

Perception Management and the 'War' Against Terrorism

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Abstract:

This article challenges the popular view that 'propaganda' - here defined in a value-neutral sense - is an inappropriate activity for democratic governments. Indeed, it suggests that it is essential for the 'perception management' elements of the war against terrorism. It argues that we are in a new Cold War type of situation in which our very ideas and values are under attack, and therefore must be defended, albeit within a democratic tradition. The ability of the western democracies to succeed in not just defending, but in actively promoting their value systems over 'the long haul', may even determine the final outcome. Accordingly, great care needs to be taken at both the tactical and the strategic levels of information operations, although the theory is sometimes belied by the practice.

Introduction

The degree to which the 'war' against international terrorism requires, by its very nature, the inclusion of a global struggle for hearts and minds has been somewhat obscured by the first military phase of the conflict in Afghanistan against the Taliban and the Al Qaeda network. In a struggle that is in fact being waged on several fronts – including the intelligence, law enforcement, legislative and financial fronts as well as the military front – much will be done outside of the public view, behind closed doors. Yet as the various debates about the validity of the evidence against Osama bin Laden for his involvement in the 11 September attacks revealed, as with the more familiar media debates about the 'collateral damage' caused in Afghanistan, it is essential for the eventual victor to win the moral high ground in the public domain on a global scale – and not just in the short term. In other words, they also need to win the 'propaganda war'.¹

While western politicians insist that this is not 'a clash of civilisations' they have recognised, in Tony Blair's words, that they need to address 'a gulf of misunderstanding'² in order to explain to Muslim populations that this is not a war against Islam when there are many in the Arab world who believe that it is. When democratic nations go to war – usually against non-democratic adversaries – it is recognised that they need to undertake propaganda. But in this particular type of 'war' the challenge for whatever replaces the Office of Strategic Information is daunting, especially since the conflict owes more in character to the Cold War than to any other conflict waged by the United States since 1945 – and it may prove to last just as long.

Indeed, the role of strategic information warfare may prove crucial. This article will examine some of key issues involved in waging an 'information war' against a

terrorist network that utilises propaganda as one of its key weapons in its asymmetric struggle against western liberal capitalism in general and the United States and its allies in particular. It calls in the process for a continuation of the shift in emphasis in IW conceptualisation away from its early obsession in the mid-1990s with computer and communications systems at the expense of human factors.³ Indeed, one suspects that history will show that it was this obsession with systems and their vulnerabilities – with an ‘electronic Pearl Harbor’⁴ - at the expense of paying attention to worldwide perceptions which was partly responsible for the attacks on New York and Washington.

Moreover, the American media agonising over ‘why they hate us so much’⁵ itself reflected a naivety not so much about the intricacies of US foreign policy but a decade-long downgrading of *media interest* in US foreign policy. This disinterest in foreign affairs since the end of the Cold War not only goes a long way to explain the sense of shock felt by the US public about being attacked on its own soil but it also helps to explain why the media coverage of Operation Enduring Freedom has left a lot to be desired. The shortage of specialised foreign and defence correspondents meant that much of the complexities of the ‘war on terrorism’ were simply not reported. Inexperienced journalists suddenly had to learn where Khandahar was, just as an inexperienced President had to learn who was the President of Pakistan. At one point in October 2001, the Department of Defence even had to hold a special press briefing for journalists on how to identify whether bomb damage had been faked.⁶ In short, there was a knowledge vacuum both at home and abroad that not only allowed America’s enemies to exploit by its surprise attack but which has also had to be rapidly repaired ever since. But, even after six months, the DoD remains capable of spectacular own goals, as the mishandling of news about what exactly the Office of Strategic Influence would be doing revealed.⁷

The American media has, nonetheless and for the most part, rallied behind the war. Critical voices at home are mute, and objective analysis in the domestic media has almost disappeared. Rather, the immediate challenge lies abroad. After significant initial mistakes, for example by the use of the term ‘crusade’ and by the labelling of the campaign as ‘Infinite Justice’, the American government, media and public have all had to learn quickly about the importance of perception management whereas before they thought that America ‘as a force for good in the world’ would be self-evident. Nevertheless, as the controlled release of pictures of Al Quaida prisoners locked up in cages on Guantanamo base demonstrated, publicity cock-ups can still serve to undermine new-found assertions that this is in fact the case, as the criticism of some British newspapers – of all people - revealed. In other words, the problem so far has not been on the home front where public support remains high. While this begs the question of how long this will remain the case, and hence whether a modern equivalent of the World War Two Office of War Information will be required at some point in the future, for now the real perception management challenge is overseas.

