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Correction Appended

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Body

The mission of military public affairs (PA) practitioners is to transmit truthful information about the U.S. military to the press and various publics. "The truth - it's what we're all about," retired Brig. Gen. Ronald Sconyers, the former head of Air Force PA, once said.

But now, in this era of myriad new threats to U.S. national security, the public affairs role has become a symbolic element in a heated theoretical and doctrinal debate within the U.S. Defense Department, and elsewhere, over how best to manage information operations (IO) in the ongoing war on terrorism. This is due in no small measure to the fact that Islamic terrorists seem to be winning increasing numbers of "hearts and minds" in their countries through media reports, according to AFJ interviews with numerous military and civilian officials and journalists.

Winning the hearts-and-minds battle certainly is not up to only the U.S. military, according to a September study by the Defense Science Board, an independent panel of experts that advises the secretary of defense on various issues. The report said that many agencies need to more effectively communicate U.S. government policies to populations abroad.

Within the Defense Department, the entire IO mission came into question late last year after the Pentagon acknowledged that a Marine PA lieutenant, during an interview with international news outlet CNN (January AFJ), may have misrepresented the unfolding situation in Fallujah. If he was intentionally misleading, which has not been determined and has been denied by top PA people in Iraq, he would have been working more as an information operations functionary than as a public affairs officer, which is raising deep concerns, especially among public affairs professionals and journalists.

Further, as this debate rages, some critics have accused the military of misrepresenting the facts relating to the capture of Army Pvt. Jessica Lynch and the friendly fire death of Army Sgt. Pat Tillman, a former NFL football player, to make both appear more heroic. For their part, PA people denied they misrepresented the facts.

STRETCHING THE TRUTH

The Lynch and Tillman cases nevertheless may have been part of an IO effort to pick up the spirits of the American people by stretching the truth, some critics believe, because IO people were talking to reporters independently of the PA people.

Essentially, as the military sees it, the term "information operations" applies to offensive and defensive activities that support and enhance the national security of the United States, both at home and abroad. In short, IO can include

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anything from a widespread Internet campaign against the enemy to an intelligence sweep by a reconnaissance aircraft, and it can include the circulation of false information from time to time.

And while few people inside the Defense Department and the services would argue in favor of intentionally giving false information to the press, some have embraced the idea of "managing" the news much more aggressively, a concept that started to take shape nearly three years ago when Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld gave tacit approval to the short-lived Office of Strategic Influence (OSI). OSI was disbanded after The New York Times reported in February 2002 that the new group "was developing plans to provide news items, possibly even false ones, to foreign media organizations."

A subsequent investigation by the Defense Department never found any direct references to providing false information to the media, according to military sources. But people deeply familiar with the organization believe its only goal was to manage the news, even if the information was occasionally false. The dissemination of "disinformation" long has been part of warfare but never so blatantly addressed through an organization like OSI, according to experts.

President Bush, for his part, ordered that the OSI be shut down immediately in early 2002, which it was, although Rumsfeld in the fall of that year told reporters, according to a Defense Department transcript, "And then there was the Office of Strategic Influence. You may recall that. And 'oh my goodness gracious isn't that terrible, Henny Penny, the sky is going to fall.' I went down that next day and said fine, if you want to savage this thing, fine, I'll give you the corpse. There's the name. You can have the name, but I'm gonna keep doing every single thing that needs to be done, and I have."

And now, more than two years after Rumsfeld made that statement, the issue has flared anew after both the Fallujah incident and a decision by the top military commander in Iraq to place PA officers under the supervision of IO commanders - a rare (some say unprecedented) move - in the recent history of U.S warfare.

'CLEAR AND DISTINCT' SEPARATION

Although the PA function is only one component of the military's massive information apparatus, its mission nevertheless is viewed as sacrosanct by many in the military and the press; any attempt to use PAs in a disinformation campaign could have a lasting impact on the military's credibility, said some of the people interviewed by AFJ.

To some military people, however, the transformation of Iraq and Afghanistan into beacons of democracy is far more important than whether a PA occasionally may be forced to stretch the truth a bit to achieve the ultimate goal. But, for their part, public affairs people and IO policymakers remain adamant that the two are distinct.

"With respect to DoD policy, there has always been, and there will continue to be, a clear and distinct separation between public affairs and information operations," Army Lt. Col. Chris Conway, a Defense Department spokesman, told AFJ. "The mission of public affairs has not changed. DoD spokespersons tell the truth, as their job is to inform and educate."

