

A Few Truths

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Friday, September 15, 2006

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A delightfully eerie piece about American military propaganda is engaging minds at Alternet.org right now. It is called "[Rumsfeld's Fake News Flop in Iraq](#)" and is reprinted below. I have a mere few reactions:

Osama bin Laden is America's Emmanuel Goldstein from Orwell's *1984*. **Not** wanted, dead or alive. The longer he is at large, the longer the fear-mongering continues.

w.Caesar can remain so optimistic about the prospects for success in Iraq because his reality is a construct of his beliefs. "Greeted as liberators" has merely been delayed. He believes they will prevail, so the rest of our realities have relatively less sway over him. He is the resolute decision maker. He decides reality in a Philip K. Dick kind of way.

I'm not sure why we're so shocked at PSYOPs being pointed domestically--and I pick it up in Canada too through the dominating American media and Canadian sycophantic replicants. The enemy is one who confronts the agenda. Many enemies are domestic or living among allied countries. In this light, there is nothing wrong with treating the subversives [or cut-and-runners] as they treat their beloved Islamofascists.

Neil Postman's writing about edutainment tracks the increasing difficulty North American teachers are having developing functional critical thinking skills among students. When the government itself is assaulting the minds of its citizenry with PSYOPs, it is that much harder to facilitate a process whereby the public can evaluate the messages we are bombarded with, particularly from government, the corporate feudalists and corporate media.

Burson-Marsteller is the devil's publicist.

Again, we should not be so shocked that exporting a perverted sense of democracy to Iraq includes planted truth-truncated and one-sided news reports: "*The planted stories were 'basically factual,' U.S. officials told the Los Angeles Times, although they admitted that they presented only one side of events and omitted information that might reflect poorly on the U.S. or Iraqi governments.*" North American media continues to imply their objectivity, yet the censorship and bias from such corporate concentration is intolerable.

Soft fascists are threatened by a free press. Hard fascists simply quash it. *1984* was about a totalitarian state controlling information. And to follow Neil Postman's lead here, *Brave New World* is all about convincing people they don't want to read anyway.

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The following is an excerpt from *The Best War Ever: Lies, Damned Lies, and the Mess in Iraq* by Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber (Tarcher, 2006).

The danger of negative news, according to President Bush, is that it may undermine morale and support for the war, as Americans "look at the violence they see each night on their television screens and they wonder how I can remain so optimistic about the prospects of success in Iraq." But propaganda itself is a danger to the nation, as the United States has long recognized, both in theory and in law. In 1948, Congress, concerned by what it had seen propaganda do to Hitler's Germany, passed the Smith-Mundt Act, a law that forbids domestic dissemination of U.S. government materials intended for foreign audiences.

The law is so strict that programming from Voice of America, the government's overseas news service, may not be broadcast to domestic audiences. Legislators were concerned that giving any U.S. administration access to the government's tools for influencing opinion overseas would undermine the democratic process at home. Since 1951, this concern has also been expressed in the appropriations acts passed each year by Congress, which include language that stipulates, "No part of any appropriation contained in this or any other Act shall be used for publicity or propaganda purposes within the United States not heretofore authorized by Congress."

Economic and media globalization, however, have shrunk the planet in ways that blur the distinction between foreign and domestic propaganda. This has been acknowledged in the U.S. Defense Department's Information Operations Roadmap, a 74-page document approved in 2003 by Donald Rumsfeld. It noted that "information intended for foreign audiences, including public diplomacy and PSYOP [psychological operations], increasingly is consumed by our domestic audience and vice-versa. PSYOP messages disseminated to any audience... will often be replayed by the news media for much larger audiences, including the American public."

This ought to be of particular concern to Americans because the Pentagon's doctrine for psychological operations specifically contemplates "actions to convey and (or) deny selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, and objective reasoning. ... In various ways, perception management combines truth projection, operations security, cover, and deception, and psyops."

An example of a psyops operation that used "deception" in Iraq occurred during the 2004 preparations for the U.S. military assault on Fallujah, which had become a stronghold for insurgents. On October 14, a spokesman for the marines appeared on CNN and announced that the long-awaited military campaign to retake Fallujah had begun. In fact, the announcement was a deliberate falsehood. The announcement on CNN was intended to trick the insurgents so that U.S. commanders could see how they would react to the real offensive, which would not begin until three weeks later. In giving this bit of false information to CNN, however, the marines were not merely reaching a "foreign audience" but also Americans who watch CNN.

