

The Pentagon, Information Operations, and International Media Development

A Report to the Center for International Media Assistance

By Peter Cary

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**National Endowment
for Democracy**
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The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), a project of the National Endowment for Democracy, aims to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of media assistance programs by providing information, building networks, conducting research, and highlighting the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies around the world. An important aspect of CIMA's work is to research ways to attract additional U.S. private sector interest in and support for international media development.

CIMA convenes working groups, discussions, and panels on a variety of topics in the field of media development and assistance. The center also issues reports and recommendations based on working group discussions and other investigations. These reports aim to provide policymakers, as well as donors and practitioners, with ideas for bolstering the effectiveness of media assistance.

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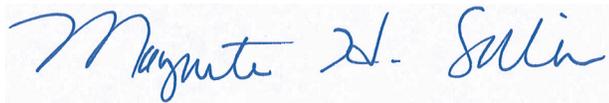
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Preface

The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) at the National Endowment for Democracy commissioned this study of the U.S. Department of Defense’s activity in international media. The report examines what effect the DoD’s multi-front information war—both to support U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan and to counter enemy propaganda—has had on local news media in the areas where the U.S. military is operating.

CIMA is grateful to Peter Cary, a veteran journalist with extensive experience reporting about the U.S. military, for his research and insights on this topic.

We hope that this report will become an important reference for international media assistance efforts.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Marguerite H. Sullivan". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Marguerite H. Sullivan
Senior Director
Center for International Media Assistance

Executive Summary

A core principle of the United States is that a free and independent press is vital to the formation and maintenance of democracies. During the Cold War, the State Department’s media outreach into the former Soviet Union and other Communist-leaning nations was largely limited to the broadcasts of the U.S. Information Agency (USIA). With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the effort broadened: USAID began to encourage and develop independent media in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. In the early 1990s, when the Balkans erupted in conflict, that region became the focus of assistance for media development.

With the demise of the Soviet Union, however, the State Department’s public diplomacy role shrank rapidly. In 1999, USIA was broken up. Its cultural exchange and information functions were assumed by the under secretary of state for public diplomacy, and its broadcast functions were taken over by the Broadcasting Board of Governors, whose network targeted Europe, Asia, and Cuba. Then, signaled by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the threat to America radically changed. The United States soon found itself in wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the Department of Defense (DoD) was faced with countering threats from a radical Muslim enemy that also showed itself to be quite adept in the new media environment. As part of its strategy, the DoD launched a

multi-front information war, both to support its troops on the ground and to counter the propaganda of an enemy intent on adding to its global army and its sympathizers.

The DoD’s global public relations war, however, has fostered criticism that the department has over-reached into the territory once reserved for the State Department—that is, the mission known as public diplomacy—meaning the promotion of the national interest through informing and influencing foreign publics. Some U.S.

ambassadors in foreign countries are reported to have bristled at the arrival of Defense Department teams to assist the embassies in public outreach. And in September 2009, two lawyers—one a former associate counsel in the DoD, the other a senior appellate judge on the Air Force

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Court of Criminal Appeals, writing in the journal of the U.S. Army War College—questioned the legality of regional news and information websites set up by the DoD because they overlap with the State Department’s mandate and support no identifiable military missions. Meanwhile, Defense Secretary Robert Gates has said publicly that the State Department needs to engage more in public diplomacy. Judith McHale, the State Department’s under secretary for public diplomacy and public affairs, has outlined a new communications approach for her agency that is “more pro-active and less reactive.”

Still, the Defense Department’s budget is more than ten times that of the Department of State. (The 2011 budget request for State and USAID is \$52.8 billion; DoD’s request is for \$708.2 billion.) And in the past several years, the DoD has received authorization to spend hundreds of millions of dollars a year on what is termed—sometimes interchangeably and confusingly—strategic communications, information operations, and psychological operations. Those operations include such activities as re-establishing national media in Iraq, setting up small FM radio stations in Afghanistan, creating regional foreign language news and information websites in Africa and elsewhere, and encouraging soldiers to blog to counter foreign criticism. However, with one glaring exception—the massive \$200 million effort to reconstruct a national media operation in Iraq—little of the DoD’s work can be said to fall into the category of classic “media development” of the type practiced by USAID and various nongovernmental organizations. Instead, its work has been designed to influence opinion, to shape the security environment, and to counter anti-American messages. Some of this work has been done by the uniformed military; much of it is inaccessible or secret; and a great deal of it has been done by contractors.

Not all of these efforts have been productive, and some of the work has collided with the efforts of non-profit organizations engaged in training foreign journalists and helping establish independent foreign media based on Western models. While the DoD cannot be criticized for trying to protect the lives of its soldiers, one cannot help but note the vast amounts of money spent by the DoD on media operations—which

tend to be conducted in secrecy and whose effectiveness often cannot be measured—compared with the relatively small amounts given to the NGOs, who work under contract and are expected to deliver measurable results. And the media work of some contractors hired by the DoD turned into fiascoes, which not only embarrassed the U.S. government but also tarred the efforts of non-DoD Americans doing media development work abroad.

Moreover, Congress’s frustration with the DoD’s oversight of its media operations has been running high. One signal event, whose effects have not yet fully played out, occurred in 2009 when DoD submitted a budget request for \$988 million for strategic communications and information operations for fiscal year 2010. When pressed, however, DoD officials agreed to take a second look at their request, and shortly thereafter decreased it to \$626 million. Still dubious, and somewhat out of pique, congressional defense appropriators cut another \$100 million off the request. DoD did not protest. Congressional staffers say this budgetary drama was a wake-up call to them that indicated the Defense Department does not truly know what its information operations needs are and what they have and should cost.

Congress is demanding more accountability from the Pentagon for its information operations spending, and the DoD says it is trying to identify which offices and officials can exercise oversight over its far-flung information activities. For those agencies and organizations with relatively tiny budgets that are trying to develop a free press in war-torn and emerging nations, these changes would be welcome.

The Ballooning Budget

The story of the Defense Department's work with international media is a complex one.

When DoD presented its budget request for fiscal year 2010, included in the request was \$988 million for strategic communications and information operations. The amount was more than four times what the Pentagon had estimated it spent for similar programs in 2007, and it raised eyebrows in Congress.¹

(Simply put, strategic communications means communicating by any means to advance national interests. Psychological operations are military operations to influence emotions, motives, and even the objective reasoning of individuals, groups, and governments. Information operations means using information to influence behavior. It should be noted that information operations also includes other activities more closely linked to war-fighting capabilities, such as electronic warfare and operations security, which makes a dollar-to-dollar comparison with spending on purely media activities difficult.)

When the congressional defense committees asked for more information, the Pentagon returned with a new number: \$626.2 million. Pentagon officials said they had made a \$362 million mistake in their request, double-counting some numbers. Not satisfied with that answer, and skeptical that the Pentagon had made the case for its needs, the House-Senate appropriations conference committee on December 16, 2009, cut another \$100 million off the request.

Committee members included some strong language in their report. They noted that Central Command's (CENTCOM)

information operations programs in Afghanistan, as reported, had grown from a cost of \$39.9 million in 2008 to a request for \$243.8 million in 2010. They also noted that of the \$109.7 million appropriated for U.S. forces in Afghanistan information operations in 2009, only \$64.3 million was actually spent on information operations, and the remainder was used for other purposes. They demanded that the DoD tighten its accounting and management of strategic communications and information operations spending, and that within 90 days it deliver a thorough report containing "budget justification materials" for 2007 through 2011.²

The fact that Congress was surprised by the nearly \$1 billion budget request is extraordinary because congressional appropriators tend to keep close track of Pentagon spending. The large request reflects how deeply and extensively the DoD has gotten into strategic communications and the related activities of information psychological operations. The 2010 budget was the first time the DoD, pressed by Congress, had tried to consolidate all of its strategic communications and information operations requests in one place. Previously those functions were not apparent to Congress as they had been spread across and sprinkled throughout DoD annual budgets in as many as 12 different commands and multiple missions—and some of them were secret. How this happened becomes clearer in hindsight.

In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the Defense Department recognized that warfare in the 21st century, especially as waged against radical Islamists, would require the focused use of information.

In July 2002, President George W. Bush signed National Security Presidential Directive NSPD-16, which outlined the administration's new thinking for information warfare. While it is still classified, its essence was captured in a PowerPoint presentation at an Air University lecture that stated, "information itself is now a weapon, a realm, and a target."³

In October 2003, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld signed a secret document, the Information Operations Roadmap. It elevated information operations to a "core military competency," and prescribed waging information

warfare through psychological operations, multi-media strategies, and cyber warfare, both offensive and defensive. The report carried 57 recommendations for expanding information operations and more closely coordinating them with other DoD

activities such as public affairs and support for public diplomacy. It carried a budget of \$383 million for its core efforts from 2004 through 2009 and added \$151 million more for related programs and \$161 million more for public affairs.⁴ The Information Operations Roadmap was not declassified until January 2006.

Suddenly flush with money, but short on in-house media experts, the DoD turned to private contractors. In March 2003, even before the U.S. invaded Iraq, the DoD awarded a \$15 million expandable no-bid contract to Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC) to reconstruct Iraq's

national broadcast and press operations. The so-called Iraqi Free Media project would create the Iraqi Media Network (IMN). By September 2003, the contract had ballooned to \$82 million. The SAIC contract ended that year amid questions of the effectiveness of the company's work. Pentagon auditors, for instance, said SAIC was paid for work not completed, electronic equipment was missing, and that SAIC paid top salaries to executives and security officers but skimmed on equipment for journalists. (According to news accounts, an SAIC official said there had been some mistakes but defended the

company's work.)

More important, there were charges that IMN's programming was weak, its news was managed, and that Iraqis saw it as the mouthpiece for the Coalition Provisional Authority.⁵ Since the development of IMN was seen as incomplete, the project was put out to bid in late 2003,

and Harris Communications of Florida was awarded a one-year \$96 million contract in January 2004 to finish the job. Later the new Iraqi government extended the Harris contract for an additional \$22 million.⁶

About the same time in 2004, the Joint Psychological Operations Support Element was formed at the U.S. Special Operations Command in Tampa. In June 2005, it awarded three contracts worth up to \$300 million over five years to SYColeman, Lincoln Group, and SAIC to develop radio and TV commercials, Internet ads, podcasts, billboards, and more to improve foreign

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Definitions

Strategic Communication:

“Focused United States Government efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of United States Government interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power.”

