

**STRATEGY
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**INFORMATION OPERATIONS AND COUNTER-PROPAGANDA:
MAKING A WEAPON OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS**

BY

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

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The U.S. military operates in a global information environment and is subject to propaganda influence from both domestic and foreign media. Access to information and disinformation can now influence attitudes and behavior from the battlefield to the far reaches of the world. Biased information can readily undermine the will of the American people and the American soldier to support military operations. This study examines the role of Public Affairs in information operations. It identifies the need for Public Affairs to change the objectives of its Public Information function. It concludes with recommendations for Military Public Affairs to engage in defined counter-propaganda activity.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT iii

INFORMATION OPERATIONS AND COUNTER PROPAGANDA: MAKING A WEAPON
OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS 1

KNOW PROPAGANDA 4

STRATEGIC VIEW 8

A CLEARLY DEFINED FUZZINESS 10

A CASE FOR COUNTER-PROPAGANDA 13

NOW KOSOVO 17

RECOMMENDATIONS 21

CONCLUSION 22

ENDNOTES 25

BIBLIOGRAPHY 29

INFORMATION OPERATIONS AND COUNTER PROPAGANDA: MAKING A WEAPON OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

*We are now at a crossroads of military public information. We must choose wisely which direction to go ... we must grow beyond conventional public information tactics... develop new roles ... and more importantly, we must explore strategic information concepts that are better suited to dealing with the challenges of reduced military budgets and manpower, widespread instability around the globe, new military missions and revolutionary advances in communication technology.*¹

-Captain Mark Van Dyke

New advances in technology have revolutionized information access and the way wars are fought. Broadcast media, television in particular, brings real-time images of war and suffering into American living rooms and even those in the jungle.² Like the Vietnam war, DESERT STORM had its daily news reports from the battlefield. Currently, images from Bosnia and Kosovo remind us of the power of broadcast media. However, unlike journalistic accounts of previous American war, reports from Southwest Asia were not limited to broadcasts from friendly territory.

The 1991 Gulf War to eject Iraqi forces from Kuwait ushered in a new era: real-time reporting from the battlefield. New technology, satellite relays in particular, allowed U.S. citizens to see Apache helicopter engagements in friendly zones as well as SCUD missile firings from the enemy's heartland. The battlefield of 2010 will feature imaging from space, and a ubiquitous media will monitor soldiers' activities throughout

the depth of the combat zone. In fact, current conflict in the Balkans portends that this new era is here to stay.

The ongoing information revolution calls for changes not only in warfighting but also in policy. Information technologies expand conflict beyond the traditional battlefield and enhance opportunities to conduct asymmetric war.³ The enemy can now transmit propaganda via television screens.

We must assume that future adversaries will take full advantage of media broadcasts as propaganda tools. Propaganda in modern media will undoubtedly create greater challenges for military public affairs officers. As opportunities for manipulation of telecasts to sway public perceptions increase, military public affairs officers will have to struggle to carry out their support of the mission. In order to thwart hostile attempts to prejudice our broadcast media, Public Affairs must change its way of doing business. Indeed Public Affairs officers may now have to openly challenge broadcast news containing propaganda. To effectively neutralize broadcast news propaganda, Public Affairs must change its policy and the way it thinks about itself.

The coming years will not bring an uncomplicated, stable security environment such as that of the Cold War. The future security environment promises challenges from weapons of mass destruction to Hobbesian societies featuring resource depletion,

rapid population growth, environmental damage, new infectious diseases, and uncontrolled refugee migration.⁴

We can expect countries that have ripened for conflict to have little print media circulation beyond the city limits. A war-torn country's citizens who become refugees can hardly afford the expense of or have access to newspapers. Although an evicted population can not be expected to escape with radios and televisions, electronic broadcasts are free. The proliferation of inexpensive pocket radios and televisions make it plausible that a few refugees will have the means to pull transmissions from the airways. Moreover, among the instruments of power—diplomatic, information, economic, military—information can best leverage television and radio for immediate affect on the views of citizens and leaders on both sides of a conflict.

This paper limits the term "media" to broadcast media, radio and television. The restricted definition is appropriate, since radio and television have the greatest potential to shape the future security environment.

