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- *From:* "Cytizens Agaynst Lyme Cryme" <[CALC@xxxxxxxxxxx](mailto:CALC@xxxxxxxxxxx)>
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Military's Information War Is Vast and Often Secretive

By Jeff Gerth

The New York Times

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The media center in Fayetteville, N.C., would be the envy of any global communications company.

In state of the art studios, producers prepare the daily mix of music and news for the group's radio stations or spots for friendly television outlets. Writers putting out newspapers and magazines in Baghdad and Kabul converse via teleconferences. Mobile trailers with high-tech gear are parked outside, ready for the next crisis.

The center is not part of a news organization, but a military operation, and those writers and producers are soldiers. The 1,200-strong psychological operations unit based at Fort Bragg turns out what its officers call "truthful messages" to support the United States government's objectives, though its commander acknowledges that those stories are one-sided and their American sponsorship is hidden.

"We call our stuff information and the enemy's propaganda," said Col. Jack N. Summe, then the commander of the Fourth Psychological Operations Group, during a tour in June. Even in the Pentagon, "some public affairs professionals see us unfavorably," and inaccurately, he said, as "lying, dirty tricksters."

The recent disclosures that a Pentagon contractor in Iraq paid newspapers to print "good news" articles written by American soldiers prompted an outcry in Washington, where members of Congress said the practice undermined American credibility and top military and White House officials disavowed any knowledge of it. President Bush was described by Stephen J. Hadley, his national security adviser, as "very troubled" about the matter. The Pentagon is investigating.

But the work of the contractor, the Lincoln Group, was not a rogue operation. Hoping to counter anti-American sentiment in the Muslim world, the Bush administration has been conducting an information war that is

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extensive, costly and often hidden, according to documents and interviews with contractors, government officials and military personnel.

The campaign was begun by the White House, which set up a secret panel soon after the Sept. 11 attacks to coordinate information operations by the Pentagon, other government agencies and private contractors.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, the focus of most of the activities, the military operates radio stations and newspapers, but does not disclose their American ties. Those outlets produce news material that is at times attributed to the "International Information Center," an untraceable organization.

Lincoln says it planted more than 1,000 articles in the Iraqi and Arab press and placed editorials on an Iraqi Web site, Pentagon documents show. For an expanded stealth persuasion effort into neighboring countries, Lincoln presented plans, since rejected, for an underground newspaper, television news shows and an anti-terrorist comedy based on "The Three Stooges."

Like the Lincoln Group, Army psychological operations units sometimes pay to deliver their message, offering television stations money to run unattributed segments or contracting with writers of newspaper opinion pieces, military officials said.

"We don't want somebody to look at the product and see the U.S. government and tune out," said Col. James Treadwell, who ran psychological operations support at the Special Operations Command in Tampa.

The United States Agency for International Development also masks its role at times. AID finances about 30 radio stations in Afghanistan, but keeps that from listeners. The agency has distributed tens of thousands of iPod-like audio devices in Iraq and Afghanistan that play prepackaged civic messages, but it does so through a contractor that promises "there is no U.S. footprint."

As the Bush administration tries to build democracies overseas and support a free press, getting out its message is critical. But that is enormously difficult, given widespread hostility in the Muslim world over the war in Iraq, deep suspicion of American ambitions and the influence of antagonistic voices. The American message makers who are wary of identifying their role can cite findings by the Pentagon, pollsters and others underscoring the United States' fundamental problems of credibility abroad.

Defenders of influence campaigns argue that they are appropriate. "Psychological operations are an essential part of warfare, more so in the electronic age than ever," said Lt. Col. Charles A. Krohn, a retired Army spokesman and journalism professor. "If you're going to invade a country and eject its government and occupy its territory, you ought to tell people who live there why you've done it. That requires a well-thought-out communications program."