“In its broadest sense, ‘strategic communication’ means communicating strategically through all that we say and do.”

Information Operations:

“The integrated employment of the core capabilities of electronic warfare (EW), computer network operations (CNO), psychological operations (PSYOP), military deception (MILDEC), and operations security (OPSEC), in concert with specified supporting and related capabilities. To influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp adversarial human and automated decision making while protecting our own.”

“Information Operations ‘supports military objectives ... throughout [the] range of military operations.’”

Psychological Operations:

“Planned operations to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals. The purpose of psychological operations is to induce or reinforce foreign attitudes and behavior favorable to the originator’s objectives.”

“Contrary to popular belief, psychological operations involve the dissemination of truthful information. Although the term PSYOP has acquired negative connotations, suggesting falsehood and manipulation, the information that is relayed through military PSYOP programs is truthful.”

“Note: the Department is currently evaluating existing PSYOP definitions and authorities to determine whether changes are required as well as reviewing the underlying integrating concept of IO.”

Public Diplomacy:

“Public diplomacy seeks to promote the national interest and the national security of the United States through understanding, informing, and influencing foreign publics and broadening dialogue between American citizens and institutions and their counterparts abroad.”

Sources: U.S. Department of Defense, “Consolidated Report on Strategic Communication and Information Operations,” (March, 2010); Public Diplomacy Alumni Association (formerly the USIA Alumni Association), <http://www.publicdiplomacy.org/1.htm>

opinion of the United States. “If you want to influence someone, you have to touch their emotions,” Col. James A. Treadwell, the element’s director, told the *Washington Post*.⁷

As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan wore on, numerous military commands developed information operations capabilities. DoD budget documents indicate that their spending was designed to influence the local populations and counter the propaganda of the enemy. A report from the DoD, sent to Congress in March 2010, says that most of the contracting occurred in areas where DoD does not have the requisite skills. This includes unique languages, like Somali, or foreign media summary and analysis. It says the DoD also uses contractors “to produce high-quality print, audio, and video products” while government and military officials set objectives and targets and policies.⁸

The number of contractors hired by the various military commands for information operations work following 2001 could not be ascertained. However, in a document that gives a sense of the spending, the DoD inspector general reported that U.S. Central Command alone had used 172 contract vehicles—contracts, purchase orders, etc.—to buy \$270.1 million worth of information operations services in Iraq from 2006 to late 2008. One single contract was used to purchase \$173.7 million of information services from suppliers denoted as “miscellaneous foreign contractors.” One single purchase order bought \$5.97 million worth of services without competitive bidding.⁹

Apparently because of its cut-off date, the inspector general’s report did not include another group of contracts awarded September 23, 2008, by the Joint Contracting

Command-Iraq/Afghanistan, a subordinate of Central Command. The Joint Contracting Command awarded four contracts to Leonie Industries LLC, SOS International, Ltd., MPRI/L-3 Services, Inc., and the Lincoln Group to provide media services to the multi-national force in Iraq—specifically to produce news stories and public service announcements for the Iraqi media. The contracts were for one year with two 12-month extension options, and they were worth up to \$300 million per year for each company.¹⁰

An earlier contract to the Lincoln Group had proved embarrassing when it was reported that the contractor had been paying Iraqi media outlets to run “good news” stories that the company had generated. Partly due to a number of other information operations problems, Congress stepped in. On October 9, 2008, Democratic Senator Jim Webb of Virginia wrote to Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, demanding that the \$300 million in contracts be put on hold pending a Senate review.¹¹ The Pentagon then decided to do its own review, and its inspector general took a close look at the four contracts. The review found no illegalities, but it noted that the contracts did not differentiate between psychological operations and public affairs and that they lacked “sufficient oversight mechanism.” According to a spokesman for Webb, the \$300 million contracts were cancelled.

Until 2009, most of the DoD’s information operations funding was essentially invisible. One congressional staffer suggested that this was by design—“the old administration . . . did a fantastic job of hiding it everywhere,” he said—while another staffer’s view was more benign—he noted that the Defense Department simply did not have any one office or official who managed and oversaw

all information operations. “You had the COCOMs [Combatant Commands, unified military commands responsible for six regions of the world] and the services and you had people just flush with cash going off and hiring contractors and doing things. And nowhere was it all coming together,” the staffer said. And until early 2009, Congress had no idea what might be buried in the DoD budgets because no one congressman or staff member was pulling together all the pieces.

About the time the new Obama administration was seated, in January 2009, two staff members in the now Democratically-controlled Congress were working on the 2009 DoD supplemental budget when they spotted some unexplained funding for information operations. Curious, they told the DoD that when it submitted its 2010 request it should put all the funding for information operations and strategic communications (the two were seen as intertwined) in one place. The DoD complied, and came up with the budget request for \$988 million—the one it quickly revised down to \$626 million. The implication, not lost on Congress, was that the DoD had no more of a grasp on its information operations budget needs than Congress.

For fiscal year 2011, the Pentagon submitted a budget request for \$384.8 million for an account labeled “Psychological Operations (Information Operations).” Strategic communications has been dropped as a category from the funding request. Still, it is not clear what is the total amount the DoD is seeking for all information operations and related activities. Walter Pincus, a veteran *Washington Post* national security reporter, pegged the number at close to

a billion dollars in a June 2010 column. He wrote that about 40 percent of that amount would go to contractors.¹² Congress remained frustrated with the DoD’s ability to oversee, account for, and control its information operations and related activities. The Senate Armed Services Committees in particular, reporting on the DoD’s 2011 budget request, called for a complete overhaul of information operations management and a new DoD directive on the subject.¹³

One chart accompanying the DoD’s 2011 budget shows the amount requested for “Psychological Operations (Information Operations)” to have shrunk between 2010 and 2011, due primarily to a decrease of \$187 million in Army funding because of its diminished presence in Iraq. However, the budget includes an increase for U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) funding of \$34.4 million. That includes money to build and run eight news and information websites (six are already constructed) targeted at various regions of the world, the publishing of six regional magazines, and translation services and surveys to determine the effectiveness of psychological operations programs.

It appears that the Department of Defense will be in the information and influence business for many years to come, and that its spending in this area will be of the same order as the Broadcasting Board of Governors, far surpassing the public diplomacy spending of State. (The BBG’s annual budget for its TV and radio outlets runs about \$750 million. Senator Webb noted in his letter to Secretary Gates that the State Department’s 2009 funding for public diplomacy programs in Iraq was \$5.6 million.¹⁴

A Cottage Industry

As strategic communications and information operations have boomed in recent years, an industry has followed. Major defense contractors, as well as start-ups with little or no history or expertise in the news, information, or public relations, are now casting themselves as information specialists. The rapid growth of this business presents a number of issues.

One is reflected in a lament by Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, writing in the *Joint Forces Quarterly* last fall. He complained that strategic communications had become a “thing” and not a “process,” the center of an organized structure that had become “something of a cottage industry.” Within that industry, he said, strategic communications sets out to solve through techniques of messaging what are really policy or execution problems. He noted that the voyage of the Great White Fleet around the world in 1907-09 and the launch of the Marshall Plan after World War II spoke volumes without any strategic communications plan accompanying them.

Mullen went on to say that “there has been a certain arrogance to our ‘strat comm’ efforts. We’ve come to believe that messages are something we can launch downrange like a rocket, something we can fire for effect. They are not.”¹⁵

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Mullen’s thinking is reflected in a March 2010 report from the DoD on the subject (DoD Consolidated Report on Strategic Communications and Information Operations) which defines strategic communication as “communicating strategically through all that we say and do.” It notes that the term only cropped up in DoD language less than a decade ago, and says it is still “an evolving concept.”¹⁶

Still, the contracting shops of the Pentagon seem to take a narrower and more direct approach. The language in one contract reads: “The Government will rely on these contracts to produce media products for Government dissemination to the Iraqi people that will engage target segments to achieve objectives.”¹⁷ Another, setting up regional websites, calls for the contractor to “continuously recommend and conduct, with Government approval, mass marketing efforts to establish brand name recognition, market presence, and capitalize on opportunities to promote the websites and to significantly increase penetration to the intended audience.”¹⁸

Despite the fact that Washington is plentifully supplied with public relations and marketing companies, most large information operations contracts have been won by long-time defense contractors or by start-ups whose ranks are packed with ex-

military officers. That may be because only old-line defense firms or opportunistic new ones staffed by former colonels are willing to work in war zones, or to undertake the tedious and specialized effort required to pursue Defense Department contracts. It may also be that the Pentagon has a higher comfort level with certain defense contractors. For instance, the \$15 million and \$82 million contracts to rebuild a state media structure in Iraq were awarded to SAIC, a San Diego based engineering and research firm whose main business is DoD contracting. According to the Defense Department's inspector general, DoD's reason for awarding SAIC the no-bid contract was, "We need the immediate services of a fully qualified contractor who has the unqualified support and confidence of the Pentagon leadership and who was prepared to begin work and deploy as soon as possible."¹⁹ The \$10.1 million annual contract to create and maintain regional websites was awarded to General Dynamics. The \$96 million follow-on contract to develop Iraqi media was awarded to Harris Corporation of Melbourne, FL, a communications equipment company. (Harris, it should be noted, partnered with the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation and a Kuwaiti newspaper company for the

task.) Other information operations contracts have gone to well-established defense contractors such as MPRI and SYColeman.

