

ing American troops.” The first of these—“open and independent reporting will be the principal means of coverage of U.S. military operations”—was by far the most important. It reestablished the idea that the Pentagon Pool was to be used primarily, if at all, in the early stages of combat.

We failed, however, to resolve the question pertaining to “security review.” After long negotiations, we simply agreed to disagree and attached to the list of principles two statements. Ours said: “[We] strongly believe that journalists will abide by clear operational security ground rules. Prior security review is unwarranted and unnecessary.... We will challenge prior security review in the event that the Pentagon attempts to impose it in some future military operation.” The Pentagon’s statement said: “The military believes it must retain the option to review news material, to avoid inadvertent inclusion...of information that could endanger troop safety or the success of a mission....”

Two of the nine agreed-upon principles—numbers three and five—are especially important now. Number three reads: “Even under conditions of open coverage, pools may be appropriate for specific events, such as those

at extremely remote locations or where space is limited.” Number five reads: “Journalists will be provided access to all military units. Special Operations restrictions may limit access in some cases.” After the “war on terrorism” was declared by President Bush, the assistant secretary of defense for public affairs, Victoria Clarke, said the Pentagon would abide by the nine principles, but there was precious little “open and independent” coverage or “access to all military units.” Moreover, like their predecessors in the Gulf War, pool reporters on certain of the Navy ships involved in the initial cruise missile attacks complained of being isolated and unable to file timely reports.

Doubtless the military, which had the public—and, for that matter, a too often flag-waving press—on its side in this war, has good geopolitical and military reasons for imposing the limitations. Certainly the type of combat seen in the early phase of the war did not appear to lend itself to open coverage. And the instant communication technologies that journalists can carry into battle today—digital cameras, videophones, e-mail, Internet connections—create entirely new challenges. Coming up with guidelines to deal with them will require perseverance

and understanding on both sides. Moreover, it needs to be said that coverage of actual combat, important as it can be, is a supplement to, not a substitute for, serious analytical reporting that military correspondents can do—and are doing—far from the battlefield.

Still, the broad constitutional issues remain. No government can be depended upon to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—especially not when that government makes mistakes or misjudgments in wartime. The natural inclination then is to cover up, to hide, and the press’s role, in war even more than in peace, is to act as watchdog and truth-seeker. To do that effectively, it must rely as little as possible on the good wishes, good graces, and good offices of the government. ■

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The Dangers of Disinformation in the War on Terrorism

‘We actually put out a false message to mislead people.’

By Maud S. Beelman

“In wartime,” Winston Churchill once said, “truth is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies.” Two weeks after the September 11 terrorist attacks, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld evoked Churchill’s words when asked for assurances that neither he nor his lieutenants would lie to the media as the United States pursued the war on terrorism and the bombing of Afghanistan. Though Rumsfeld quickly added that he could not envision a situation in which lying would be nec-

essary, this is indeed a “different kind of war,” and the always-present risk of disinformation is heightened precisely because of that.

For reporters covering this war, the challenge is not just in getting unfettered and uncensored access to U.S. troops and the battlefield—a long and mostly losing struggle in the past—but in discerning between information and disinformation. That is made all the more difficult by a 24-hour news cycle, advanced technology, and the military’s growing fondness for a discipline it

calls “Information Operations.” IO, as it is known, groups together information functions ranging from public affairs (PA, the military spokespersons corps) to military deception and psychological operations, or PSYOP. What this means is that people whose job traditionally has been to talk to the media and divulge truthfully what they are able to tell now work hand-in-glove with those whose job it is to support battlefield operations with information, not all of which may be truthful.

At the core of a civilian-controlled

military and a free press, these blurred roles are fueling an intense debate within the uniformed ranks. "It's one of the biggest issues now that has to be resolved," said one military spokesman. "The reason public affairs has been so successful is because reporters trust us. You destroy our credibility and you take away our usefulness."