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But covert information battles may backfire, others warn, or prove ineffective. The news that the American military was buying influence was met mostly with shrugs in Baghdad, where readers tend to be skeptical about the media. An Iraqi daily newspaper, Azzaman, complained in an editorial that the propaganda campaign was an American effort "to humiliate the independent national press." Many Iraqis say that no amount of money spent on trying to mold public opinion is likely to have much impact, given the harsh conditions under the American military occupation.

While the United States does not ban the distribution of government propaganda overseas, as it does domestically, the Government Accountability Office said in a recent report that lack of attribution could undermine the credibility of news videos. In finding that video news releases by the Bush administration that appeared on American television were improper, the G.A.O. said that such articles "are no longer purely factual" because "the essential fact of attribution is missing."

In an article titled "War of the Words," Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld wrote about the importance of disclosure in America's communications in *The Wall Street Journal* in July. "The American system of openness works," he wrote. The United States must find "new and better ways to communicate America's mission abroad," including "a healthy culture of communication and transparency between government and public."

#### Trying to Make a Case

After the Sept. 11 attacks forced many Americans to recognize the nation's precarious standing in the Arab world, the Bush administration decided to act to improve the country's image and promote its values.

"We've got to do a better job of making our case," President Bush told reporters after the attacks.

Much of the government's information machinery, including the United States Information Agency and some C.I.A. programs, was dismantled after the cold war. In that struggle with the Soviet Union, the information warriors benefited from the perception that the United States was backing victims of tyrannical rule. Many Muslims today view Washington as too close to what they characterize as authoritarian regimes in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and elsewhere.

The White House turned to John Rendon, who runs a Washington communications company, to help influence foreign audiences. Before the war in Afghanistan, he helped set up centers in Washington, London and Pakistan so the American government could respond rapidly in the foreign media to Taliban claims. "We were clueless," said Mary Matalin, then the communications aide to Vice President Dick Cheney.

Mr. Rendon's business, the Rendon Group, had a history of government work in trouble spots. In the 1990's, the C.I.A. hired him to secretly help

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the nascent Iraqi National Congress wage a public relations campaign against Saddam Hussein.

While advising the White House, Mr. Rendon also signed on with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, under a \$27.6 million contract, to conduct focus groups around the world and media analysis of outlets like Al Jazeera, the satellite network based in Qatar.

About the same time, the White House recruited Jeffrey B. Jones, a former Army colonel who ran the Fort Bragg psychological operations group, to coordinate the new information war. He led a secret committee, the existence of which has not been previously reported, that dealt with everything from public diplomacy, which includes education, aid and exchange programs, to covert information operations.

The group even examined the president's words. Concerned about alienating Muslims overseas, panel members said, they tried unsuccessfully to stop Mr. Bush from ending speeches with the refrain "God bless America."

The panel, later named the Counter Terrorism Information Strategy Policy Coordinating Committee, included members from the State Department, the Pentagon and the intelligence agencies. Mr. Rendon advised a subgroup on counterpropaganda issues.

Mr. Jones's endeavor stalled within months, though, because of furor over a Pentagon initiative. In February 2002, unnamed officials told The New York Times that a new Pentagon operation called the Office of Strategic Influence planned "to provide news items, possibly even false ones, to foreign news organizations." Though the report was denied and a subsequent Pentagon review found no evidence of plans to use disinformation, Mr. Rumsfeld shut down the office within days.

The incident weakened Mr. Jones's effort to develop a sweeping strategy to win over the Muslim world. The White House grew skittish, some agencies dropped out, and panel members soon were distracted by the war in Iraq, said Mr. Jones, who left his post this year. The White House did not respond to a request to discuss the committee's work.

What had begun as an ambitious effort to bolster America's image largely devolved into a secret propaganda war to counter the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Pentagon, which had money to spend and leaders committed to the cause, took the lead. In late 2002 Mr. Rumsfeld told reporters he gave the press a "corpse" by closing the Office of Strategic Influence, but he intended to "keep doing every single thing that needs to be done."