The Lincoln Group, however, was a fresh start-up. Designated to participate in two \$100 million contracts to create and distribute radio and TV ads, articles, and website content, it was founded in 2004 by entrepreneur Christian Bailey and ex-Marine Paige Craig to take advantage of the business and government money flooding into Iraq. Neither had a public relations or journalism background, but they were willing to work in a hostile environment. Their first contract, worth \$6 million, was awarded by the Multi-National Corps-Iraq to create an "aggressive advertising and public relations campaign" to inform the Iraqi people of the coalition's goals and gain their support.²⁰ By 2006, Craig told *Fortune* magazine, their company had landed more than a score of DoD contracts and an equal number of other deals.²¹

"Information operations is the hot thing, and somebody turned on a hose of money," W. Patrick "Pat" Lang, a retired Defense Intelligence Agency official, told the *Washington Post*. "Retired colonels and senior executive service officers are forming teams to compete."²²

A Chronology of Embarrassments

Certain aspects of communications and influence inarguably fall to the military as part of its war-fighting missions. As defined by the DoD, the components of information operations, for instance, are psychological operations, electronic warfare, military deception, and operations security. A newer one is computer network operations, both aggressive and defensive. They work separately or as a unit toward “achieving information superiority for the United States.”²³

Public affairs, with a long tradition in the U.S. military, is different. Public affairs officers strive to transmit truthful and factually correct information. It should be no surprise, then, that one of the early embarrassments for the DoD as it entered the post-9/11 world of media and communications

was the result of a clash between public affairs officers and a new DoD Office of Strategic Influence. In February 2002, the *New York Times* reported that the new strategic influence office, formed quickly after 9/11, had proposed planting news items with foreign correspondents that might or might not be true. It also proposed sending e-mails to journalists and foreign leaders pushing the U.S. point of view or attacking enemies. The *Times* reported that The Rendon Group, a Washington-based public relations firm and a long-time

Pentagon communications contractor, was paid about \$100,000 a month to work with the new office. At the time, Rendon officials said they could not discuss their Pentagon contract, but Rendon officials later disputed that they had been hired to assist that office.²⁴ The *Chicago Tribune* reported that Rendon had been hired to track foreign news reports and advise on media strategy.²⁵

The formation of the Office of Strategic Influence alarmed some Pentagon public affairs officials. They were especially concerned that untruthful messages planted with journalists could damage the credibility of the United States and their own function. They were also concerned that false news items planted overseas could end up being read by a United States audience, a violation of laws that prohibit

domestic propaganda. Reaction in the press and in Congress was strong, and even though a Pentagon review found no actual plans to issue false stories, then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld closed the office.

In 2004, more media-related contracts for The Rendon Group raised controversy. Rendon had been awarded a \$1.4 million contract to give media advice to Afghan President Hamid Kharzai and his staff, but Kharzai, as well as Zalmay Khalilzad, then the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan,

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were said to be unhappy with the work and ended the contract after five months. Supporters of Rendon said the company had done a good job, but others disagreed. Not long after that, Rendon was hired by the DoD for \$3.9 million to do media work for Afghan anti-drug programs. The company was to train five Afghan press officers, but once again the contract caused controversy, as U.S. embassy officials in Kabul estimated that the work could have been performed for about \$200,000, according to a *Chicago Tribune* report. Still, Rendon's contract was extended for \$600,000 more.²⁶ From September 11, 2001 through 2010, Rendon was involved in 28 Pentagon contracts valued at \$66 million, according to a government contracting website, including one with the Joint Chiefs of Staff to do world-wide focus groups and analyses of foreign media outlets.²⁷ A Rendon spokesman said in an interview that his company might have participated in, but not owned, all those contracts.

Meanwhile, the *New York Times* reported that in 2004 Rendon partnered with a company named Iraqex, and they were awarded a \$5 million contract for an advertising and PR campaign to support the coalition in Iraq. Shortly afterward, Rendon left the partnership. Iraqex then changed its name to the Lincoln Group and sought more contracts—this time for information and psychological operations. In June 2005, the Lincoln Group was one of three contractors—SAIC and SYColeman were the other two—to win five-year contracts for up to \$100 million each to do psychological operations work for SOCOM, mainly TV and radio spots targeted at Iraqis.²⁸

According to Willem Marx, a former Lincoln Group employee, Lincoln was

already at work on the contract it had won with Rendon. Marx wrote in *Harpers* magazine that this contract involved getting pro-American and pro-coalition stories into the Iraqi press. (A Rendon spokesman said his company dropped out of the project because it did not agree with the Lincoln Group's plan for story placement.²⁹) Nonetheless, according to Marx and other reports, Lincoln Group employees worked alongside soldiers writing news and feature stories which they had translated into Arabic. They then paid newspapers from \$50 to more than \$2,000 to run the articles. Lincoln Group also recruited Iraqi journalists to write opinion pieces, for which they were paid \$400 to \$500 a month. The Lincoln Group acknowledged planting more than 1,000 stories in the Arab and Iraqi media. Some, written by U.S. soldiers, masqueraded as articles written by Iraqis.³⁰

Marx recounted one situation he found particularly ironic. The Lincoln Group proposed to hire Iraqi journalists and post them in the violent Anbar province to work closely with U.S. troops to report news that would bolster the U.S. image. Marx said he was tasked to find Iraqi op-ed writers to do this, and he went looking for prospects at the Baghdad Press Center, which was funded by the U.S. State Department “to provide Iraqi reporters with equipment and to train them in journalistic ethics and professional conduct.” And yet, Marx wrote, “we were hiring these same Iraqi reporters to work indirectly for the U.S. military.”³¹

When the *Los Angeles Times* broke the story in November 2005, members of Congress expressed outrage over the pay-for-placement plan. Edward Kennedy, the late Democratic senator from Massachusetts, called it “a devious scheme to place

favorable propaganda in Iraqi newspapers.” The mainstream media was incensed, as was the public relations press. An op-ed column in *PR Week* called it “government giving PR a bad name.”³² Some Iraqi journalists lamented the situation as well. “This is not right,” Faleh Hassan, an editor at the newspaper *Al Mutamar*, told the *Los Angeles Times*. “It reflects the tragic condition of journalism in Iraq. Journalism in Iraq is in very bad shape.”³³

The Pentagon investigated, and within six months cleared the Lincoln Group of wrongdoing, saying they had not breached military policy nor its contract. By July 2006, however, Special Operations Command discontinued its \$100 million contracts with the Lincoln Group and SAIC, two of its three contractors, to do the TV and radio spots. A SOCOM official said his command really only needed to work with one company, SYColeman.³⁴

One prominent non-profit media development organization, the International Research & Exchanges Board, or IREX, found itself stung by the scandal. An IREX executive said potential clients suddenly became suspicious of his organization, wondering if they had the same motives as the Lincoln Group. (Many of the non-profit media development implementers have not taken on projects funded by the U.S. Department of Defense.)

Despite the flap over its previous contract, on September 26, 2006, the Lincoln Group was awarded a two-year contract, worth between \$6.2 million and \$20 million, to provide media monitoring and training and advice for the Army’s Multi-National Forces Iraq (MNFI).³⁵ Efforts to speak with someone at the Lincoln Group were

unsuccessful. An official at a company that is also a U.S. government contractor, Strategic Social, said the Lincoln Group had changed its name to Fulcra Worldwide and had been acquired by Strategic Social. However, the official, Matt Tirman, director of corporate development, did not respond to a set of questions about the Lincoln Group or its contracts. By 2010, the Lincoln Group, which had once been highly visible and well-publicized, had taken down its website.

A slippery dividing line has developed in Iraq and Afghanistan between information operations, psychological operations, and, now, intelligence gathering. While most information and psychological operations contracts are written to provide outreach—leaflets, news stories, advertising, commercials, billboards—some clearly have turned that proposition on its head, using “reporters” to gather information to provide intelligence on the enemy.

For instance, Fulcra Worldwide (formerly the Lincoln Group) advertised on its website on February 28, 2010, for an “Information Operations Targeting Officer.” The job requires a Top Secret clearance and experience working with the U.S. military in Iraq. According to the website, the person’s job would be to “provide, plan, coordinate and synchronize Information Operations in support of efforts to capture wanted individuals and disrupt enemy networks as part of the unit’s mission of supporting Iraqi Security Forces.”³⁶

On March 25, 2010, Defense Secretary Gates ordered an investigation of the contracting activity associated with information operations.³⁷

On the Ground

Iraq

On January 16, 2003, two months before the invasion of Iraq, Pentagon planners issued a white paper and PowerPoint briefing that designed a way to create a post-Saddam independent Iraqi press network. “It will be as if, after another day of deadly agit-prop, the North Korean people turned off their TVs at night, and turned them on in the morning to find the rich fare of South Korean TV spread before them as their very own,” the paper stated.

To make this happen quickly the planners (some of whom were covertly arranging for the invasion of Iraq)³⁸ proposed the creation of a Rapid Reaction Media Team that would consist of hand-picked U.S. TV, radio, and newspaper experts and trainers, media experts from the United Kingdom, and Iraqi media experts.

According to the white paper, as soon as hostilities ended the team would deploy from Washington and “begin broadcasting and printing approved USG information to the Iraqi public.” Working with the US command in Baghdad, the team would be tasked to prepare two months of news and entertainment programming and create several editions of a new Iraqi newspaper. Suggested topics for stories provided by the planners were “Saddam’s Bomb-Maker,” mine awareness, de-Baathification, justice and the rule of law, a U.S. government-approved “Democracy Series,” and Hollywood and other entertainment news. A proposed budget included \$2 million for media consultants for six months and \$49 million more for transmitters, studios, and

microwave towers. The paper posited that the transition to an Iraqi representative government would take one to two years.³⁹

Within two months, the Rapid Reaction Media Team concept had shifted into something even more ambitious, the “Iraqi Free Media Project.” On March 11, the DoD awarded a \$15 million no-bid contract to SAIC. The purpose of the SAIC contract was to reconstitute the TV, radio, and newspapers that existed under Saddam into a new and independent media network. Robert Reilly, the former director of the Voice of America, was hired to be project director of the Iraqi Media Network (IMN). SAIC had no experience in media development, but it hired as consultants a number of journalists, among them Don North, an independent TV producer and former war correspondent. On April 10, the network broadcast its first radio announcement and its TV station went live on May 13. Seven months after that, North had quit, and not long after he was castigating the network before the Senate Democratic Policy Committee. Citing a litany of charges, he contended that the Iraqi Media Network had turned into an “irrelevant mouthpiece for Coalition Provisional Authority propaganda, managed news and mediocre programs.”