Public Affairs involves three activities: Command Information, Community Relations, and Public Information (PI). Command Information is the commander's responsibility to disseminate accurate and timely information to soldiers, their families, and civilian employees and other internal audiences. Community Relations is the Public Affairs activity that helps

civic leaders and local communities understand the military. Public information aims to tell the military story to a wide external audience. Public Information officers work with and support the media.⁵

This study focuses on the Public Information aspect of Public Affairs. It specifically recognizes the Public Information activity as the Public Affairs linkage to the other elements of information operations—civil affairs, psychological operations (PSYOP), command and control warfare, and electronic warfare.⁶

In information operations, Public Affairs conducts information campaigns designed to establish credibility with the media to gain support for the military mission. But Public Affairs proclaim that its public information campaigns are devoid of a most effective tool: counter-propaganda activity.⁷

KNOW PROPAGANDA

Propaganda, in the minds of many, aims to appeal to prejudices by distorting facts with lies. Joint Pub 1-02 defines propaganda as "any form of communication in support of national objectives designed to influence the opinions, emotions attitudes, or behavior of any group in order to benefit the sponsor, either directly or indirectly."⁸ As defined, propaganda

is dissemination of ideas and information for the purpose of inducing or intensifying specific attitudes and actions. Although some propagandists may intentionally distort fact, others may objectively present information. No matter what its objective, propaganda attempts to persuade through rational or emotional appeal or through the organization of personal opinion.⁹

Propaganda can be blatantly obvious, such as that used in Nazi Germany. The Germans had a complex and well-organized system for the spread of propaganda and the control of their culture. During World War II (WWII), the Germans raised their propaganda system to a never obtained level of sophistication. Headed by Joseph Goebbels, the propaganda department influenced most all aspects of the German culture—literature, the press, films, theater, music, broadcasting, tourism, advertising, and the arts.¹⁰ No where could Germany's people or soldiers escape the ever-present themes: Pure-blooded Aryans are the superior race and could not be defeated by the mixed-blooded Allies and their Jewish masters.¹¹

On the other hand, it may employ subtle persuasive communication techniques. Propagandistic (i.e., persuasive) communications are not "good" or "evil" in and of themselves. They can be used for good, to reduce drunk driving and lung

cancer, while they may also seek to win elections and sell malt liquor.¹²

This study defines counter-propaganda activity as actions to discredit an adversary's use of broadcast media to support their national objectives by influencing the opinions, emotions, attitudes, or behavior of U.S. and friendly audiences. As defined, counter-propaganda allows for truthful, honest opposition to the enemy's media borne propaganda.

Public affairs practitioners attempt to influence target audiences through many propaganda techniques, including "spin." Scott Rodgers cites euphemisms as a propaganda technique in military discourse. As examples, the MX-Missile was renamed the "Peacekeeper," and "collateral damage" often means civilian casualties.¹³ Reacting viscerally, public information practitioners blindly avoid association with the term "propaganda." They fear that indulgence in any activity labeled propaganda will create perceptions that public information practitioners lie or deliberately deceive the public. This attempt to maintain their image has made Public Affairs officers overlook their own reliance on spin.

"Disinformation" is the spin euphemism of choice for propaganda. The public affairs community says disinformation is any government-sponsored communication in which deliberately misleading information is passed to targeted individuals,

groups, or governments with the purpose of influencing foreign elite or public opinion. This also defines propaganda. Thus, a case can be made that the acknowledged public affairs mission to counter disinformation applies to propaganda.¹⁴

Alvin and Heidi Toffler categorize six military propaganda techniques: atrocity stories, i.e. emphasis on the brutal torture and killing of innocent men, women and children; hyperbolic inflation of the stakes involved in a war, i.e. left unchecked, the conflict will lead to Armageddon; dehumanization of the opponent, i.e. the enemy leader is a heartless demon; polarization, i.e. those who refuse to join us are not on the side of right; divine sanctions, i.e. God is with us; and, propaganda that discredits the adversary's propaganda.¹⁵ The latter category should be openly recognized and clearly designated as a vital aim of the Public Information function of Public Affairs.

