



U.S. MILITARY COVERTLY PAYS TO RUN STORIES IN IRAQI PRESS

Mark Mazzetti and Borzou Daragahi

WASHINGTON, November 30, 2005 — As part of an information offensive in Iraq, the U.S. military is 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 with the help of a defense contractor, according to U.S. military officials and documents obtained by the *Los Angeles Times*.

Many of the articles are presented in

the Iraqi press as unbiased news accounts written and reported by independent journalists. The stories trumpet the work of U.S. and Iraqi troops, denounce insurgents and tout U.S.-led efforts to rebuild the country.

Though the articles are basically factual, they present only one side of events and omit information that might reflect poorly on the U.S. or Iraqi governments, officials said. Records and interviews indicate that the U.S. has paid Iraqi newspapers to run dozens of such articles, with headlines such as

“Iraqis Insist on Living Despite Terrorism,” since the effort began this year.

The operation is designed to mask any connection with the U.S. military. The Pentagon has a contract with a small Washington-based firm called Lincoln Group, which helps translate and place the stories. The Lincoln Group’s Iraqi staff, or its subcontractors, sometimes pose as freelance reporters or advertising executives when they deliver the stories to Baghdad media outlets.

The military’s effort to disseminate propaganda in the Iraqi media is taking place even as U.S. officials are pledging to promote democratic principles, political transparency and freedom of speech in a country emerging from decades of dictatorship and corruption.

It comes as the State Department is training Iraqi reporters in basic journalism skills and Western media ethics, including one workshop titled “The Role of Press in a Democratic Society.” Standards vary widely at Iraqi newspapers, many of which are shoestring operations.

Underscoring the importance U.S. officials place on development of a Western-style media, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld on Tuesday cited the proliferation of news organizations in Iraq as one of the country’s great successes since the ouster of President Saddam Hussein. The hundreds of newspapers, television stations and other “free media” offer a “relief valve” for the Iraqi public to debate the issues of their burgeoning democracy, Rumsfeld said.

The military’s information operations campaign has sparked a backlash among some senior military officers in Iraq and at the Pentagon who argue that attempts to subvert the news media could destroy the U.S. military’s credibility in other nations and with the American public.

“Here we are trying to create the principles of democracy in Iraq. Every speech we give in that country is about democracy. And we’re breaking all the first principles of democracy when we’re doing it,” said a senior Pentagon official who opposes the practice of planting stories in the Iraqi media.

The arrangement with Lincoln Group is evidence of how far the Pentagon has moved to blur the traditional bound-

aries between military public affairs — the dissemination of factual information to the media — and psychological and information operations, which use propaganda and sometimes misleading information to advance the objectives of a military campaign.

The Bush administration has come under criticism for distributing video and news stories in the United States without identifying the federal government as their source and for paying American journalists to promote administration policies, practices the Government Accountability Office has labeled “covert propaganda.”

Military officials familiar with the effort in Iraq said much of it was being directed

by the “Information Operations Task Force” in Baghdad, part of the multinational corps headquarters commanded by Army Lt. Gen. John R. Vines. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were critical of the effort and were not authorized to speak publicly about it.

A spokesman for Vines declined to comment for this article. A Lincoln Group spokesman also declined to comment.

One of the military officials said that, as part of a psychological operations campaign that has intensified over the last year, the task force also had purchased an Iraqi newspaper and taken control of a radio station, and was using them to channel pro-American messages to the Iraqi public. Neither is

identified as a military mouthpiece.

The official would not disclose which newspaper and radio station are under U.S. control, saying that naming them would put their employees at risk of insurgent attacks.

U.S. law forbids the military from carrying out psychological operations or planting propaganda through American media outlets. Yet several officials said that given the globalization of media driven by the Internet and the 24-hour news cycle, the Pentagon's efforts were carried out with the knowledge that coverage in the foreign press inevitably “bleeds” into the Western media and influences coverage in U.S. news outlets.

“There is no longer any way to separate foreign media from domestic media. Those neat lines don't exist anymore,” said one private contractor who does information operations work for the Pentagon.

Daniel Kuehl, an information operations expert at National Defense University at Ft. McNair in Washington, said that he did not believe that planting stories in Iraqi media was wrong. But he questioned whether the practice would help turn the Iraqi public against the insurgency.

“I don't think that there's anything evil or morally wrong with it,” he said. “I just question whether it's effective.”

One senior military official who spent this year in Iraq said it was the strong pro-U.S. message in some news stories in Baghdad that first made him suspect that the American military was planting articles.

“Stuff would show up in the Iraqi press, and I would ask, ‘Where the hell did that come from?’ It was clearly not something that indigenous Iraqi press would have conceived of on their own,” the official said.

Iraqi newspaper editors reacted with a mixture of shock and shrugs when told they were targets of a U.S. military psychological operation.

Some of the newspapers, such as Al Mutamar, a Baghdad-based daily run by associates of Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Chalabi, ran the articles as news stories, indistin-

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guishable from other news reports. Before the war, Chalabi was the Iraqi exile favored by senior Pentagon officials to lead post-Hussein Iraq.