"The idea was the battlefield can be shaped by information, so it's necessary to conduct robust information operations in support of the battlefield," said another military official familiar with the IO doctrine. The problem, he added, is that "everyone has a different idea of what it means.... We have created a sort of a monster."

In August 1996, the U.S. Army issued field manual 100-6, outlining its vision of Information Operations. "Information and the knowledge that flows from it empower soldiers and their leaders. When transformed into capabilities, information is the currency of victory," the manual said. It noted that "the Army has shown considerable strength in applying both PSYOP and deception to military operations," adding that "PSYOP elements must work closely with other [command and control warfare] elements and PA strategists to maximize the advantage of IO." The manual stated that IO "does not sanction in any way actions intended to mislead or manipulate media coverage of military operations." But that risk is precisely what worries those familiar with this doctrine.

In peacetime, public affairs and PSYOP both deal in the truth, military spokesmen insist. "There is no black information," the military official said, referring to deception. "But in a war situation, it's different." In 1988, during the Iran-Iraq war, Pentagon officials leaked word that a U.S. aircraft carrier would be delayed in departing for the Persian Gulf. In reality, it headed to the region immediately.

"We actually put out a false message to mislead people," Jay Coupe, former spokesman for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, explained to *The Washington Post* in a September 24 article. "The idea was not to give information about the movement of our carrier. We were trying to

confuse people." In a letter to the editor four days later, Coupe sought to clarify that "no public affairs personnel were involved in the message's preparation or release. It was a strictly internal message put out within military operational circles with the expectation that it might be leaked. And that is exactly what happened." In his experience, military public affairs officials "never lied to journalists," Coupe wrote. "That distinction is important, and I am confident it will remain the military's policy."

The shift in U.S. military policy on information can be traced to the "information-control techniques" employed by the British military during the 1982 Falklands War, according to a 1991 study of U.S. military media restrictions from Grenada to the Persian Gulf by Jacqueline Sharkey and the Center for Public Integrity. The British model—influenced by the Pentagon's experience with media coverage of Vietnam—was based on the premise of "pre-censorship," whereby media access to military operations and information was restricted, the study said.

Ten years later, during the wars in former Yugoslavia—where a previously entrenched international press corps made access restrictions nearly impossible—the British military sought to manage the message, truthful or otherwise, in support of the United Nations and NATO mission. Put simply, they routinely lied to reporters and did so with vigor and the conviction that the importance of an accurate and independent press was subordinate to military strategy and success.

That the United States and Britain are now the two major executors of the war on terrorism further raises the risk that reporters will be subjected to disinformation. This is worrisome enough, but it becomes even more so with advanced technology and the voracious 24-hour news cycle.

In the summer of 1997, a group of senior Pentagon officers and military reporters gathered for a retreat aimed at improving their often rocky relationship. The Pentagon was 18 months into a successful Bosnian peacekeeping deployment, and reporters were

getting good access to the troops. The mood was upbeat, and it appeared, for a while, that historic tensions might have eased. That is until talk turned to psychological operations, disinformation and public affairs.

One of the guest speakers at the conference showed how video images could be created and/or altered electronically, and without detection, unless the creator inserted an electronic watermark to indicate it was a fabrication. But if the creator's intent was to misinform, the presenter said, then there would be no watermark, and the doctored image would be indistinguishable from reality.

With the Pentagon's fleet of EC-130 "Commando Solo" aircraft—capable of inserting radio and TV programming into national broadcast systems—the implications of such electronic wizardry were obvious. First, journalists monitoring local media in a war zone would need to question constantly whether what they were receiving was U.S. military disinformation. Assuming they asked, would the military take the reporters into its confidence to spare them from spreading the disinformation? The officers at the retreat responded that they would not.