Much of the U.S. propaganda effort, however, is aimed not at tactical deception of enemy combatants but at influencing morale and support for the war in the United States. The Office of Media Outreach, a taxpayer-funded arm of the Department of Defense, has offered government-subsidized trips to Iraq for

radio talk-show hosts. "Virtually all expenses are being picked up by the U.S. government, with the exception of broadcasters providing their own means of broadcasting or delivering their content," reported Billboard magazine's Radio Monitor website.

Office of Media Outreach activities included hosting "Operation Truth," a one-week tour of Iraq by right-wing talk-show hosts, organized by Russo Marsh & Rogers, a Republican PR firm based in California that sponsors a conservative advocacy group called Move America Forward. The purpose of the "Truth Tour," they reported on the Move America Forward website, was "to report the good news on Operation Iraqi Freedom you're not hearing from the old line news media... to get the news straight from our troops serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom, including the positive developments and successes they are achieving." Even before the trip began, however, the radio talkers' take on Iraq was already decided. "The war is being won, if not already won, I think," said tour participant Buzz Patterson in a predeparture interview with Fox News. "[Iraq] is stabilized and we want the soldiers themselves to tell the story."

In September 2004, the U.S. military circulated a request for proposals, inviting private public relations firms to apply for a contract to perform an "aggressive" PR and advertising push inside Iraq to include weekly reports on Iraqi public opinion, production of news releases, video news, the training of Iraqis to serve as spokesmen, and creation of a "rebuttal cell" that would monitor all media throughout Iraq, "immediately and effectively responding to reports that unfairly target the Coalition or Coalition interests."

According to the request

for proposals, "Recent polls suggest support for the Coalition is falling and more and more Iraqis are questioning Coalition resolve, intentions, and effectiveness. It is essential to the success of the Coalition and the future of Iraq that the Coalition gain widespread Iraqi acceptance of its core themes and messages."

The contract, valued initially at \$5.4 million, went to Iraqex, a newly formed company based in Washington, D.C., that was set up specifically to provide services in Iraq. Not long thereafter, Iraqex changed its name to the Lincoln Group. Its success in winning the contract "is something of a mystery," the New York Times would report a year later, since the "two men who ran the small business had no background in public relations or the media."

They were: Christian Bailey, a 30-year-old businessman from England, and Paige Craig, a 31-year-old former marine intelligence officer. Before taking the PR job in Iraq, they had racked up a string of short-lived businesses such as Express Action, an Internet-based shipping company that raised \$14 million in startup financing during the dot-com boom but disappeared within two years; or Motion Power, an attempt to invent a shoe that would generate electrical power.⁴⁵ Bailey had also been active with Lead21, a fund-raising and networking operation for young Republicans.

Shortly before the commencement of war in Iraq, he set up shop in Iraq, offering "tailored intelligence services" for "government clients faced with critical intelligence challenges." In its various incarnations, Iraqex/Lincoln dabbled in real estate, published a short-lived online business publication called the Iraq Business Journal, and tried its hand at exporting scrap metal, manufacturing construction materials, and providing logistics for U.S. forces before finally striking gold with the Pentagon PR contract.

Lincoln partnered initially with the Rendon Group, a public relations firm that had already played a major role in leading the U.S. into war through its work for Ahmed Chalabi and his Iraqi National Congress. A few weeks later, Rendon dropped out of the project and left Lincoln in charge. Lincoln hired another Washington-based public relations firm as a subcontractor -- BKSH & Associates, headed by Republican political strategist Charles R. Black, Jr. BKSH is a subsidiary of Burson-Marsteller, a PR firm whose previous experience in Iraq also included work for Chalabi and the Iraqi National Congress. Other Pentagon contracts for public relations work were awarded to SYColeman Inc. of Arlington, Virginia, and Science Applications International Corporation. All totaled, the PR contracts added up to \$300 million over a five-year period.

On November 30, 2005 -- the same day that Bush gave his "Plan for Victory" speech to naval cadets -- taxpayers got their first glimpse at what was being done with their money. The Los Angeles Times reported that the U.S. military was "secretly paying Iraqi newspapers to publish stories written by American troops in an effort to burnish the image of the U.S. mission in Iraq. The articles, written by U.S. military 'information operations' troops, are translated into Arabic and placed in Baghdad newspapers."

