

Media Manipulation

By Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.) | December 8, 2004

When truth becomes war's first fatality,
Trust quickly becomes the second.

"Since my son's death ... I don't trust them [the Pentagon] one bit."

One need only read the article in the *Los Angeles Times* (Dec. 6, 2004) to sense the loss felt by Mrs. Mary Tillman whose son, former pro-football star Corporal Pat Tillman, was killed in Afghanistan on April 22, 2004.

The *Times* story followed a two-part *Washington Post* article that recounted the confluence of accidents, botched orders, mistaken identity, phantom enemy, and lack of fire discipline that led to Pat Tillman's death by friendly fire.

As disheartening as this story is on a personal level, just as significant systemically is the press account of calculated, deliberate announcements from the Pentagon that cannot be excused as misstatements based on incomplete or inaccurate information.

To briefly recap:

April 30—events leading to Tillman's death, including his heroism, are released, along with announcement of the posthumous award of the Silver Star, a medal given only for valor under fire; the military already had statements from other participants on the mission that contradicted the official version.

May 3—a memorial service commemorating Tillman's life is held; participants include football colleagues, Senator John McCain, and flag-rank military representatives.

May 29—the Pentagon concedes Tillman's death was from friendly fire.

June-November—the media gradually uncover the details of a botched mission, one which apparently did not involve a close-in firefight with Taliban fugitives (as described in the citation for the Silver Star), and one that leaders of the local Afghan militia accompanying the U.S. troops were told by U.S. commanders not to discuss with media representatives.

In Afghanistan as in Iraq, the Pentagon is repeating its ill-fated public information policies of the Vietnam era that contributed to the breakdown of trust between a significant portion of the U.S. public, the uniformed mili-

tary, and those elected and appointed to lead the nation. Despite the Republican victory on November 2, 2004, the U.S. remains deeply divided about Iraq—the president's handling of the war, (40% favorable, 55% unfavorable), whether invading was the right (46%) or wrong (48%) course, and how well the war is going (45% very or somewhat well and 53% somewhat or very badly).

Deception and the Media

No one is calling for the end of deception and denial stratagems on the battlefield or at the strategic level of war, when applicable. Deceiving an enemy is a force multiplier that touches on basic principles of war, such as surprise and economy of force.

Many in Washington and in the country also would not object to employing the media, with its foreknowledge, in propaganda or misinformation campaigns carefully directed against hostile regimes. (However, once started, this can prove to be a perilous path.)

But in a democracy, a line is crossed when government knowingly and deliberately lies or even misleads media that government knows full well will be reporting news to the U.S. public.

Besides the circumstances of Pat Tillman's death, the most recent deliberate deception of the media was the October 14, 2004 statement by a Pentagon spokesperson that an assault on Fallujah had begun. Given that such an operation had been discussed for weeks, news outlets were primed for an announcement. But this was not the assault, which was not confirmed until some hours after the Pentagon statement had been broadcast to the U.S. and the world.

There is the deeper history of the ill-fated Pentagon Office of Strategic Influence, created after September 11, 2001, whose job was to provide news to foreign media, including false stories, in an attempt to influence policy in both unfriendly and friendly nations. The Office had barely begun to function when it was disbanded in 2002. But Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld reportedly distributed its missions to other entities in the Pentagon involved in propaganda and disinformation.

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If this were not enough to make the U.S. media and public wary of official pronouncements, the 2004 summer study by the Defense Science Board (DSB) should engender concern. The DSB, an advisory body, said that the lack of a strategic communications plan is a contributing factor in “America’s negative image in world opinion and diminished ability to persuade” Islamic nations of the reasonableness of U.S. actions.

The suggested remedy in the DSB document, as reported by *the New York Times* (November 24, 2004), is a “comprehensive reorganization of government public affairs, public diplomacy, and information efforts” beginning with the creation of a strategic communications structure in the National Security Council. But this (or any other) agency will not be effective unless or until they first understand the motives of those opposed to the U.S. (“Muslims do not hate our freedom, but rather they hate our policies”) and how best to use information to break down this opposition—i.e., to at least tolerate western concepts, culture, and practices.

The problem facing the U.S. government internationally—a lack of credibility arising from the dissonance between words and actions—is in danger of being replicated in the domestic arena through deliberate manipulation of the press. The bargain between the press and the Pentagon—“We don’t do anything to endanger the troops or operations. They don’t lie to us”—articulated by CNN’s Aaron Brown on December 1, 2004, also applied to the government in general at one time.

For a White House that preaches the virtues and necessity of credibility—as in the United Nations—there is a

gaping hole in its understanding of the critical role that credibility plays in the social contact between those who are governed and those governing. Once that is broken, so too is political power—witness Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon.

As one who spent part of his military career keeping secrets (intelligence) and another part trying to tell the Army’s story as best as possible, there was never any question but that what counted most in both endeavors was the full truth to the chain-of-command in the first instance and to the public in the second. Lying is death—physical if in combat, of credibility everywhere else. Even the latter can be irretrievable.

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