The shift to third-wave information warfare is underway, and the battle for control of information by perception management will intensify. The Gulf War offers classic examples of the use of propaganda and perception management. A young woman appears before television cameras and talks about babies being ripped out of incubators in Kuwait. Later reports linked the young woman to the Kuwaiti embassy, and she was apparently following a script. In the era of real-time broadcast, such

televised propaganda is going to become far more important, and it will be managed with far more sophistication.¹⁶

Public Affairs' potential role, identifying and attacking enemy propaganda broadcast, can be a powerful tool to shape the course of events in time of conflict. A counter-propaganda effort can get needed information to displaced populations and combatants. Victims in a dysfunctional society can use reliable counter-propaganda information to locate relief sites. On the other hand, counter-propaganda may restrain belligerents with warnings that they will be subject to punishment for war crimes.

STRATEGIC VIEW

Maintaining a strong military and the willingness to use it in defense of national and common interests remain essential to a strategy of engagement as we approach the 21st century.¹⁷

The advent of satellite-based global television broadcasting has created yet another arena for unconventional warfare. Live television coverage provides participants in armed conflicts with unprecedented opportunities to conduct military deception and shape the way distant audiences perceive events on the battlefield. Such "CNN Wars" are likely to become more common—and with disproportionately large political repercussions, especially in societies like the United States where policy-

making is sometimes driven by transitory public reactions to media images.

Clausewitz asserted that the center of gravity is the hub of all power and movement: "What the theorist has to say is this: one must keep the dominant characteristics of both belligerents in mind. Out of these characteristics a certain center of gravity develops, the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends. That is the point against which all our energies should be directed."¹⁸

National will exemplifies Clausewitz's definition of center of gravity. And, a nation's will, as stated by Clausewitz, is derived from the trinity formed by the government, the army and the people.¹⁹ Thus modern adversaries will seek to exploit broadcast media to target the most susceptible element of national will, the people.

Despite media influence on the people, there is little evidence of U.S. efforts to counter propaganda-laced news broadcasts. The fact is the U.S. military operates in a global information environment, and Americans are subject to propaganda influences through domestic and foreign broadcast. Nearly unlimited access to information threatens to prejudice opinions on the battlefield and at home.

Given the wide array of possible opponents, weapons, and strategies, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish

between foreign and domestic propaganda in the news. Sometimes it is difficult to determine who is propagandizing whom. This new uncertainty greatly complicates the traditional public information role of telling the military story.

Furthermore, the possibility arises that the very "facts" of an event can be manipulated via multimedia techniques and widely disseminated by television and radio. Countering such manipulation will increase our ability to build and maintain support for military actions. In short, our Public Affairs practitioners should actively prepare to counter enemy propaganda.

A CLEARLY DEFINED FUZZINESS

Attacking the unabated flow of propaganda across the globe can further blur the functional lines between Public Affairs (PA) and Psychological Operations (PYSOPS). Both PA and PYSOPS are key elements of Information Operations. FM 100-6 defines Information Operations as continuous military operations within the Military Information Environment that enable, enhance, and protect the friendly force's ability to collect, process, and act on information to achieve an advantage across the full range of military operations.²⁰

While acknowledging that the media can dramatically affect strategic direction and the range of military operations,

military doctrine does not sanction actions intended to mislead or manipulate media coverage.²¹ However, it is widely recognized that visual information displayed by domestic and international news organizations directly and rapidly influenced the nature of US policy objectives and the use of military force in Rwanda, Somalia, and in the former Yugoslavian republics. Images from future conflicts will convey undeniable propaganda designed to disrupt or defeat friendly military operations. Without change in Public Affairs concepts, biased broadcast will fall in the gap between psychological operations and public information activities.

The public affairs mission is to strengthen deterrence and war-fighting powers by timely, accurate and truthful communication to U.S. military, the American public and friendly foreign audiences.²² Public Affairs is charged with communicating the military perspective to the American public, government, and internal military audiences. Implied in the public affairs charter is the requirement to support legitimate efforts that gain or maintain public support for military operations. Also implied is the responsibility to degrade the impact of negative stories, false reports, and inaccuracies.