In an effort to mask any connection with the military, the Pentagon had employed the Lincoln Group to translate and place the stories. When delivering the stories to media outlets in Baghdad, Lincoln's staff and subcontractors had sometimes posed as freelance reporters or advertising executives. The amounts paid ranged from \$50 to \$2,000 per story placed. All told, the Lincoln Group had planted more than one thousand stories in the Iraqi and Arab press. The U.S. Army also went directly into the journalism business itself, launching a publication called Baghdad Now, with articles written by some of its Iraqi translators, who received training in journalism from a sergeant in the First Armored Division's Public Affairs Office. The U.S. also founded and financed the Baghdad Press Club, ostensibly a gathering place for Iraqi journalists. In December 2005, however, it was revealed that the military had also been using the press club to pay journalists for writing stories favorable to the U.S. and the occupation. For each story they wrote and placed in an Iraqi newspaper, they received \$25, or \$45 if the story ran with photos.

The planted stories were "basically factual," U.S. officials told the Los Angeles Times, although they admitted that they presented only one side of events and omitted information that might reflect poorly on the U.S. or Iraqi governments. Actually, though, concealing the fact that the stories were written and paid for by the United States was itself a form of deception. Concealment of sponsorship, in fact, is the very standard by which the U.S. Government Accountability Office defines propaganda. In a 1988 report that has served as a standard ever since, the GAO stated, "Our decisions have defined covert propaganda as materials such as editorials or other articles prepared by an agency or its contractors at the behest of the agency and circulated as the ostensible position of parties outside the agency. ... A critical element of covert propaganda is the concealment of the agency's role in sponsoring such material."

"In the very process of preventing misinformation from another side, they are creating misinformation through a process that disguises the source for information that is going out," said John J. Schulz, the dean of Boston University's College of Communications. "You can't be creating a model for democracy while subverting one of its core principles, a free independent press." When the program was exposed, government officials responded with contradictory statements. The White House denied any knowledge of the program, and Donald Rumsfeld said at first that it was "troubling." General Peter Pace, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said he was "concerned." In Iraq, however, a military spokesman said the program was "an important part of countering misinformation in the news by insurgents." A couple of

months later, Rumsfeld claimed that the pay-for-praise operation had been shut down. "When we heard about it, we said, 'Gee, that's not what we ought to be doing' and told the people down there. ... They stopped doing that," Rumsfeld told interviewer Charlie Rose during an appearance on public television. However, he said, "It wasn't anything terrible that happened," and he argued that U.S. media exposure of the program was unfortunate because it would have a "chilling effect" on "anyone involved in public affairs in the military," preventing them from doing "anything that the media thinks is not exactly the way we do it in America."

The problem, in other words, was not that the United States was running a covert propaganda operation. The problem was that there were still independent journalists in the United States capable of straying from the script. Even more unfortunately for Rumsfeld, those same journalists happened to notice that he was not telling the truth when he said the program had been shut down. Four days after his interview with Charlie Rose, Rumsfeld was forced to admit that he had been "mistaken" and that the program was merely "under review." A couple of weeks later General George Casey, the top U.S. commander in Iraq, said the military's review had found that it was acting "within our authorities and responsibilities" in paying to place stories in the press, and that it had no plans to stop.

It is difficult to imagine that Rumsfeld and other White House officials were as naive as they pretended to be when they denied knowledge of the Lincoln Group's activities, since Lincoln's work was closely coordinated with the Pentagon's psychological operations unit, a 1,200-person organization based in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, whose media center was so large that the New York Times called it "the envy of any global communications company." The Pentagon had spent \$57.6 million on contracts to the Rendon Group and Lincoln Group

p -- an amount that "is more than the annual newsroom budget allotted to most American newsrooms to cover all the news from everywhere for an entire year," observed Paul McLeary, a politics and media reporter for the Columbia Journalism Review. Spending on that scale, he added, "sure sounds like well-financed policy to us -- and a well-coordinated one as well -- and not one hatched by low-level officials who never let their bosses at the White House in on what they were doing."

Interviews with Lincoln Group employees also undercut the claim that their work was some kind of rogue operation. "In clandestine parlance, Lincoln Group was a 'cutout' -- a third party -- that would provide the military with plausible deniability," said a former Lincoln Group employee in an interview with the Los Angeles Times. "To attribute products to [the military] would defeat the entire purpose," he said. "Hence, no product by Lincoln Group ever said 'Made in the U.S.A.'"

Another former Lincoln employee openly scoffed at the program on grounds that it was having no effect on Iraqi public opinion: "In my own estimation, this stuff has absolutely no effect, and it's a total waste of money. Every Iraqi can read right through it."

The question, then, is who was believing it? Just who was the United States really fooling? The answer is that it was mostly fooling itself.

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Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber are the authors of, most recently, *The Best War Ever: Lies, Damned Lies, and the Mess in Iraq* by Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber (Tarcher, 2006). Stauber is the founder

and director of the Center for Media & Democracy. Rampton is the founder of the website SourceWatch.org.