Network staff, he said, was ordered to cover endless Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) news conferences. The network bought old programs from established networks rather than creating new shows. Officials with “no credible television or journalism experience dictated plans and policy.” In short, North indicated,

the original plans for making the network into an Iraqi BBC or PBS utterly failed.⁴⁰

In a paper for the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, *New York Times* reporter David Rohde reported similar findings. He noted that the effort cost \$200 million over three years, and he declared it a “near total failure in its first year.” Rohde’s report covers the period from 2003 to mid-2005.⁴¹

The project in Iraq is significant because it represents the DoD’s one grandest effort to do post-conflict media development in the Middle East. Because the SAIC contract was open-ended, far more than its original \$15 million would be spent. Because the U.S. Defense Department was inexperienced in media development, some say, the project was far too ambitious: its goal was to create two TV channels, two radio channels, and a national newspaper, all within the span of a year. But North and others say the biggest problem

was one of institutional bias: neither the DoD nor the Coalition Provisional Authority could support truly independent reporting and publishing, especially at a time and place of violent conflict.

By the end of 2003, SAIC had spent \$82.3 million to establish what some characterized as being not much different from what had existed under Saddam Hussein—a state-controlled

media network. A September 2003 Gallup poll found Iraqis had little trust in IMN broadcasts: “The Iraqis know state-run TV when they see it,” an SAIC consultant told *U.S. News & World Report*.⁴²

On the U.S. end, the entire effort was questioned by at least some members of Congress who saw an overlap between the SAIC effort and that of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, which was spending \$100 million a year to broadcast into the Middle East over Radio Sawa and its satellite TV station, al-Hurra. “Everyone tells me they have separate missions, but I can’t get it through my thick skull what the difference is,” an aide to Senator Richard Lugar, Republican of Indiana, told *U.S. News*.

Because the U.S. Defense Department was inexperienced in media development, some say, the project was far too ambitious: its goal was to create two TV channels, two radio channels, and a national newspaper, all within the span of a year.

At the end of 2003, SAIC’s contract expired with the project considered unfinished, so the DoD put the media development contract out to bid. A one-year contract was awarded to Harris Communications for \$96 million. Harris formed a partnership

with the Christian-owned Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation, which would work to develop radio and TV content and reporting, and a Kuwaiti company, al-Fawares, which would work with the newspaper. While some criticism emerged over Harris’s stewardship of the contract, the consensus among experts was that Harris had made improvements, and polls showed that Iraqis had more confidence than earlier in the IMN TV station, Al Iraqiya.

In June 2004, the Coalition Provisional Authority was disbanded, and the interim Iraqi government took over the network. It extended Harris's contract for three more months for \$22 million. The end result of the work of Harris and SAIC was a bit less than what was originally envisioned. IMN wound up having one television outlet, Al Iraqiya, one radio station with two channels, and one newspaper, *Al Sabah*.

At the same time, while the U.S. was contracting to develop IMN, there occurred a private sector boom in media development.

At the time of Saddam Hussein's fall, there had been no truly independent radio, TV, or newspaper outlets, but soon after Saddam was toppled the media business exploded.

By 2009, there were about 100 magazines and newspapers, 55 privately-owned radio stations, and 28 private TV stations.⁴³ By all accounts, the private Iraqi media was (and still is) a wild mix of entertainment,

news—often politicized—and opinion, some of which posed problems for the CPA.

According to North, the video producer and IMN consultant, U.S. Army and Coalition Provisional Authority officials took umbrage at stories in the new Iraqi media they found offensive. "They visited the offices of offending newspaper and often left them padlocked and in ruins," he said. "No mediation, no appeal." North called the CPA's code of conduct, which bans "intemperate speech that could incite violence," a kind of "selective democracy," not dissimilar to the censorship of Saddam.⁴⁴

After Saddam was toppled, the media business exploded.

By 2009 there were about 100 magazines and newspapers, 55 privately-owned radio stations, and 28 private TV stations.

After the Coalition Provisional Authority was disbanded, USAID stepped in. In August 2004, it awarded a contract to a non-profit organization, America's Development Foundation, for a project called Iraq Civil Society and Independent Media. The award would run through June 2007 and the foundation would be paid \$57.1 million.⁴⁵ The program was broken into two parts, the civil society part and the independent media part, for which \$6 million was allocated. The foundation hired IREX, and paid it \$1.69 million for staffing, consulting, and training journalists and journalism business managers, and the foundation made other grants as well. The project as a whole

supported legal reforms, journalism advocacy, and free speech organizations to foster independent media.

IREX ran its training programs in several centers, including ones in Baghdad, Irbil, Najaf, and Basra. As much as possible, IREX used Iraqi trainers. Mark

Whitehouse, director of global media initiatives for IREX, estimates that his organization trained 4,000 people in 18 months. IREX also helped establish the National Iraqi News Agency (NINA), and the Reuters Foundation supported the creation of another news agency, Aswat al Iraq (Voices of Iraq.) The idea behind both of them was that with the boom in new Iraqi media, but with not many trained journalists or resources for reporting, there would be a need for content from professional independent news agencies.⁴⁶ IREX did this work under a grant for \$6 million.

IREX's funding from America's Development Foundation ran out in the fall of 2006, but it was awarded two more grants totaling \$13.5 million from the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL) for the Support for Independent Media Program. With the State Department grant, IREX's mandate changed also, and it switched from doing large group workshops to more focused and specialized journalism training. IREX also provided sub-grants to media outlets to do special election programming, TV talk shows, and radio call-in shows. "People came to us who said they had something they wanted to do, could we help them fund it," Whitehouse said. His organization began to put more emphasis on aspects of media law and advocacy and providing legal defense for journalists, even medical care for injured journalists. IREX has one more \$8.5 million grant from the State Department through 2012 for its Media and Technology for Community Development project. About \$5 million of that will go to media development in Iraq.

Other than the massive IMN effort, it appears that the DoD alone did not do extensive development work with Iraqi media. Apparently some civil affairs officers were tasked with working with Iraqi media. For instance, a researcher at Columbia University in an unpublished paper described an interview with a military reporter for the Armed Forces Network who deployed to help Iraqi journalists learn TV editing and rebuild their TV station's looted infrastructure. However, the researcher wrote that she had trouble tracking the extent of such efforts because such duties do not fall into any single category of military operations.⁴⁷

Mostly, it seems, the military's work with the media was designed to obtain favorable press coverage. "Unfortunately, other than using limited psychological operations (PSYOP) resources and capabilities, the GOI [Government of Iraq] and the coalition have allotted scant attention, effort, and capital to communicating with Iraqis," three Army officers wrote in the July-August 2008 issue of *Military Review*. They went on to describe the media initiatives taken by Task Force Marne, the unit responsible for the northern sector of Iraq, as an example of what others could be doing. They wrote that Marne set up an Iraqi Media Section (IMS) to capitalize on Iraqi media capabilities and "the advantages of using them." As of the *Military Review's* article's writing, the IMS had "translated over 300 'good news' articles into Arabic and disseminated them," as the IMS had established contacts with 11 radio stations, 27 newspapers, and a number of websites. In addition, it had "signed an exclusive contract with the popular *Al Sabah* newspaper" that guaranteed that "high priority" Task Force Marne stories are circulated to its audience. The stories always carried task force attribution.

The officers described the hard work involved in doing "battlefield circulations," that is, escorting Iraqi reporters and cameramen, with translators, out to "stories that the coalition wants highlighted." The benefit of this, they pointed out, was "putting an Iraqi face on the story," which was much more effective among Iraqis than if a coalition reporter told the story. And having local government representatives present during the event only increased the impact. The authors concluded: "Stories of reconstruction, partnership and progress show Iraqis that there is more transpiring in Iraq than combating insurgents."⁴⁸

As in Afghanistan, the U.S. government created Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Iraq that work out of military bases to do projects for local communities. A PRT typically consisted of personnel from DoD, State, USAID, and perhaps other agencies. The PRTs did work with some established media outlets and conferred with IREX about journalism training for them, Whitehouse said. They also provided funding for some fledgling magazines or newspapers whose focus was anti-insurgent, democracy, and civil and human rights. While those papers seemed politically correct, he said, their stories did not appear to have been spoon-fed by the PRTs. And in dealing with the PRTs, it was often not clear which of their components—the DoD, State, or USAID—were behind a project.

Whitehouse said that IREX had no actual collisions with DoD, the military, or its contractors in Iraq, but he did discuss three issues related to the military’s media work.

First, he argued that following the fall of Saddam the United States had no comprehensive media development policy for Iraq. The only policy was to build IMN, which would become, in effect, a state-run media network. He offered that he never would have taken on the project to build IMN as did SAIC and Harris. For starters, Whitehouse said, the project was just too ambitious—to create two TV outlets, two radio stations, and a newspaper in a single year. It is his view that the IMN project was approached fundamentally in the wrong

way, as an infrastructure project—rebuilding broadcast stations and newspapers and not focusing on the quality of journalism.

Perhaps more important, he said, “DoD is, in my opinion, not the right contractor for media development. They have psyops needs . . . and media development is a very different thing.”

A second issue was money. It bothers him that so much was needed to be done for media in Iraq, and yet more than \$200 million was spent just on IMN. “I just can’t understand how that much money was

needed or used to build effectively what they were hoping would be a public broadcast network for a country that size.”

Whitehouse compared the money spent on building IMN’s one TV station, two radio channels, and one newspaper with what the Iraq Civil Society and Independent Media project did to train journalists from all the other private-

sector media outlets. “Do the math, they spent several hundred million dollars over a couple of years for IMN,” he said, “and we came in and spent roughly \$6 million on a media development program to cover Iraq. So just put them side by side.”

If there ever was hope for the Iraq Media Network (IMN) to become another BBC or NPR, it has not been fulfilled. IMN went from being viewed as a mouthpiece for the Coalition Provisional Authority to being tightly under the control of the Iraqi

“DoD is, in my opinion, not the right contractor for media development. They have psyops needs . . . and media development is a very different thing.”