Conway added that the Pentagon's Principles of Information call for spokespersons to provide "timely and accurate

information."

Meanwhile, the continuing debate over information management comes as U.S. casualties continue to rise, and as the terrorist enemy, by some accounts, seems to be doing a better job winning support from many ordinary Iraqis than American forces.

"We can't get the true story out," a contractor working in Iraq and Afghanistan told AFJ. "There is a lot of good news about our operations in the Middle East that isn't getting out to the people in those countries, or to the American people. For one thing, we are helping build massive irrigation projects in that region of the world, and none of that is reported. In Iraq, I have worked with many peasant farmers who are grateful we are there and grateful Saddam is gone. I have thousands of Iraqis working in my office who fully support what we are doing there."

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The contractor, a former military helicopter pilot who asked not to be identified, said, "A lot of us distrust the media because we don't think you're telling the full story."

The contractor is hardly alone in that assessment. As terrorists continue to thrive, increasing numbers of commanders have warmed to the idea of using PA operatives in a range of IO missions, AFJ was told. Consider this statement from a PA document at the Air Force Doctrine Center:

"Commanders should make public affairs operations part of their information operations (IO) planning ... public-affairs operations are part of information-in-warfare activities, which collect and disseminate unclassified information, and also may support some information warfare activities," according to the document.

The document went on to explain, "The synergistic effects of integrating public affairs operations into IO planning significantly enhance a commander's ability to achieve military objectives."

Nothing in the PA document is surprising; public affairs long has been considered useful in helping publicize the military's mission in an effective manner. At the same time, public affairs officers and enlisted people understand fully that intentionally misinforming the U.S. public, Congress or media "about military capabilities and intentions in ways that influence U.S. decision makers and public opinion" violates long-standing Defense Department rules.

Therefore, PA people traditionally have been kept away from situations where they might be forced to mislead the press and the public, creating a firewall of sorts between them and psychological operations (PsyOps) outfits that might, for the sake of national security, be forced to disseminate specious information from time to time.

But in the last few months alone, that long-standing firewall between PA and the other information missions has cracked in the wake of Army Gen. George W. Casey Jr.'s decision last summer to create a strategic communications office in Iraq that combines public affairs with the information and psychological components.

By doing that, Casey, the head of U.S. forces in Iraq, may have created a situation where PA officers feel pressured to stretch the truth, if not lie outright, some military people believe. Others, however, contend that the PA and IO organizations certainly should be aware of each other's activities, so long as it is made clear the functions of the two often are at cross-purposes.

While a memorandum last year from Air Force Gen. Richard Meyers, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, supported the idea of PA and IO people knowing what the other was doing, the memo also urged caution when dealing with the missions of each.

"While organizations may be inclined to create physically integrated PA/IO offices, such organizational constructs have the potential to compromise the commander's credibility with the media and the public," the memo said.

FALSE START

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Meyers' concerns were underscored last year after a Marine lieutenant, Lyle Gilbert, may have misled CNN in a much-publicized case.

After the incident became public in December, thanks to a Los Angeles Times reporter, the Pentagon's top spokesman, Lawrence DiRita, conceded in an interview with reporters: "We are looking into reports where people may have gotten more creative than they should have."

Was it creativity by Gilbert or part of a clear effort by U.S. military leaders to manage the war effort by planting misinformation with news outlets? That is a question under heavy debate now, at the Pentagon, throughout the military and in television and print newsrooms across the country.

Here is what happened in the Gilbert case. In the Oct. 14 interview with CNN, he said the military's major offensive in the Iraqi city of Fallujah was underway, although it did not actually begin until three weeks later.

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U.S. forces had "crossed the line of departure, kicking off a significant security operation in and near the city of Fallujah" Gilbert told CNN. "We had artillery fire, prep fire going out. Aircraft have been moving through the area all day, helicopters providing transport. It's been a pretty uncomfortable time."

The Oct. 14 operation involved two battalions attacking insurgent positions near Fallujah. It would be several weeks before six Marine and Army battalions would launch the major operation to retake the city.

Almost as soon as Gilbert's comments "hit CNN, people we deal with, military and civilian, were aggressively knocking it down, warning us to stay away from it," Jim Miklaszewski, the chief Pentagon correspondent for NBC News, told AFJ. "And we immediately saw that it couldn't be right, that it was way premature."