As the primary agent for telling the military story, Public Affairs should be most concerned when news broadcasts distort military operations. Yet, military doctrine specifically denies

Public Affairs a counter-propaganda role. The services do acknowledge concern about propaganda. Joint Pub 3-53 recognizes the requirement to counter propaganda and makes this a Psychological Operations responsibility. The Joint Pub also makes it policy for PSYOP to use PA channels to provide facts that will counter foreign propaganda, including misinformation directed at the United States.²³ Juxtaposing psychological operations policy with Public Affairs could lead to unintended consequences: one military community, PSYOPS, could dupe another, PA.

Psychological Operations should continue as directed in Joint Pub 3-53: "Operations to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objectives and reasoning, and, ultimately, the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals. The purpose of PYSOPS is to induce or reinforce foreign attitudes and behavior favorable to the originator's objectives."²⁴

Public Information and Psychological Operations communicate information to civilian and military audiences to influence their perception of military operations. While PA communicates to U.S. and friendly audiences, PSYOPS targets enemy audiences. Both PA and PSYOPS contribute to achieving information dominance—the aim of Information Operations. Moreover, PA and

PSYOPS often communicate their messages through the same mediums. But, in the global information environment, neither PA nor PYSOPS can isolate their target audiences. Friend and foe will hear and view the same information. As important, news anchors willingly or unwittingly serve as agents for enemy propaganda.

Unlike Psychological Operations, Public Affairs policy not only ignores a counter-propaganda requirement but also asserts that it has no association with propaganda. This assertion aims to sustain Public Affairs' cloak of credibility. This protective public affairs garment, however, is woven with false threads. An honest look at military media operations reveals that Public Affairs is already engaged in counter-propaganda activities—censorship, message shaping, and spin.

A CASE FOR COUNTER-PROPAGANDA

Misinformation concerning Bosnia appeared in the media before the ethnic cleansing started. Croatian propaganda described Serbian nationalists as Cetniks and presented the World War II (WWII) Cetnik leader as a genocidal monster. Serb propaganda described Croatian nationalists as Ustasa, and suggested that the Bosnian Muslims were either Nazis or fundamentalists, or both.²⁵

Some analysts are convinced that it was propaganda-laced media that ignited the ethnic flames that swept across Yugoslavia.²⁶ Media-espoused hate themes in the former Republic of Yugoslavia caused citizens to demonize neighbors, friends, and even family. Without benefit of truth-based counter-propaganda, the people of Yugoslavia have continued to vilify each other despite their recent history of peaceful coexistence.

Television has played a major role in the events leading to the war and disintegration of Yugoslavia. The political leaders in the republics blatantly used the media for their propagandist purposes and shaped public opinion in the direction that best suited their interests. During the Yugoslav era, media were used to support the existing political system and were controlled by the League of Communists in each republic.²⁷

The new power holders, particularly in Serbia and in Croatia, simply stepped in for the old regime and increased their influence over the media. The few independent media organizations were sidelined and were not able to reach such massive audiences as the state-controlled television and radio did. The media was the tool that generated nationalist euphoria, ethnic hatred, and war psychosis. Media organizations included journalists who were devoted to the most extreme propagandist presentations. Such was the power of the media

that many experts of the Yugoslav crisis are convinced that the war could not have erupted without media influence.²⁸

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the media were widely controlled by the ruling parties. The political elite used the media to govern the population and support nationalistic propaganda. However, few alternative media emerged in the Republika Srpska at the end of 1995. In the government-controlled territories, and particularly in Sarajevo, the media had more space to maneuver—but often only with the help of international donations, which in turn created an artificial media market.²⁹

Broadcast news played a crucial role in events within the former Yugoslavia, but it helped to shape the policies of the international community. The war—first in Slovenia, then in Croatia, and finally in Bosnia—was played out in real time on television screens throughout the world. The images of tanks, refugees, concentration camps, and crimes against humanity shook the world and challenged the international community to do something.³⁰

In 1997, the nationalist, state-run broadcast media in Bosnia painted NATO peacekeepers as an "occupying force." NATO commanders responded with threats to jam transmitters and then closed four transmission stations of Bosnian Serb radio and television because of what a United Nations spokesman called ongoing "distortion of the truth."