— Mark Whitehouse, director of global media initiatives for IREX

government. Some have even criticized it for serving as a propaganda tool for Iraq's Shiite politicians. Interestingly, a survey commissioned by IREX and released in April 2010 found that only 21 percent of Iraqis overall trust the IMN TV station, Al Iraqiya, as a news source. In Kurdish northern Iraq fewer than 5 percent find it trustworthy; in Sunni-inhabited central Iraq 15 percent trust it, but in Shiite-dominated southern Iraq viewers' trust of Al Iraqiya rises to 44 percent. (The overall trust level of the satellite TV outlet al-Hurra, which is U.S.-based and U.S.-sponsored, was found to be 20 percent.)⁴⁹ IMN's newspaper *Al Sabah* has also suffered from government pressure and interference.⁵⁰

"I would say the whole IMN project was a failure in the end, and what it did was use a lot of money that could have been put to better use in a diversified media development program," Whitehouse said. "It is rather interesting that the United States, of all countries, supported the development of a state-run newspaper, which is, I think, the first time we've done that."

DoD's work in the media field created one other headache for IREX. When it was revealed in 2005 that the Lincoln Group had paid Iraqi newspapers to run stories it had written that were favorable to the coalition forces, IREX felt the effect, particularly in the Middle East. IREX's clients and potential trainees started asking questions, such as, "What's the difference between what the Lincoln Group is doing and what you are doing? Who's your real funder? What are your real intentions?" He said, "It just creates an atmosphere which makes it difficult to be taken legitimately and gives ammunition to those who are opposed to this involvement with media development."

Afghanistan

The media development picture for Afghanistan is quite different from the one for Iraq, mainly because the DoD did not attempt a massive construction of a state-run media operation. Instead, more work has been done both by the DoD and by non-governmental organizations hired by USAID to create small local media operations. There have been some clashes between what the DoD is doing and what USAID is attempting to do there, though in some cases their efforts may also complement each other.

Spending on media and communications in Afghanistan has followed the funding pattern for Iraq, with budgets in the hundreds of millions of dollars. According to one report, the director of communications for U.S. Forces in Afghanistan operates with an annual budget of about \$100 million for information operations. That includes \$30 million for psychological operations, \$30 million for reporting on local issues, \$10 million for public affairs, and \$30 million for other programs.⁵¹ One chart accompanying the DoD's 2011 budget shows CENTCOM, which is running the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, spending \$375 million in 2010 for information operations. The Air Force, under CENTCOM, and Special Operations Command's Overseas Contingency Operations have an additional \$108 million for information operations.⁵²

In his paper for the Shorenstein Center, David Rohde chronicled the building of independent media in Afghanistan through 2005. There, unlike in Iraq, multiple countries funded numerous media development projects run by various nongovernmental agencies. For

the Americans, the task of revitalizing the country's state-run broadcast system, Afghan Television and Radio, or RTA, fell to the Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) within USAID. OTI awarded a grant to Internews, an international media development organization, to train the journalists at Afghan Television and Radio, but OTI was frustrated by the stodgy atmosphere of the formerly Soviet-run broadcasting network. The BBC trust and other Europeans took over that effort, and OTI moved on.

OTI decided to focus on two parallel efforts in Afghanistan. One was the creation of many small, independent, local radio stations. The common denominator was that the stations would serve the information and discussion needs of communities across Afghanistan, from large centers such as Jalalabad, Mazar-i-Sharif, and Herat to medium-sized provincial centers such as Khost and Bamyan to remote provincial centers such as Nili. By March 2010, Internews officials said, they had helped Afghans create a network of 41 local, independent radio stations, including three repeaters, which rebroadcast weak signals from other stations, at an estimated cost of \$6 million. The stations' staffs are trained to manage themselves and produce their own programming as well as broadcast a national feed produced by Internews for local stations.⁵³

Much of that project involved training. Internews says it trained more than 5,000 journalists to work at the radio stations and elsewhere, and OTI provided training for 1,200 more. When the Afghan media development organization known as Nai was established by Internews Europe with European Union funding in 2005,

Nai partnered with Internews to do more training and mentoring of journalists. The training covered such diverse subjects as basic journalism, radio production, media management, investigative journalism, and media law. Perhaps most important, the trainers trained other trainers, so that most training is now done by Afghans.

By 2005, OTI had funded 132 media projects for \$14.6 million. Most of those projects were small, and they created an atmosphere of cooperation and enthusiasm for media development among the non-profits and the Afghans.⁵⁴

The other half of the USAID effort was the support of an Afghan family of entrepreneurs, the brothers Saad, Jahid, and Zaid Mohseni, as well as their sister Wajma, who had been expatriates living in Australia but had returned to create commercial radio and television outlets based in Kabul. They launched Tolo TV, Lemar TV, and Arman FM, and went on to build a \$20 million business that includes a music company, an ad agency, a TV and movie production company, and Internet cafes. USAID seeded the original radio and TV projects with a \$2.2 million grant. It was the hope of USAID that these commercial stations would create pressure on RTA to improve its service and quality. Other commercial stations sprung up as well; the Afghan Ministry of Communications and Information Technology says there are now 31 private television channels and 93 radio stations in Afghanistan.⁵⁵ Much of this, however, has come about because of U.S. support. Saad Mosheni told *The New Yorker* in 2010 that he expects the U.S. will spend \$140 million over the following three years on media development, advertising, training, and programming.⁵⁶

Unlike Iraq, where the DoD contracted to re-build the Baathist Iraqi media network even before its invasion, the Pentagon was late to the media wars in Afghanistan. U.S. government officials say the first broadcasts they noticed that could be attributed to the U.S. military were those of an AM station called Radio Peace in mid-2004. Radio Peace was an AM signal broadcast in Dari and Pashtun, containing mainly pro-government and anti-opium poppy messaging and some music. It still broadcasts nationwide, but it has been judged to be ineffective because local Afghans are astute at identifying propaganda. According to one U.S. government worker, its anti-opium broadcasts also put local government officials in a delicate position of presenting themselves as partners of the United States while not alienating local farmers and leaders who were heavily involved in the drug trade.⁵⁷

Though the efforts apparently were not concerted, there were other instances of U.S. military involvement in media work. Jack Holt, a senior strategist for emerging media at the Pentagon assigned to Afghanistan, said he worked with a unit that was trying to teach the Afghan Ministry of Defense how and why to communicate with their citizens. He said they had made some progress before the effort was abandoned following a U.S. change of command. He also described a later effort in which the Afghan government spokesman's office was trying to train the Afghan media on how to report.⁵⁸

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Wally Dean, a former news assignment manager for CBS News and director of training at the Committee of Concerned Journalists, recalled a discussion with a senior officer at a strategic communications conference in which the officer talked about the difficulty of sustaining a newspaper his unit had supported in Afghanistan. As long as the U.S. military subsidized the paper, it could run, he said, but Dean pointed out that the military had created a subsidy model, not a business model. "I told them, your job may be to train ad salesmen," he said. It was clear, Dean said, that they had not anticipated that would be part of their mission.⁵⁹

Internews, for its part, was working to build local radio stations that could survive once their support was withdrawn. In doing so, it bumped up against American PRTs, similar to the PRTs in Iraq. In Afghanistan, they were made up of representatives from the DoD, State, USAID, and sometimes U.S. Agriculture or the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). The teams operate out of remote bases set up all across Afghanistan. The PRTs are tasked to reach out to local residents to determine their needs and help fill them—whether digging a well, building a school, or teaching farmers to plant crops as alternatives to poppies. Sometimes the agencies worked together, but often they worked separately. The idea was to create high-impact, low-cost community projects to consolidate the government's hold on a locale or push development progress forward.

New media: fortress or battlefield?

In the post-September 11 world, and as the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan progressed, it became eminently clear to military leaders that the enemy—usually defined as radical Muslim fundamentalists—was uniquely adept at using the Internet to attract new members and support, to raise funds, and to attack the United States and the West. The U.S. Government came to realize that it was losing the PR war, and that it desperately needed to use the Internet to project a positive image of the American military and to counter the claims of skeptics and the enemy.

“We are miserable at communicating to the rest of the world what we are about as a society and a culture, about freedom and democracy, about our politics and our goals. It is just plain embarrassing that al-Qaeda is better at communicating its message on the Internet than America,” Defense Secretary Robert Gates said in a speech in November 2007.¹ Fourteen months later he made the same point on the Charlie Rose TV show: “How did we end up in a place where the country that invented public relations ended up being outcommunicated by a guy in a cave?”²

Congress is concerned as well. In a May 2010 report, the House Armed Services Committee wrote, “the committee is concerned that while extremist groups are becoming increasingly more sophisticated in their use of the Internet, the U.S. Government has been slow to mobilize an effective counter-response to the proliferation of extremist websites that are used for recruiting, training, propaganda, and fundraising.”³

Among the agencies slow to mobilize was the DoD. One reason was natural military conservatism towards allowing soldiers and DoD employees to speak freely in public, another was its concern for the security of its computer systems, and a third was the prohibition against creating internet propaganda that could be read by U.S. citizens. It was not until June 2007 that a policy memorandum for Internet use was signed by then-Deputy Secretary of Defense Gordon England. It was titled Policy for Department of Defense Internet Interactive Activities. Its purpose was to provide authority and guidance for Internet communications—that is, e-mail, blogs, Internet chat rooms, and bulletin boards. It delegated authority for such activities down to the regional combatant commanders.⁴ The underlying idea was that one way to battle extremists on the internet is to let soldiers and sailors tell their stories.

In practice, some military blogging already was underway. In March 2006, CENTCOM announced that it would begin to engage bloggers who were “posting inaccurate or untrue information” to get them to visit its CENTCOM website. In January 2009, the Air Force announced a “counter-blog” plan aimed at bloggers who have “negative opinions about the U.S. government and the Air Force.” It created a list of options for airmen to deal with misguided blog offerings. They include ignoring the blog, or creating a factual and well-cited response—always disclosing one’s Air Force connection.⁵

In August 2009, the U.S. Marine Corps called a halt to its employees’ and Marines’ practices of visiting or using social sites such as Facebook and Twitter, calling them a potential security threat.

Then, in February 2010, the floodgates were opened. Under a new DoD-wide directive, personnel with unclassified computers that use the “dot-mil” signature were allowed to visit social media websites such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and MySpace. The Pentagon policy, which reversed a three-year ban on such activities, reflected the reality that such sites are increasingly used for informational and official uses. Bandwidth and security concerns remain, but officials said they expected DoD employees to act responsibly.