Another veteran Pentagon correspondent, who asked not to be identified, told AFJ it was very clear to him that the U.S. military, through Gilbert, "was trying to rattle the enemy. It looks like the military was targeting CNN because they reach the international audience. There wasn't much point targeting me."

Gilbert, for his part, later said his Oct. 14 statement was carefully worded to avoid creating the impression that the limited strike was the start of an all-out attempt to retake Fallujah.

Many media representatives, however, concluded the limited strike and Gilbert's statement were intended to deceive the insurgents into believing the major assault was underway.

The Gilbert incident underscores the intensity of the debate about how to best use information, whether over the Internet or the airwaves, to advance the U.S. war effort.

In an article about the Gilbert incident on its Web site, CNN said, "The interview with Gilbert was unusual. He appeared on air only because military officials contacted CNN and said they had someone ready on the scene to discuss major unfolding developments that night."

If military leaders in Iraq were intending to deliberately use CNN to "rattle the enemy," a Pentagon source said, they did not do it effectively because no other electronic or print outlet picked up the article. Also, no Defense Department spokespeople supported Gilbert's statements as he was making them, military sources said.

DEFINING INFO OPS

As the theoretical and doctrinal debate over the role of public affairs continues, the military is investing billions of

...the doctrinal and doctrinal debate over the role of public affairs commands, the primary is increasing billions of dollars to improve and widen its IO efforts.

The doctrinal definition of IO, according to military officials, is the "integrated employment" of the core capabilities of electronic warfare, computer network operations (CNO), psychological operations, military deception and operations and cyber security in concert with specified support and related capabilities to influence, disrupt, corrupt or usurp adversarial human and automated decision-making while protecting U.S. assets. Here is how IO operations are evolving:

- Electronic warfare - As the entire world becomes more automated, the U.S. military has stepped up its use of electronic warfare missions, using a range of Air Force, Navy, Marine and Army platforms to gather information, and block the enemy from doing the same thing.
- Computer network operations - The Pentagon in 1998 opened the Joint Task Force on Computer Network Defense "to direct the operation and defense" of the country as pertaining to global information, officials said. Now, the agency is known as the Joint Task Force-Global Network Operations and is a component of the U.S. Strategic Command at Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska.
- Psychological operations - A sophisticated and highly classified part of the military, PsyOps operations are ongoing throughout the world. They can range from the dropping of leaflets on a targeted area to e-mail and other Internet communication with foreign populations. Throughout the history of American warfare, PsyOps activities have been crucial.

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- Military deception - A highly classified area, this IO category, according to military doctrine, involves actions that are "taken deliberately to mislead adversary decision makers."
- Operations and cyber security - The Pentagon faces the daunting task of protecting untold amounts of information throughout the services daily, ranging from sophisticated tracking systems on aircraft to computer systems used by personnel units in the United States.

This mission falls under operations and cyber security. Since Sept. 11, the Pentagon has worked closely with the Department of Homeland Security and various civilian agencies to safeguard data, although fears are growing that the Bush administration is not doing enough in this area. A group called the Cyber Security Industry Alliance recently asked the Bush administration to pay more attention to this issue.

"The executive branch must exert more leadership" regarding cyber security, said Paul Kurtz, the alliance's director and a former senior cyber-security official in the Bush administration.

The U.S. military also closely monitors the media in the Middle East, including two U.S.-subsidized stations. The TV station, al Hurra, and the radio station, Sawa, are intended to counteract the influence of the powerful al Jazeera and other Arab networks, including the relatively moderate al Arabyia.

Overall, critics add, the entire U.S. effort to manage information in Iraq has fallen behind the terrorists.

"The opposition is doing better, PR-wise, than the official Americans and Iraqis," Arab newsman Nabil Khatib told The New York Times recently. "The militants are ready with a video of masked men ... a half-hour after the story breaks."

Even so, any attempt to use U.S. military public affairs as purveyors of false information, even if the goal is a just one, would be incredibly ill-advised and harmful to the military's overall image among the American people, NBC's Miklaszewski said. ·

Correction

4 COLOR PHOTOS. ONE PHOTO IS OF AN ARMY HELMET, AND ONE IS OF PRESS MICROPHONES.

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