After the takeover of the towers, rival Bosnian Serb factions in Pale and Banja Luka agreed to alternate daily broadcasts until parliamentary elections. The television network served as an effective counterweight to Serbian propaganda broadcasts. Studio interviews with opposing candidates and various international election observers presented listeners in and outside of the cities with a clear picture of the campaign. Although this balanced coverage helped bring some moderates to power, the counter-propaganda effort was too little too late.

With few independent electronic news sources and a public conditioned to obey authority, people readily accept what they are told. Obviously, leaders like Slobadana Milosevic know very well how to leverage broadcast media for propaganda purposes. He used Serb-controlled radio and television stations during his drive for a "Greater Serbia" to re-ignite Serb nationalism throughout the former Yugoslavia. Moreover, his unchecked messages of hate fed an international media that was hungry for news.

Some say it was "words, not bullets" that sparked the bloodshed in Bosnia-Herzegovina. According to Michael Ignatieff, "long before a shot was fired in Yugoslavia, the media of both Croatia and Serbia were readying their populations to think of the other side as vermin, insects, dogs, and other

noisome creatures."³¹ Several analysts have gone so far as to suggest some government journalists ought to be tried as war criminals.³² Through uncontested broadcast propaganda, Milosevic successfully isolated the public. His news railed against the West and Serbia's neighbors, blaming them for the country's woes. Serbians became more xenophobic and convinced that former friends were their enemies. Counter-propaganda through independent media could have brought another perspective and offered hope by informing and educating the warring factions about how a democratic society works.

NOW KOSOVO

As of this writing, conflict rages in Kosovo. With over a million refugees fleeing their homes for sanctuary in nearby Albania and Macedonia, the U.S. military and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces are supporting a massive humanitarian relief effort. Yet little is being done in the way of counter propaganda to dispel lies and keep Kosovo's displaced citizens informed.

Some refugees have transistor radios and are able to tune in to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) World Service, Radio Tirana, and other stations to find out what is happening. But even then, the information they receive is not specifically geared to their needs. Reliable information is clearly not

coming from the government-controlled media of President Slobodan Milosovic.

As NATO bombs rain on Belgrade, Serb state-run radio and television broadcasts call President Clinton "Adolf Clinton." NATO soldiers are referred to as "assassins." U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright is "bloodthirsty."³³ The Serb leader's use of propaganda parallels that of Germany's WWII leader. Milosevic apparently desires to strengthen resolve of both his people and his military. Christopher Bennet says that "the key to Milosevic's rule and an understanding of modern Serb nationalism is the Serbian media and their sustained campaign to generate national hysteria. Indeed, the Serbian media have played a very similar role in Milosevic's Serbia to that played by the Nazi media in Hitler's Germany, though on account of technological advances in the intervening half century, their influence has been more pervasive and more insidious."³⁴

As the Serbian propaganda machine has greater access to its population than NATO, we can expect it to also have a greater influence. The Serbian people have grown up with a strong bias in their media, and propaganda messages have had a lifetime to take hold. By implanting his views without challenge, Milosevic easily influences the Serbian people to do what he wants or lay blame on others. In the case of the Serbian military, it

appears soldiers are willing to fight and die based on Milosevic's propaganda.

Radio-Television Serbia voices its propaganda over images of bombed out buildings and anti-NATO rallies. This propaganda, which is closely controlled by Milosevic's regime, has already played a major role in the survival of the Yugoslav President. It will likely become even more crucial as the war drags on and life becomes more difficult. We can not afford to ignore Milosevic's rhetoric as it fuels nationalist frenzy. Serbs are now burning U.S. flags, destroying anything that is a symbol of a NATO country, and claiming they are already to fight to the death.

Some Serbian people may question the state radio and television broadcasts. But, they have few alternative messages that can cause serious doubt. Serbian media present a picture that Yugoslavia is winning the war and America and its NATO allies have gone mad. In the face of this distortion of the truth, President Clinton made an attempt at counter-propaganda. He sent a message to the Serbian people via satellite transmission. Clinton said the bombing was directed not at the Serbian people but at their leader. The US President's message contended with propaganda filters in Serbia. Most likely, few Serbians heard the message, and even fewer believed the message.