The changes really began in late 2006 when the DoD created an Office of Emerging Media, said Holt, senior strategist in that office. The office took note of the progression from old media to new media to social media, and saw a sea change in how people communicate and how they get news. In early 2007, Holt recalled, CENTCOM had tried to get news about a successful battle in Iraq into the mainstream media only to see it overtaken by non-stop coverage of the death of celebrity Anna Nicole Smith. Frustrated by an apparent inability to communicate what they saw as significant information, Holt's group decided to try something new: They created a Bloggers' Roundtable. They reached out to a group of military affairs bloggers, and set them up with long-distance phone calls to commanders in the field. The bloggers then wrote about what they learned, and their blogs linked to a transcript provided by DoD. Holt said it was an immediate success, in that it helped widen understanding of current military matters and informed the public debate. And in some cases the news media picked up on the blogged information and turned it into mainstream news stories. The individual services, commands, and military bases have now created blogging platforms as well.

A foray by the U.S. Army into Facebook, however, did not go as smoothly. When the Army attempted to create an official Army Facebook page, it discovered that there were already scores of Army Facebook pages (one source said 60), none of them owned or created by the Army. The Army began a laborious process of working with Facebook to contact the owners of those pages to try to get them taken down. Some willingly gave them up, some were not so willing, and some were closed by Facebook because they had broken their terms of agreement. Holt said the Army eventually worked out a process of official site certification. A recent search for "U.S. Army" sites on Facebook found seemingly official ones for the Army, Special Operations Command, Army Rangers, and Fort Benning but also a number of other "U.S. Army" sites that obviously were not official or sanctioned.

Clearly, the military's movement into the world of new media is a work in progress. Holt says the new policy directive that allows military and DoD personnel to visit social media sites had to happen: "Number one, troops are going to be doing it anyway and you're not going to stop it. And number two, if you're not out there, you don't know that they're doing it, you don't know what they are saying, and you can't really judge what the strategic communication effects could be to having your own place there."

Holt said a question posed in DoD discussions has set the tone for the new environment. The question was, "How do we view our place on the Internet? Is this a fortress to be defended, or a field of maneuver?" He believes "our children, our adversaries, and businesses look at this as a field of maneuver. And we lose a lot if we don't."⁶

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- 1 Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, Landon Lecture, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, November 26, 2007, <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1199>
 - 2 Walter Pincus, "Pentagon Chief Sees Opportunities in Russia and the War on Terrorism," *The Washington Post*, January 5, 2009.
 - 3 Committee on Armed Services, U.S. House of Representatives, Report on H.R. 5136, number 111-491, May 21, 2010, page 348.
 - 4 Daniel Silverberg and Joseph Heiman, *An Ever-Expanding War; Legal Aspects of Online Strategic Communication*, Parameters, September 2009, 4, <http://www.carlisle.army.mil/usawc/parameters/09summer/>
 - 5 Steve Watson, "Air Force Creates 'Counter Blog' Response Plan to Quell Online Dissent," *Infowars.net*, January 9, 2009, <http://www.infowars.net/articles/january2009/090109bloggers.htm>
 - 6 Jack Holt, senior strategist for emerging media, U.S. Department of Defense, in interview with author, March 16, 2010.

According to officials from the U.S. government and Internews, the PRTs began to see some of the local stations set up by Internews, and other independent stations as well, as potential broadcasters for their messages. They approached them offering to pay \$1,000 a month, and sometimes much more, if the station would broadcast their programming. Stations which had been established to operate on a shoestring budget to improve their chances of sustainability found it hard to pass up the money.

Among the U.S. military classified documents leaked to WikiLeaks and published July 25, 2010, are several that refer to PRTs paying Afghan radio stations to run psychological operations programming and announcements. For instance, one intelligence memo dated November 5, 2006, reports the delivery of “12 hours of PSYOP Radio Content Programming” to Radio Ghaznwyan and Radio Ghazni, and the paying of Radio Ghaznwyan \$3,900 for air time in October. Another memo dated August 14, 2007, reports on a meeting between PRT, Special Operations personnel, and Panjshir Radio representatives to discuss the purchase of \$6,000 worth of air time to “transmit coalition and IRoA [Islamic Republic of Afghanistan] messages/information operations.” Another refers to “renewal of the contracts” at a radio station in Balkh Province. The memos indicate that the PRTs considered such contracts a way to develop and support local radio. The Panjshir Radio memo, for instance, states, “the agreement represents capital for the new radio station where the Radio Board can purchase new equipment and improve programming through the revenue gains.”⁶⁰ Internews officials said the PRTs also encouraged provincial journalists to train with Nai, and worked with Internews on technical and licensing matters.

However, one U.S. government official argued, to the extent that the stations ran U.S. government programming purchased by the PRTs, the stations lost the trust of their audience. Getting their credibility back will be very difficult, the source said.⁶¹ A report by Media Support Solutions, which surveyed Afghans on their trust of various media, made a similar finding: “Even though BBC, VOA and RFE remain absolute references [among Afghans] for the accuracy and the impartiality of the news ... all interviewees expressed their distrust of local radio stations, claiming that these stations were totally under foreign influence, having to depend on their funding and relay their messages.” It quoted one influential elder in Uruzgan province: “I do not believe 1% of what radio Nawa [a local independent station] announces; all the programs are propaganda, nothing useful.”⁶²

Internews officials, however, disagree. They say the independent stations are much in tune with their communities, and their managers are trained to make business and programming decisions that are highly appropriate. “All I can say is that we’re aware of plenty of examples where stations are valued by their communities,” wrote one Internews official in an e-mail. (Under the ground rules of the interviews, Internews staff could not be identified by name.) Internews encourages stations to identify the source of all programming, he said, especially the sources of paid content, and the officials note that after many years of hearing propaganda, Afghans know when they are being messaged. They said, however, that the paying of relatively large amounts of money to the stations has distorted the economy within which they operate, as they are designed to be low cost operations—with budgets of no

more than \$1,000 a month—to cope with the low expected revenue in such a poor country.⁶³ A U.S. government official said there had been a backlash to the PRTs buying radio time on the local stations and that some had since backed off.⁶⁴

It is worth noting that PRT and information operations efforts were not limited to local radio. The intelligence reports and memos leaked to WikiLeaks reflect a broad range of attempts to inject U.S.-friendly messaging into national radio, TV, and newspapers.

One memo, from October 2007, describes the scene following an incident where a man friendly to the coalition was praying with his family in a mosque when they were fired upon by Taliban fighters. When a reporter from Ariana Television in Kabul showed up, “we were able to send the journalist in with our cultural advisers to speak to the elders,” the U.S. soldier wrote. “The story will be aired on the Ariana Television Network,” he reported. “We will also run the oral interviews over the radio stations in Mohammad Agha and Baraki Barak, in addition to a print story that will run in the Wardak newspaper.”⁶⁵

Perhaps the most prevalent media tool now being used by the U.S. military in Afghanistan is the so-called RIAB, or “radio in a box.” A RIAB is a low-power radio transmission kit—a transmitter, a microphone, and an antenna—that can be set up anywhere quickly and easily. They are typically established on forward or remote bases, inside the base perimeter, and used to

broadcast out to the local community. One or more local announcers may be hired, or the broadcasting may be done by the base translation team. The fare often consists of news, commentary, and music. The consensus among media developers working in Afghanistan is that there are roughly 70 such RIABs now operating in Afghanistan. Some of them argue that the RIAB stations are popular, especially in communities which previously had no radio, but a trickier question is whether the messaging from the station is trusted. Most observers say, and surveys confirm, that Afghans are very sophisticated consumers of media. On the one hand, they would trust messages that are identified as coming from the U.S. military, such as instructions on what to do if one is in a car and a military convoy approaches, but for general news and information, the picture is murkier. The consensus of media developers on the ground is that because the RIABs and their messaging are controlled by the U.S. military they are unlikely to gain the same credibility as the BBC or VOA.

The radio stations on military bases do have the potential, however, of connecting with the local communities—to do outreach, take phone calls, do talk radio, and invite locals leaders on to speak or debate. Internews officials say the RIABs do not pose a threat to their own network of 41 stations, and in 2010 Internews started working with PRTs to investigate some possible transitions of RIABs to independent stations. In the meantime, one U.S. government source offered, there might be room in some

Perhaps the most prevalent media tool now being used by the U.S. military in Afghanistan is the so-called RIAB, or “radio in a box.”

communities for two radio stations—one aligned with the U.S. and Afghan government and one run by local citizens.

Separately, in early 2007, the network of independent stations received a serious scare—from a company that appeared to have ties or contracts with the DoD. According to Ivan Sigal, who was then Internews’ regional director for Central Asia and Afghanistan, the episode involved an Afghan company called Cetena Group, a newly-formed advertising and marketing firm based in Kabul. Sigal and other Internews officials say that stations within their network (along with an industry group established with Internews support—the Afghan Independent Radio Association) were approached by Cetena asking for an exclusive relationship with the stations for \$1,000 a month each. The contract would have not only given Cetena exclusive rights for placement and revenue from all advertising and public service messaging, but also would have prohibited the stations from broadcasting an Internews-produced radio show, Salam Watandar (Hello, Countrymen), a daily national service that includes news, current events, sports, agriculture, religious, and women’s and children’s programming. It also forbade them from broadcasting other network programming from other sources. Some stations, attracted by the money, signed the contracts.

“Internews is alarmed by what seems to be a simple takeover strategy of Cetena to secure the network of stations and Salam

“Stations are at risk to become just psyops messengers because that’s where the high income potential is at the moment. Stations may lose their integrity as a result.”

— *Internews official*

Watandar as an income-generating vehicle for them, a vehicle for commercial and psyops campaigns,” Internews officials wrote in a briefing paper. “Stations are at risk to become just psyops messengers because that’s where the high income potential is at the moment. Stations may lose their integrity as a result.”

Sigal says that he attempted to find out where Cetena was getting its funding for this offer—the amounts involved came close to \$500,000—and all paths led to the Pentagon. USAID and State Department officials knew nothing about Cetena, he said.

Eventually, non-DoD officials working with Sigal reported they had traced the funding source to Bagram Air Force base, a contracting office known as CJTF-82, and a \$22 million contract being tendered for an anti-improvised explosive device campaign. But, Sigal said, they never did find the contracting officer or see a Cetena contract.