The Pentagon increased spending on its psychological and influence operations and for the first time outsourced work to contractors. One beneficiary has been the Rendon Group, which won additional multimillion-dollar Pentagon contracts for media analysis and a media operations center in Baghdad, including "damage control planning." The new

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Lincoln Group was another winner.

#### Pentagon Contracts

It is something of a mystery how Lincoln came to land more than \$25 million in Pentagon contracts in a war zone.

The two men who ran the small business had no background in public relations or the media, according to associates and a résumé. Before coming to Washington and setting up Lincoln in 2004, Christian Bailey, born in Britain and now 30, had worked briefly in California and New York. Paige Craig, now 31, was a former Marine intelligence officer.

When the company was incorporated last year, using the name Iraqex, its stated purpose was to provide support services for business development, trade and investment in Iraq. The company's earliest ventures there included providing security to the military and renovating buildings. Iraqex also started a short-lived online business publication.

In mid-2004, the company formed a partnership with the Rendon Group and later won a \$5 million Pentagon contract for an advertising and public relations campaign to "accurately inform the Iraqi people of the Coalition's goals and gain their support." Soon, the company changed its name to Lincoln Group. It is not clear how the partnership was formed; Rendon dropped out weeks after the contract was awarded.

Within a few months, Lincoln shifted to information operations and psychological operations, two former employees said. The company was awarded three new Pentagon contracts, worth tens of millions of dollars, they added. A Lincoln spokeswoman referred a reporter's inquiry about the contracts to Pentagon officials.

The company's work was part of an effort to counter disinformation in the Iraqi press. With nearly \$100 million in United States aid, the Iraqi media has sharply expanded since the fall of Mr. Hussein. There are about 200 Iraqi-owned newspapers and 15 to 17 Iraqi-owned television stations. Many, though, are affiliated with political parties, and are fiercely partisan, with fixed pro- or anti-American stances, and some publish rumors, half-truths and outright lies.

From quarters at Camp Victory, the American base, the Lincoln Group works to get out the military's message.

Lincoln's employees work virtually side by side with soldiers. Army officers supervise Lincoln's work and demand to see details of article placements and costs, said one of the former employees, speaking on condition of anonymity because Lincoln's Pentagon contract prohibits workers from discussing their activities.

"Almost nothing we did did not have the command's approval," he said.

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The employees would take news dispatches, called storyboards, written by the troops, translate them into Arabic and distribute them to newspapers. Lincoln hired former Arab journalists and paid advertising agencies to place the material.

Typically, Lincoln paid newspapers from \$40 to \$2,000 to run the articles as news articles or advertisements, documents provided to The New York Times by a former employee show. More than 1,000 articles appeared in 12 to 15 Iraqi and Arab newspapers, according to Pentagon documents. The publications did not disclose that the articles were generated by the military.

A company worker also often visited the Baghdad convention center, where the Iraqi press corps hung out, to recruit journalists who would write and place opinion pieces, paying them \$400 to \$500 as a monthly stipend, the employees said.

Like the dispatches produced at Fort Bragg, those storyboards were one-sided and upbeat. Each had a target audience, "Iraq General" or "Shi'ia," for example; an underlying theme like "Anti-intimidation" or "Success and Legitimacy of the ISF;" and a target newspaper.

Articles written by the soldiers at Camp Victory often assumed the voice of Iraqis. "We, all Iraqis, are the government. It is our country," noted one article. Another said, "The time has come for the ordinary Iraqi, you, me, our neighbors, family and friends to come together."

While some were plodding accounts filled with military jargon and bureaucratese, others favored the language of tabloids: "blood-thirsty apostates," "crawled on their bellies like dogs in the mud," "dim-witted fanatics," and "terror kingpin."

A former Lincoln employee said the ploy of making the articles appear to be written by Iraqis by removing any American fingerprints was not very effective. "Many Iraqis know it's from Americans," he said.

