that prayer, whose sentiments have perhaps been forgotten during these dangerous and uncertain times. The passage reads: "Make us to choose the harder right instead of the easier wrong and never to be content with a half-truth when the whole truth can be won." ■

Daniel Schulman is an assistant editor at CJR.



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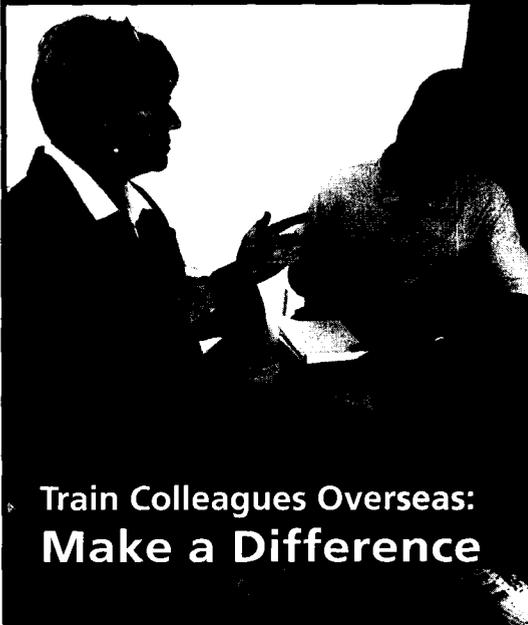
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