Finally, Sigal’s complaints to the State Department and USAID led him to a meeting in Washington in late 2007. There, in a room with about two-dozen people, some who identified themselves and some who did not, he laid out his complaint. “They collectively said, ‘We’ll take care of it,’ and they did,” Sigal said. USAID officials later told Internews that Cetena was standing down on its exclusivity offer.⁶⁶

Still, one U.S. government official said that Cetena continues to present itself as

the agent for purchasing advertising on the Internews stations—at least to the DoD. A search of DoD contract databases turned up two U.S. Army contracts for Cetena Group, one for \$13.4 million, which it apparently shared with other unnamed contractors. Its website identifies it as an Afghan-owned and run strategic communications firm with “extensive experience running local and national media campaigns” founded in 2005 and employing 400 full-time people. It says it has national media networks in radio, TV, and print spanning the entire country, and is a full-service media and marketing firm.⁶⁷ Several attempts to contact Cetena officials through emails went unanswered.

In 2008, Cetena Group protested a U.S. Army contract won by the Lincoln Group under the Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization (JIEDDO) campaign. The award was for a variety of media work, including newspaper, radio, and TV ads and messages; flyers; posters; and billboards, all designed to reduce support among the population for the makers of improvised explosive devices. Cetena bid \$17.8 for the contract, Lincoln bid \$14.3 million, but Cetena claimed Lincoln’s bid was defective in that it did not contain a plan to disseminate newspaper ads, and that Cetena was fully Afghan-owned while Lincoln was American-owned. In reviewing the protest, the Government Accountability Office concurred with the Army that the Lincoln contract had been fairly awarded, noting that Lincoln’s bid was \$3.5 million lower.⁶⁸

Other theaters

In the past two decades, the U.S. State Department, USAID and its Office of Transition Initiatives, and various non-profits they have hired, have undertaken

media training and development projects in more than two dozen countries from Bosnia to Uganda and Nigeria to East Timor. The work has encompassed such media development activities as training journalists and media business managers, funding legal groups to support journalists, providing grants to small media outlets to increase their number and variety, and supporting media and government watchdogs.

The U.S. military does not appear to be actively involved with media, except in situations where it has intervened or has been part of an international intervention force (Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan) or where it has quietly been invited to assist a government to counter terrorists or insurgencies. Nonetheless, since it is Pentagon policy to use information operations to help prevent conflict, as well as to quell it, there are indicators that the DoD is running such operations in many areas of potential conflict around the world. U.S. government sources outside of DoD mentioned Iran, Yemen, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Mali as past or current theaters for psychological or information operations. Yet, IREX, whose international media development work includes projects in Jordan, Egypt, and Lebanon and which has also worked in Yemen, Bahrain, and Algeria, has not run across DoD operations in those countries, according to Whitehouse. The Defense Department did not answer several requests to identify countries where the military was doing information and media operations. A congressional report issued in December 2006 that explored the widening presence of the military in embassies worldwide noted the creation of Military Information Support Teams (MIST) and their deployment to embassies in 18 countries, with plans to

expand their reach to 30, and said the military operations had created some friction with embassy personnel.

U.S. Army Field Manual FM 90-29 describes a MIST as a “rapidly deployable, mission-tailored team” with the following capabilities: a “mini AM/FM radio station, a 1 kilowatt TV station, modest newspaper or leafleting capacity, and three to six tactical loudspeaker teams.” It can deploy on one C-141 aircraft.⁶⁹

As an example of embassy-DoD disagreement, the congressional report cited a situation in Mali where the military support team wanted a video that the embassy was producing to feature a local moderate Muslim cleric. The embassy staff vetoed the idea, arguing that if the cleric were shown supporting the United States it would taint him among his people.⁷⁰

Mali, apparently, has been a sort of test-bed of embassy-military relations. Before the creation of U.S. Africa Command in October 2008, the European Command had jurisdiction over Africa. According to a U.S. government source, the European Command, concerned about terrorist activity by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb on Mali’s border with Algeria, approached the U.S. embassy in Mali with the idea of installing FM transmitters throughout the country to broadcast messages from the United States. The idea was even supported by officials at the Voice of

America, who thought that whatever else was broadcast, the project could provide a platform for more VOA programming.

The embassy resisted the idea, the source says, because it was opposed to involving the military in such a widespread project across the country and didn’t want to lose control of the transmitters. An August 2009 report by the State Department’s Inspector General (IG) refers to friction between the DoD and embassy personnel in Africa. The report, which detailed numerous and serious weaknesses in the State Department’s Africa Bureau, also noted the difficulties that emerged as the DoD tried to establish an independent Africa Command: “the activation and role of the command was misunderstood at best, if not resented and challenged” by the Africa Bureau. DoD’s idea of locating the command center in Africa was opposed by numerous African nations, so the command ultimately ended up in Stuttgart, Germany, where its original parent command, the European Command, is located.

“There continues to be some public and considerable internal debate about the wisdom of military funding of U.S. developmental and public diplomacy activities in Africa,” the report noted. Regarding the Military Information Support Teams, however, the IG’s findings are more sanguine, terming the program “an established military practice of working closely with embassy public affairs officers to develop and fund effective programs.”⁷¹

A World-Wide Web

On September 3, 2009, the Special Operations Command awarded a \$10.1 million contract, renewable annually, to General Dynamics Information Technology to set up and run news and information websites aimed at foreign audiences in various regions. The effort was dubbed by the Pentagon the Trans Regional Web Initiative, or TRWI. Sites that are up and running include:

- www.infosurhoy.com targets audiences in Latin America and the Caribbean. It says its goal is to offer accurate, balanced, and forward-looking coverage of the region, and that its news, analysis, commentary, and interviews come from paid InfoSurHoy correspondents and contributors. It offers translations to Spanish, Portuguese, and English. The featured news stories on the homepage are generally positive and upbeat. Like all the TRWI sites, it states, in the About Us section, that it is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Defense, in this case U.S. Southern Command.
- www.centralasiaonline.com is aimed at Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, as well as Pakistan and Afghanistan. Its home page strives to carry at least one story from each of these countries, and the site is offered in Russian, English, Farsi, and Urdu. The About Us section says the site is sponsored by U.S. Central Command “to highlight movement toward greater regional stability.”
- www.al-shorfa.com has as its intended audience the Persian Gulf States. It is offered in English and Arabic. Its anti-

insurgency and pro-human rights messaging appears stronger than the other sites, as seen from some headlines one afternoon: “All the resources of the Taliban come from illegal methods,” “Jordanian women are still struggling to get important rights,” and “Iraqis celebrating the deaths of two terrorist leaders.” The site says it is sponsored by U.S. Central Command and, among other things, “endeavors to disrupt terrorist activities in the region.”

- www.mawtani.com is aimed at Iraqis. Mawtani is the Iraqi national anthem and it means “my homeland.” Recently its home page featured 10 news stories with photos showing female singers in slinky gowns and men in western dress. The lead story, as on the al-Shorfa site, was about Iraqis celebrating the deaths of two terrorist leaders. Regarding one, Abu Ayyub al-Masri, the story declared his “death was a final blow to al Qaeda in Iraq.”
- www.setimes.com, or *Southeast Times*, is a news and information site covering southeastern Europe. It is the oldest of the sites, whose origins date to American Internet efforts to counter Serbian nationalist messages in Kosovo. It was set up as a news site in 2002 and remade in March 2005. It lists 11 countries on its navigation bar, and offers 10-20 recent news stories for each, readable in any of 10 languages. The stories are either written by *Southeast Times* reporters or culled from a number

of U.S. and European news services. The site says it is sponsored by the U.S. European Command and that its goal is to offer “accurate, balanced and forward-looking coverage of developments in Southeast Europe.” On any day, it offers from 100 to 200 news stories from the region, and the coverage appears balanced between “good” and “bad” news.

- www.magharebia.com targets the northern tier of Africa—Morocco, Tunisia, Mauritania, Libya, and Algeria. It projects a strong feminist and anti-terrorist point of view, with such offerings as “Gender differences fading in Maghreb kitchens” and “Tribute to many in the Maghreb Saudi fatwa condemning terrorism.” The site declares that it is sponsored by the U.S. Africa Command.

In the Pentagon’s 2011 budget request, the funding line that supports these six websites, with two more possibly to be added for the Pacific and European Commands, also funds a group six regional magazines: *Diálogo* (Southern Command), *African Defense Forum* (Africa Command), *Asia-Pacific Defence Forum* (Pacific Command), *Agora* (Northern Command), *Perconcordium* (European Command), and *Unipath* (Central Command). Some of these magazines, like *Diálogo*, a professional magazine for military forces in Latin America, have been published for years. Others, such as *Unipath*, are new. Lockheed Martin, the defense contractor, is currently advertising for several editors for this magazine “contingent upon contract award.” All eight websites and

six magazines are listed in the 2011 budget as psychological operations activities.⁷²

Some individuals in government and media have raised their eyebrows at these sites, voicing a preference that the U.S. government should not be represented on the global scene by media that obviously take their cues from information or psychological operations. Their preference is that the U.S. be represented only by icons like the Voice of America or Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, or their sisters Radio Sawa and al-Hurra television, which broadcast to the Middle East. They argue that those organizations have a long tradition of presenting news and information according to strict standards of journalism, including presenting opposing sides of a story, and are overseen by the Broadcasting Board of Governors, which insists on such rigor. One official at the Voice of America who deals with foreign embassies and the Defense Department, and who asked not to be identified, called the websites “insidious,” because with them the Defense Department had positioned itself as a legitimate provider of news and information. “And I think that is where the danger lies,” the source said.⁷³

Even some Pentagon officials have been skeptical. In late 2005, the DoD’s Inspector General concluded that the two websites that existed then, *Southeast Times* and *Magharebia*, did not violate U.S. law or Pentagon policy. Still, Larry DiRita, at the time the Defense Department’s chief spokesman, was dubious. “We have a lot of skilled people, a lot of energy, and a lot of money,” he said. “But I question whether the DoD is the best place to be doing these things.”⁷⁴

Blurred lines

Prodded by Congress, which must approve its budgets and activities, and by its own internal needs for clarity, the DoD has published several reports and papers over the years that attempt to define and distinguish between strategic communication, information operations, and psychological operations. One, produced in March 2010, defines strategic communication as “the coordination and integration of a wide range of capabilities that are designed to affect perceptions and behavior in a manner that supports U.S. objectives.”⁷⁵ Information Operations, on the other hand, is narrower: where Stratcom supports national objectives, information operations supports military objectives. Information operations is also “driven by military commanders” and targets adversary decision-making to “influence, disrupt, corrupt or usurp” it. Psychological operations, a subset, is a “military capability.”