If Information Operations is a battlefield strategy, then information is the weapon. Rumsfeld has publicly warned Pentagon staffers against discussing military operations with the media, saying those who did so would be breaking federal criminal law "and should be in jail." His deputy, Paul Wolfowitz, issued a memo urging staffers to "exercise great caution in discussing information related to DOD (Department of Defense) work, regardless of their duties," making no distinction between classified and unclassified information. And Victoria Clarke, a former public relations executive who is Rumsfeld's spokeswoman, is focusing on "message development" in dealing with the press.

Controlling the message in a 24-hour news cycle is a key element of Information Operations. While not necessarily disinformation, nonetheless it is a media management technique employed by the military that

results in limiting critical reporting, especially in crises, when news departments that have cut defense beats rush inexperienced reporters to the front.

This technique was used to great effect in NATO's air campaign over Kosovo in 1999, an operation in which "spin doctors" from Washington and London agreed on "the message" and then through a series of sequential briefings at Alliance headquarters in Brussels and in London and Washington fed the 24-hour news machine. "They would gorge the media with information," said one spokesman. "When you make the media happy, the media will not look for the rest of the story."

In the war on terrorism, Washington and London have established 24-hour information centers at the White House and 10 Downing Street, with a third center in Pakistan, in a similar model of across-time-zone briefings to keep the message on point.

Major Gary Pounder, the chief of intelligence plans and presentations at

the College of Aerospace Doctrine, Research and Education at Maxwell Air Force Base, has noted the "cultural gap between the public affairs officer and the 'information warrior.'" But, in an article in *Aerospace Power Journal*, he concluded that "despite reservations about lost credibility, PA must play a central role in future IO efforts—the public information battle space is simply too important to ignore." Pounder went on to observe that "IO practitioners...must recognize that much of the information war will be waged in the public media, necessitating the need for PA participation. PA specialists...need to become full partners in the IO planning and execution process, developing the skills and expertise required to win the media war."

So the war on terrorism is also an information war, and the implications of that for the media are daunting. "Call it public diplomacy, or public affairs, or psychological warfare, or—if you really want to be blunt—propaganda," former U.N. Ambassador Rich-

ard Holbrooke, a message meister when he was special envoy to Bosnia, wrote in the October 28 issue of *The Washington Post*. Arguing that the United States had to better define the war on terrorism for the Muslim world, Holbrooke called for, among other things, the creation of a special White House office to "direct" public affairs activities at state, defense, justice, the CIA, and Agency for International Development. "The battle of ideas...is as important as any other aspect of the struggle we are now engaged in. It must be won."

One can only hope that the truth will win, too. ■

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President Harry Truman Enlisted Journalists in the Cold War

Are there parallels between then and now?

By Nancy Bernhard

In 1950, President Harry Truman addressed the American Society of Newspaper Editors, seeking to enlist the assembled journalists in a "Campaign of Truth" to win the cold war. He began by noting that democracy hinged on the quality of information people received through the news media. The nation's defense against Soviet propaganda, he told them, was "truth—plain, simple, unvarnished truth—presented by the newspapers, radio, newsreels, and other sources that the people trust." False conceptions about the United States were held overseas, Truman warned, because of the success of communist messages.

The President alerted his audience to the possibility that the Kremlin wanted to take over the United States,

but assured them that their cooperation would help prevent that outcome. He'd directed his secretary of state, Dean Acheson, to wage this campaign of truth and to enlist "our great public information channels" to this cause.

Truman explicitly asked for ideological support for the national security state, and none of the assembled newsmen blanched at this enlistment to propagandize.

The President's request that day was part of deliberate strategy to sustain what was then believed to be a long-time struggle against the forces of communism. For a people just emerging from the military engagements of World War II, there was little will to remilitarize for a worldwide fight against communism. Sensing this, Edward Barrett,

assistant secretary of state for public affairs, created a public information plan as a way of overcoming resistance to large foreign expenditures. Barrett was confident he could "whip up" public sentiment, and once he'd stirred the public's fears, he'd follow soon with information about the government's program to meet the threat. At times he referred to this operation as a "psychological scare campaign." Success, for him, would be measured by how much demand for government action came from frightened citizens.

