

## **Pentagon Weighs Use of Deception in a Broad Arena**

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 12 - The Pentagon is engaged in bitter, high-level debate over how far it can and should go in managing or manipulating information to influence opinion abroad, senior Defense Department civilians and military officers say.

Such missions, if approved, could take the deceptive techniques endorsed for use on the battlefield to confuse an adversary and adopt them for covert propaganda campaigns aimed at neutral and even allied nations.

Critics of the proposals say such deceptive missions could shatter the Pentagon's credibility, leaving the American public and a world audience skeptical of anything the Defense Department and military say - a repeat of the credibility gap that roiled America during the Vietnam War.

The efforts under consideration risk blurring the traditional lines between public affairs programs in the Pentagon and military branches - whose charters call for giving truthful information to the media and the public - and the world of combat information campaigns or psychological operations.

The question is whether the Pentagon and military should undertake an official program that uses disinformation to shape perceptions abroad. But in a modern world wired by satellite television and the Internet, any misleading information and falsehoods could easily be repeated by American news outlets.

The military has faced these tough issues before. Nearly three years ago, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, under intense criticism, closed the Pentagon's Office of Strategic Influence, a short-lived operation to provide news items, possibly including false ones, to foreign journalists in an effort to influence overseas opinion.

Now, critics say, some of the proposals of that discredited office are quietly being resurrected elsewhere in the military and in the Pentagon.

Pentagon and military officials directly involved in the debate say that such a secret propaganda program, for example, could include planting news stories in the foreign press or creating false documents and Web sites translated into Arabic as an effort to discredit and undermine the influence of mosques and religious schools that preach anti-American principles.

Some of those are in the Middle Eastern and South Asian countries like Pakistan, still considered a haven for operatives of Al Qaeda. But such a campaign could reach even to

allied countries like Germany, for example, where some mosques have become crucibles for Islamic militancy and anti-Americanism.

Before the invasion of Iraq, the military's vast electronic-warfare arsenal was used to single out certain members of Saddam Hussein's inner circle with e-mail messages and cellphone calls in an effort to sway them to the American cause. Arguments have been made for similar efforts to be mounted at leadership circles in other nations where the United States is not at war.

During the cold war, American intelligence agencies had journalists on their payrolls or operatives posing as journalists, particularly in Western Europe, with the aim of producing pro-American articles to influence the populations of those countries. But officials say that no one is considering using such tactics now.

Suspicious about disinformation programs also arose in the 1980's when the White House was accused of using such a campaign to destabilize Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi of Libya.

In the current debate, it is unclear how far along the other programs are or to what extent they are being carried out because of their largely classified nature.

Within the Pentagon, some of the military's most powerful figures have expressed concerns at some of the steps taken that risk blurring the traditional lines between public affairs and the world of combat information operations.

These tensions were cast into stark relief this summer in Iraq when Gen. George W. Casey Jr., the top commander in Iraq, approved the combining of the command's day-to-day public affairs operations with combat psychological and information operations into a single "strategic communications office."

In a rare expression of senior-level questions about such decisions, Gen. Richard B. Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, issued a memorandum warning the military's regional combat commanders about the risks of mingling the military public affairs too closely with information operations.

"While organizations may be inclined to create physically integrated P.A./I.O. offices, such organizational constructs have the potential to compromise the commander's credibility with the media and the public," it said.

But General Myers's memorandum is not being followed, according to officers in Iraq, largely because commanders there believe they are safely separating the two operations and say they need all the flexibility possible to combat the insurgency.

Indeed, senior military officials in Washington say public affairs officers in war zones might, by choice or under pressure, issue statements to world news media that, while having elements of truth, are clearly devised primarily to provoke a response from the enemy.

Administration officials say they are increasingly troubled that a nation that can so successfully market its cars and colas around the world, even to foreigners hostile to American policies, is failing to sell its democratic ideals, even as the insurgents they are battling are spreading falsehoods over mass media outlets like the Arab news satellite channel Al Jazeera.