The military has sought to expand its media influence efforts beyond Iraq to neighboring states, including Saudi Arabia, Syria and Jordan, Pentagon documents say. Lincoln submitted a plan that was subsequently rejected, a Pentagon spokesman said. The company proposed placing editorials in magazines, newspapers and Web sites. In Iraq, the company posted editorials on a Web site, but military commanders stopped the operation for fear that the site's global accessibility might violate the federal ban on distributing propaganda to American audiences, according to Pentagon documents and a former Lincoln employee.

In its rejected plan, the company looked to American popular culture for ways to influence new audiences. Lincoln proposed variations of the satirical paper "The Onion," and an underground paper to be called "The Voice," documents show. And it planned comedies modeled after "Cheers" and the Three Stooges, with the trio as bumbling wannabe terrorists.

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## The Afghan Front

The Pentagon's media effort in Afghanistan began soon after the ouster of the Taliban. In what had been a barren media environment, 350 magazines and newspapers and 68 television and radio stations now operate. Most are independent; the rest are run by the government. The United States has provided money to support the media, as well as training for journalists and government spokesmen.

But much of the American role remains hidden from local readers and audiences.

The Pentagon, for example, took over the Taliban's radio station, renamed it Peace radio and began powerful shortwave broadcasts in local dialects, defense officials said. Its programs include music as well as 9 daily news scripts and 16 daily public service messages, according to Col. James Yonts, a United States military spokesman in Afghanistan. Its news accounts, which sometimes are attributed to the International Information Center, often put a positive spin on events or serve government needs.

The United States Army publishes a sister paper in Afghanistan, also called Peace. An examination of issues from last spring found no bad news.

"We have no requirements to adhere to journalistic principles of objectivity," Colonel Summe, the Army psychological operations specialist, said. "We tell the U.S. side of the story to approved targeted audiences" using truthful information. Neither the radio station nor the paper discloses its ties to the American military.

Similarly, AID does not locally disclose that dozens of Afghanistan radio stations get its support, through grants to a London-based nonprofit group, Internews. (AID discloses its support in public documents in Washington, most of which can be found globally on the Internet.)

The AID representative in Afghanistan, in an e-mail message relayed by Peggy O'Ban, an agency spokeswoman, explained the nondisclosure: "We want to maintain the perception (if not the reality) that these radio stations are in fact fully independent."

Recipients are required to adhere to standards. If a news organization produced "a daily drumbeat of criticism of the American military, it would become an issue," said James Kunder, an AID assistant administrator. He added that in combat zones, the issue of disclosure was a balancing act between security and assuring credibility.

The American role is also not revealed by another recipient of AID grants, Voice for Humanity, a nonprofit organization in Lexington, Ky. It supplied tens of thousands of audio devices in Iraq and Afghanistan with messages intended to encourage people to vote. Rick Ifland, the group's director, said the messages were part of the "positive developments in

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democracy, freedom and human rights in the Middle East."

It is not clear how effective the messages were or what recipients did with the iPod-like devices, pink for women and silver for men, which could not be altered to play music or other recordings.

To show off the new media in Afghanistan, AID officials invited Ms. Matalin, the former Cheney aide and conservative commentator, and the talk show host Rush Limbaugh to visit in February. Mr. Limbaugh told his listeners that students at a journalism school asked him "some of the best questions about journalism and about America that I've ever been asked."

One of the first queries, Mr. Limbaugh said, was "How do you balance justice and truth and objectivity?"

His reply: report the truth, don't hide any opinions or "interest in the outcome of events." Tell "people who you are," he said, and "they'll respect your credibility."

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Carlotta Gall and Ruhullah Khapalwak contributed reporting from Afghanistan for this article.

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- ***Follow-Ups:***
    - ◆ ***How Uther Pendragon sent for the duke of Cornwall and Igraine his wife, and of their departing suddenly again.***
      - ◇ *From: Yukon King*
  - Prev by Date: ***How Sir Percivale came to a recluse and asked counsel, and how she told him that she was his aunt.***
  - Next by Date: ***How Sir Bors met with an hermit, and how he was confessed to him, and of his penance enjoined to him.***
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