Since the events of September 11, a similar strategy and rhetoric can be heard in the words and reactions of Victoria Clarke, assistant secretary of defense for public affairs, when she speaks about cooperation between the

Is the Press Up to the Task of Reporting These Stories?

An investigative journalist examines the evidence and shares his concerns.

By James Bamford

It was the perfect storm. A massive, Pearl Harbor-style surprise attack from abroad; a spreading, bioterrorism plague at home; a country caught in the numbing grip of fear; an endless war against a vague enemy; and an administration determined to recast the news to its own liking. In a whirlwind of government-mandated secrecy, censorship and press intimidation, many of journalism's most hard-won principals and tools are being lost. At the same time, precious civil liberties are being trashed and Orwellian internal surveillance measures are being instituted, all in the name of security. Where are the hard-hitting investigative journalists now that they are most needed?

More than any other conflict in history, this is a war for—and against—information. “This is the most information-intensive war you can imagine,” one military officer involved in the planning told *The Washington Post*'s Howard Kurtz. “We’re going to lie about things.”

Leading the charge from his secret bunker is Vice President Dick Cheney, a man who dislikes the press “big time.” A decade earlier, as secretary of defense, he took aim at journalists who failed to follow in lock step behind the administration's Panama and Persian Gulf War policies. *Time* magazine's photographer, Wesley Bocke, was even blindfolded and detained for 30 hours by U.S. National Guard troops for dis-

obeying Cheney's press coverage restrictions.

Cheney's harsh rules led to protests from numerous news organizations. In a letter to the defense chief, senior executives from *Time* and CNN argued that the restrictions gave Pentagon personnel “virtual total control...over the American press.” They bitterly complained that Cheney's policies “blocked, impeded or diminished” the “flow of information to the public” during the Gulf War. In an earlier letter, *Time*'s managing editor charged that the restrictions were “unacceptable” and marked “the formal re-imposition of censorship for the first time since Korea in an actual wartime situation.” *Newsday*'s Patrick J. Sloyan,

government and journalists. “We have the same end-goal,” she said on National Public Radio's “The Connection.” Likewise, senior White House advisor Karl Rove has conducted a series of meetings with television and film industry executives.

Of course, journalists chafe at such talk because it belies their professional identity as skeptics and cynics who cannot be fooled by government propaganda. Yet very few journalists find or develop alternate patterns of sourcing in times of military crisis. When they have done end-runs around official information by, for example, covering the war from an opponent's capital, they have been widely reviled. When Harrison Salisbury went to Hanoi in 1966, or when Peter Arnett remained in Baghdad in 1991, national security hard-liners accused them of treason.

Back in 1950, it would have been professional suicide for a journalist to question whether communism posed a genuine threat to the United States or

whether massive militarization was an appropriate response. Instead, the press directed its energies toward policing the sufficiency of the government's response which, in effect, testily egged the government on to ever-greater heights of vigilance and aggression against the enemy.

Today, most journalists do not dare question the appropriateness of a massive military response to the September 11 attacks. Instead, like their counterparts of decades past, they are feisty in defense of the war's unrealized goals and the insufficiency of the government's efforts to fulfill the policy—the destruction of Al Qaeda and the Taliban while minimizing civilian casualties, sustaining a coalition, and preventing more terrorism at home. Similarly, the Bush administration faces its own concerns about how to sustain public support for an expensive, long-term and largely covert war. Public support began remarkably high but can be expected to wane as Opera-

tion “Enduring Freedom” experiences failures.

Those people whose job it is to maintain public support will surely follow Barrett's example by reminding us of the dangers lurking in our midst and then try to reassure us that the government will do everything possible and necessary to triumph over this evil. Journalists will keep after officials to make good on their promises and vanquish the threat, and we will have overwhelmingly unified coverage, as well as the illusion of a responsible press in pursuit of its watchdog role. ■

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