The fact is that there is almost no credible information countering Belgrade's view of its security operations. The only direct Western effort to respond to this monopoly is NATO's demand that Serb-controlled radio and television broadcast six hours of uncensored Western broadcasts a day. The majority of the Serbs and Kosovars rely on government station as their main news source, and, Milosevic can be counted on to deliver a daily dose of propaganda.

After Afghanistan, Somalia, and Rwanda, we should have learned to make propaganda one of the first casualties in a conflict. Balanced reporting is effective counter-propaganda ammunition. News broadcasts by the BBC, Voice of America, or Radio Free Europe could easily carry counter-propaganda messages aimed at shaping attitudes about the conflict in Kosovo. Counter-propaganda programming tailored to the local theater could help dispel rumors by challenging Serbian broadcasts. It could also help the Serbian military and people better understand NATO's intervention. Despite past experiences, however, we have not only been slow to demonize Milosevic but also slow to recognize the need for a PA counter-propaganda program as part of our overall military strategy.

Public affairs practitioners should give credence to how useful counter propaganda can be for shaping the security environment and alleviating crises. Better information access

can help reduce conflict, particularly if aimed at the belligerents themselves. Some human rights sources believe Serb security forces might be less enthusiastic in their repression if warned by counter-propaganda broadcasts that they may be held accountable for their actions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In a society under assault across its entire infosphere, it will become increasingly difficult for members of that society to verify internally the truth or accuracy of anything.... The End State may not be bloodless surrender but total disruption of the targeted society.³⁵

-George Stein

We should openly acknowledge that Public Affairs is already engaged in the fight against propaganda. This can spur debate on a Public Affairs strategy with ends, ways and means that are aligned for information operations in 2010.

The Public Information function of Public Affairs should include counter-propaganda operations as an objective. The aim should be to degrade the enemy's propaganda impact on the conflict and to maintain domestic and international support for U.S. military operations. Public Affairs must further legitimize its Public Information link to PYSOPS to facilitate a unified counter-propaganda effort. Public Information activities must use truth-based, counter-propaganda messages.

PSYOP should conduct only offensive propaganda operations—at the theater and below in wartime. PSYOPS should assist Public Affairs with counter-propaganda activities at the strategic level.

Our military has the means to support this new Public Affairs role. So the Public Affairs infrastructure need not change. Additional instructors specializing in counter-propaganda at the Defense Information School (DINFOS) may be necessary.

Public Affairs organizations need not set up radio stations to conduct counter-propaganda. A number of independent media channels can be used for disseminating counter-propaganda messages. In the case of Kosovo, the BBC and Radio Tirana, independent media, are already transmitting Albanian-language broadcasts which reach much of the Balkans.

CONCLUSION

The howitzers of the mass media ... will not long remain the property of the West: The world's skies will fill with private satellites, and channels of communications will continue to multiply....³⁶

Whatever the means employed, it is questionable whether American public opinion can be induced to support military operations that do not support U.S. interests, especially when

adversaries use unchecked propaganda in the media to weaken American will.

The anticipated wars of the future will require Public Affairs to actively launch counter-propaganda operations. Such initiative will be critical to gaining and maintaining public support in the global information environment of the future. The Information Age is merging both internal and external audiences. Therefore, we should accept that counter-propaganda messages borne in the modern media atmosphere would impact both the enemy and friendly public. More important, lessons from Vietnam, DESERT STORM, and Bosnia teach future adversaries a common strategy: use propaganda in the media to attack the American will. This strategy of demoralization will remain viable for the foreseeable future.

The further the world advances toward embracing information technology, the less likely military Public Affairs can rely on traditional management of the media through censorship. A change in policy can bring the needed focus to public information objectives and support a specific counter-propaganda role. This does not mean that Public Affairs should mortgage its credibility that has been built on honesty for action supported by lies. To be effective tellers and protectors of the military story, Public Affairs must hammer out doctrinal change on an anvil of truth. By so doing, public information

operations can effectively counter propaganda in broadcast media and contribute to maintaining the national will for victory today and tomorrow.

WORD COUNT:4530

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