Psychological operations are “planned operations to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups and individuals.” The DoD also says that psychological operations must be “truthful”—it “must be credible to be effective.” It’s worth noting that, in places, the 2003 Information Operations Roadmap carried more aggressive language. That document says the purpose of psychological operations should be “support to military endeavors

(exercises, deployments, operations)” in hostile environments, and its focus should be “on aggressive behavior modification at the operational and tactical level of war.”⁷⁶ Indeed, a review of Pentagon reports and directives of the past decade reveals numerous attempts to define and re-define these concepts. Even the March 2010 report notes that the Department is still evaluating existing psychological operations definitions and acknowledges that strategic operations itself is an “evolving concept.”⁷⁷

One reason these definitions are important is that Congress must approve the budgets for Pentagon activities, and therefore must know what the activities are. If something labeled “information operations” is really something else, then the system of checks and balances could be out of kilter. Numerous DoD directives and papers have attempted to clarify the differences

between public affairs and information operations or psychological operations, and that effort has been fairly successful. A trend, however, has developed in recent years: the apparent conflation of information operations and intelligence gathering.

The basic idea behind information operations and its component psychological operations is that they involve putting information out, and those activities are overseen on the civilian side by the Congressional Armed Services Committees. Intelligence gathering involves collecting

A trend has developed in recent years: the apparent conflation of information operations and intelligence gathering.

information, a function overseen in Congress by the Select Committees on Intelligence and coordinated within the U.S. intelligence apparatus. Yet numerous information operations contracts of late task the contractor with doing analysis of media, a process akin to intelligence analysis. Some of those contractors have then slid into collecting information on local politics, economics, or the population.

A paper on media development in Iraq written for Columbia University notes the formation of Iraqi Adviser Task Forces,

teams designed to gather what has come to be called “atmospherics”—that is, information on everything from the local price of fuel to the imam’s message at the mosque to rumors of insurgent activity. These teams, which extracted information, “fell under information operations,” the report states.⁷⁸ A Pentagon spokesman said in April 2010 that Secretary

of Defense Gates had called for more oversight over information operations to make sure they did not “stray off course” into intelligence gathering.⁷⁹

The insistence, noted in DoD directives, that psychological operations must be truthful may be a nod to U.S. law, which allows the use of propaganda but prohibits it from being aimed at the American audience. The concern over propaganda going astray stems at least partly from the

creation of the Trans Regional Web Initiative websites, because any website targeted at a foreign audience may also be viewed by a domestic audience. The emergence of these news and information websites and magazines raises a question that Congress and the DoD are only beginning to grapple with: Shouldn’t these offerings fall under the general rubric of “public diplomacy” and therefore be the province of the U.S. State Department, and not DoD?

General Dynamics, which won the \$10.1 million annual contract to produce the

websites, recently advertised for an editor for www.setimes.com, describing it as a “public diplomacy website.”⁸⁰ Yet a Department of Defense report on strategic communications, delivered to Congress on February 11, 2010, states, “DoD does not engage directly in public diplomacy, which is the purview of the State Department.”⁸¹ Confusing matters

The emergence of these news and information websites raises a question that Congress and the DoD are only beginning to grapple with: Shouldn’t these offerings fall under the general rubric of “public diplomacy” and therefore be the province of the U.S. State Department, and not DoD?

further, the DoD’s 2011 budget asks for a \$34.4 million increase for U.S. Special Operations Command to fund the websites and regional magazines as part of its “Psychological Operations (Information Operations)” activities.⁸²

In a lengthy article published in *Parameters*, the journal of the U.S. Army War College, two legal experts argue that the DoD has overstepped its bounds in launching the Internet sites. The authors

of the article, titled “An Ever-Expanding War: Legal Aspects of Online Strategic Communications,” are Daniel Silverberg, counsel to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, and Col. Joseph Heimann, USAF, the senior appellate judge on the Air Force Court of Criminal Appeals.

In building their argument, the authors begin by questioning whether the DoD’s new online activities, including texting, blogging, email, and the transregional websites, are properly supporting “military missions.” They note these activities are “directed at broad, cross-regional audiences; and, on their face, appear more like a public diplomacy campaign than a military program.” They add that “in order to justify the use of appropriated funds, DoD activities are required to support a DoD-specific mission, and not conflict with the responsibility of another agency.”

By statute, the State Department is authorized to “properly explain the foreign policy of the United States” to foreign governments and their people, they note, as well as to “counter misinformation and propaganda concerning the United States.” The DoD is authorized “to conduct psychological operations as part of special operations campaigns,” but the law does not define what psychological operations are. That would seem to leave an opening, into which DoD stepped in 2007 with two memos, one offering guidance for DoD activities on the Internet—blogging, e-mailing, tweeting, etc.—and one giving guidance for the regional websites. The problem, the lawyers argue, is that the guidances empower combatant commanders to engage in such activities without authority from above, and they blur the lines between public affairs and psychological operations.

The potential for problems becomes more acute as the Pentagon contracts out this work to civilian contractors who may hire foreign personnel. (The Lincoln Group’s pay-for-placement work in Iraq is a perfect example.) While the guidance calls for strict oversight of contractors, they ask how the oversight can occur in media where communication is instantaneous. They also ask whether contractors have the expertise and sensitivity to comprehend foreign political events, “functions typically the purview of civilian U.S. agencies.”⁸³

The publication of the paper produced some vigorous reaction among bloggers, many of whom said that while it was a nice, legalistic argument, it was no longer tenable and did not reflect the real world in which DoD had taken on the public diplomacy role once played by State.

The debate comes against a backdrop of a perception of increased encroachment by the military into State’s territory. Embassies had begun to complain that an increased presence of military personnel following the September 11, 2001, attacks had created friction at their posts.

Whether any of the apparent public diplomacy functions now undertaken by DoD may be transferred to other agencies, such as State, seems uncertain. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates is believed by some to be uneasy with the huge information operations portfolio he inherited from his predecessor, Donald Rumsfeld. In a speech at Kansas State University in November 2007, he urged a larger budget for the State Department and “a dramatic increase in spending on ... diplomacy, strategic communications, foreign assistance, civic action, and economic reconstruction and

development.” He said he regretted that previous administrations had cut the budget of USAID and dismantled the U.S. Information Agency.⁸⁴ Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, reiterated the message even more forcefully in March 2010, again at Kansas State. “My fear, quite frankly, is that we aren’t moving fast enough in this regard,” he said. “U.S. foreign policy is still too dominated by the military, too dependent upon the generals and admirals who lead our major overseas commands, and not enough on the State Department.”

The latest report from the DoD on Information Operations says that a psychological operations review team formed in late 2009 “provisionally identified a number of PSYOP activities that may better serve USG interests by migrating over time to the Department of State.”⁸⁵

Meanwhile, a new caucus is being formed on the Hill to explore new approaches to communicating with a world audience and countering al-Qaeda and the Taliban’s use of new media. Known as the Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy Caucus, its larger goal is to more precisely define strategic communications and public diplomacy and sort out which agencies should be doing them. The House Armed Services Committees has asked the National Security Council to study the creation of a Center

for Strategic Communications and Public Diplomacy to manage and meld the two. The committees have made it clear they want to do this. “The committee is aware of 10 other studies since 2003 that have indicated the need for such an organization,” the House committee wrote in a May 2010 report.⁸⁶

Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Judith McHale has signaled that her office intended to become more aggressive in communicating with overseas audiences. She talked about becoming “more proactive and less reactive” and “to push positive stories and to respond

rapidly to negative attacks against us.”⁸⁷ To be successful, however, State will need more funding.

Sources close to the appropriations process in Congress say they expect things to move slowly. They note that the DoD has spent close to a decade of work building up its information operations capacity,

while the Bush administration neglected to fund State in this regard, so the answer is not suddenly to take a pot of money from DoD’s budget and throw it at State. One said the Republican members in particular are reluctant to shift information operations-type activities to State because they feel the DoD is still more capable. “And I will agree,” he said, “DoD is more capable of doing it, it just seems to me someone has to ask, ‘Do we want to keep feeding this beast?’”

“My fear, quite frankly, is that we aren’t moving fast enough in this regard. U.S. foreign policy is still too dominated by the military ... and not enough [by] the State Department.”

— *Michael G. Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*

Recommendations

- ▶ Congress should tighten its oversight, and the Defense Department should conduct a full audit of its Information Operations and psychological operations programs and projects. The DoD should develop metrics to gauge the effectiveness of these activities.
- ▶ Officials overseeing programs that deal with foreign and developing media should understand the basic tenets of fair and balanced journalism and order that those practices be followed without exception.
- ▶ To raise confidence levels in Congress and the press, the DoD should task one office to exercise full and complete oversight over all information operations and psychological operations activities. Even the most recent DoD report, which acknowledges the need for firmer oversight, spreads the responsibility for these activities across far too many offices and commands.
- ▶ The Defense Department needs to create bright line divisions between information operations and its component psychological operations, and intelligence gathering. Those are entirely different activities with entirely different oversight mechanisms, but recently the lines have become blurred.
- ▶ The Defense Department should refrain from attempting to do media development and media support and leave that to civilian agencies and non-profits.
- ▶ The Defense Department should transfer control of its Trans Regional Web Initiative to the State Department or the Broadcasting Board of Governors, agencies that are more experienced and better equipped to run public websites aimed at foreign audiences. The TRWI sites do not directly support military missions and by any definition fall under the rubric of public diplomacy.
- ▶ More generally, the Obama Administration should create a comprehensive national security information and media strategy that identifies roles to be played by agencies that are mandated by statute to do this work and are capable of participating. As part of that strategy the administration should review the programs that the DoD has accumulated since September 11, 2001, and channel some of them to the appropriate agencies. The Secretary of Defense has said emphatically that DoD has taken on too much in this realm and needs to lose some of the burden.

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