"In the battle of perception management, where the enemy is clearly using the media to help manage perceptions of the general public, our job is not perception management but to counter the enemy's perception management," said the chief Pentagon spokesman, Lawrence Di Rita.

The battle lines in this debate have been drawn in a flurry of classified studies, secret operational guidance statements and internal requests from Mr. Rumsfeld. Some go to the concepts of information warfare, and some complain about how the government's communications are organized.

The fervent debate today is focused most directly on a secret order signed by Mr. Rumsfeld late last year and called "Information Operations Roadmap." The 74-page directive, which remains classified but was described by officials who had read it, accelerated "a plan to advance the goal of information operations as a core military competency."

Noting the complexities and risks, Mr. Rumsfeld ordered studies to clarify the appropriate relationship between Pentagon and military public affairs - whose job is to educate and inform the public with accurate and timely information - and the practitioners of secret psychological operations and information campaigns to influence, deter or confuse adversaries.

In response, one far-reaching study conducted at the request of the strategic plans and policy branch of the military's Joint Staff recently produced a proposal to create a "director of central information." The director would have responsibility for budgeting and "authoritative control of messages" - whether public or covert - across all the government operations that deal with national security and foreign policy.

The study, conducted by the National Defense University, was presented Oct. 20 to a panel of senior Pentagon officials and military officers, including Douglas J. Feith, the under secretary of defense for policy, whose organization set up the original Office of Strategic Influence.

No senior officer today better represents the debate over a changing world of military information than Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmitt, an operational commander chosen to be the military's senior spokesman in Iraq after major combat operations shifted to counterinsurgency operations in the spring of 2003.

His role rankled many in the military's public affairs community who contend that the job should have gone to someone trained in the doctrine of Army communications and public affairs, rather than to an officer who had spent his career in combat arms.

"This is tough business," said General Kimmitt, who now serves as deputy director of plans for the American military command in the Middle East. "Are we trying to inform? Yes. Do we offer perspective? Yes. Do we offer military judgment? Yes. Must we tell the truth to stay credible? Yes. Is there a battlefield value in deceiving the enemy? Yes. Do we intentionally deceive the American people? No."

The rub, General Kimmitt said, is operating among those sometimes conflicting principles.

"There is a gray area," he said. "Tactical and operational deception are proper and legal on the battlefield." But "in a worldwide media environment," he asked, "how do you prevent that deception from spilling out from the battlefield and inadvertently deceiving the American people?"

Mr. Di Rita said the scope of the issue had changed in recent years. "We have a unique challenge in this department," he said, "because four-star military officers are the face of the United States abroad in ways that are almost unprecedented since the end of World War II."

He added, "Communication is becoming a capability that combatant commanders have to factor in to the kinds of operations they are doing."

Much of the Pentagon's work in this new area falls under a relatively unknown field called Defense Support for Public Diplomacy. This new phrase is used to describe the Pentagon's work in governmentwide efforts to communicate with foreign audiences but that is separate from support for generals in the field.

At the Pentagon, that effort is managed by Ryan Henry, Mr. Feith's principal deputy for policy.

"With the pace of technology and such, and with the nature of the global war on terrorism, information has become much more a part of strategic victory, and to a certain extent tactical victory, than it ever was in the past," Mr. Henry said.

However, a senior military officer said that without clear guidance from the Pentagon, the military's psychological operations, information operations and public affairs programs are "coming together on the battlefield like never before, and as such, the lines are blurred." This has led to a situation where "proponents of these elements jockey for position to lead the overall communication effort," the officer said.

Debate also continues over proposed amendments to a classified Defense Department directive, titled "3600.1: Information Operations," which would lay down Pentagon

policy in coming years. Previous versions of the directive allow aggressive information campaigns to affect enemy leaders, but not those of allies or even neutral states. The current debate is over proposed revisions that would widen the target audience for such missions.

Mr. Di Rita, the Pentagon spokesman, says that even though the government is wrestling with these issues, the standard is still to tell to the truth.

"Our job is to put out information to the public that is accurate," he said, "and to put it out as quickly as we can."