Others labeled the stories as "advertising," shaded them in gray boxes or used a special typeface to distinguish them from standard editorial content. But none mentioned any connection to the U.S. military.

One Aug. 6 piece, published prominently on Al Mutamar's second page, ran as a news story with the headline "Iraqis Insist on Living Despite Terrorism." Documents obtained by The Times indicated that Al Mutamar was paid about \$50 to run the story, though the editor of the paper said he ran such articles for free.

Nearly \$1,500 was paid to the independent Addustour newspaper to run an Aug. 2 article titled "More Money Goes to Iraq's Development," the records indicated. The newspaper's editor, Bassem Sheikh, said he had "no idea" where the piece came from but added the note "media services" on top of the article to distinguish it from other editorial content.

The U.S. military-written articles come in to Al Mutamar, the newspaper run by Chalabi's associates, via the Internet and are often unsigned, said Luay Baldawi, the paper's editor in chief.

"We publish anything," he said. "The paper's policy is to publish everything, especially if it praises causes we believe in. We are pro-American. Everything that supports America we will publish."

Yet other Al Mutamar employees were much less supportive of their paper's connection with the U.S. military. "This is not right," said Faleh Hassan, an editor. "It reflects the tragic condition of journalists in Iraq. Journalism in Iraq is in very bad shape."

Ultimately, Baldawi acknowledged that he, too, was concerned about the origin of the articles and pledged to be "more careful about stuff we get by e-mail."

After he learned of the source of three paid stories that ran in Al Mada in July, that newspaper's managing editor, Abdul Zahra Zaki, was outraged, immediately summoning a manager of the advertising department to his office.

"I'm very sad," he said. "We have to investigate."

The Iraqis who delivered the articles

also reaped modest profits from the arrangements, according to sources and records.

Employees at Al Mada said that a low-key man arrived at the newspaper's offices in downtown Baghdad on July 30 with a large wad of U.S. dollars. He told the editors that he wanted to publish an article titled "Terrorists Attack Sunni Volunteers" in the newspaper.

He paid cash and left no calling card, employees said. He did not want a receipt. The name he gave employees was the same as that of a Lincoln Group worker in the records obtained by The Times. Although editors at Al Mada said he paid \$900 to place the article, records show that the man told Lincoln Group that he gave more than \$1,200 to the paper.

Al Mada is widely considered the most cerebral and professional of Iraqi newspapers, publishing investigative reports as well as poetry.

Zaki said that if his cash-strapped paper had known that these stories were from the U.S. government, he would have "charged much, much more" to publish them.

According to several sources, the process for placing the stories begins when soldiers write "storyboards" of events in Iraq, such as a joint U.S.-Iraqi raid on a suspected insurgent hide-out, or a suicide bomb that killed Iraqi civilians.

The storyboards, several of which were obtained by *The Times*, read more like press releases than news stories. They often contain anonymous quotes from U.S. military officials; it is unclear whether the quotes are authentic.

"Absolute truth was not an essential element of these stories," said the senior military official who spent this year in Iraq.

One of the storyboards, dated Nov. 12, describes a U.S.-Iraqi offensive in the western Iraqi towns of Karabilah and Husaybah.

"Both cities are stopping points for foreign fighters entering Iraq to wage their unjust war," the storyboard reads.

It continues with a quote from an anonymous U.S. military official: "Iraqi army soldiers and U.S. forces have begun clear-and-hold operations in the city of Karabilah near Husaybah town, close to the Syrian border," said a military official once operations began.

Another storyboard, written on the

same date, describes the capture of an insurgent bomb-maker in Baghdad. "As the people and the [Iraqi security forces] work together, Iraq will finally drive terrorism out of Iraq for good," it concludes.

It was unclear whether those two storyboards have made their way into Iraqi newspapers.

A debate over the Pentagon's handling of information has raged since shortly after the September 11 attacks.

In 2002, the Pentagon was forced to shut down its Office of Strategic Influence, which had been created the previous year, after reports surfaced that it intended to plant false news stories in the international media.

For much of 2005, a Defense Department working group has been trying to forge a policy about the proper role of information operations in wartime. Pentagon officials say the group has yet to resolve the often-contentious debate in the department about the boundaries between military public affairs and information operations.

Lincoln Group, formerly known as Iraqex, is one of several companies hired by the U.S. military to carry out "strategic communications" in countries where large numbers of U.S. troops are based.

Some of Lincoln Group's work in Iraq is very public, such as an animated public service campaign on Iraqi television that spotlights the Iraqi civilians killed by roadside bombs planted by insurgents.

Besides its contract with the military in Iraq, Lincoln Group this year won a major contract with U.S. Special Operations Command, based in Tampa, to develop a strategic communications campaign in concert with special operations troops stationed around the globe. The contract is worth up to \$100 million over five years, although U.S. military officials said they doubted the Pentagon would spend the full amount of the contract. ■

Mazzetti reported from Washington and Daragahi reported from Baghdad for The Los Angeles Times.