Although the death toll in the September 11th attacks is less than originally thought, the very fact that homeland USA was attacked with old-fashioned civilian aviation technology that was not detected in advance by Cold War-style human intelligence techniques does indeed provide a ‘wake-up call’ to many of the assumptions of the post-Cold War global environment. And it is not just that, with the demise of communism, eyes were taken off the prize of HUMINT. It is not without its irony

that some of the most media-savvy politicians the world has ever known downgraded in significance the effort made to the projection of their national image abroad.⁸ The integration of United States Information Agency into the State Department in 1999, and the subsequent demoralisation of its staff, was the final signal that public diplomacy was to play a less significant role as an adjunct to American foreign policy than in the Reagan era when it did so much to help 'win' the Cold War. If it does anything, the war against terrorism requires a radical rethink about power not being left to speak for itself.

The campaign surrounding the Afghanistan phase revealed how much had been forgotten. When the first bin Laden tape was broadcast on Al Jazeera television, followed by governmental requests to commercial stations not to rebroadcast for fear it may contain coded messages to terrorist 'sleepers', Voice of America ignored the request.⁹ As a result, it found itself involved in a huge row with a State Department that had failed to understand one of the fundamental axioms of international public information, namely that to secure credibility as an information service, you need to broadcast the other side of the argument – including bad news – as well. Ironically, many of the free media complied with the official request, while the official media did not. There are many lessons to be (re)learned here, not least because the very request not to broadcast the tape was interpreted in many parts of the world as yet another example of the 'hypocrisy' of western democracies which purported to value freedom of speech as a fundamental principle and which they insisted was a precondition of progress in many Arab states.

Know Your Enemy

In the aftermath of the attacks, the agonising about why 'they hate us so much' thus reflected as much on US media indifference towards foreign affairs as it did the actual consequences of US foreign policy. However, anti-American explanations tended to blame the victim rather than the perpetrator of the crime by suggesting that it was US foreign policy itself which caused suicide bombers to hijack domestic civilian airliners full of fuel and fly them into the symbols of American financial and military power. Early attempts to counter this by placing emphasis on the international demography of the victims missed the point that the New York attack was an attack upon modernity and indeed upon the very western ideology of free market capitalism wherever it originated. In so far as it was an attack upon the United States, it was also a strike against a way of life.

The simmering resentments that fuel the fanaticism of the suicide bomber are difficult for many people in the west to understand. Fortunately, suicide bombers are rarer than other types of terrorist although their impact can be as disproportionate as it is dispassionate. Their business is, however, highly emotional and, in the eyes of their supporters, they are martyrs to their cause. Where their origins lie in Islamic fundamentalism, terrorists are not always the ignorant fanatics often portrayed by the media, as several of the German University educated hijackers revealed. However, they know how to exploit the global media, as the twenty-minute delay between the attacks on the Twin Towers revealed. By the time the second tower was hit, New York newsrooms had scrambled their helicopters and captured the events live on television. It was, as many people have said when recalling their experience of viewing the images, 'like watching a movie' and the assumption that it was carried out by Islamic fanatics was quick to follow – perhaps because, for years, Hollywood

movies had been portraying hijackers as Arabs in their action movies. The immediate response to the Oklahoma bombing had been the same.

This time, however, the evidence that Arabs had indeed perpetrated the crime was quick to follow in the form of Mohammed Atta's passport found in the rubble of the Twin Towers. Thus began a series of events that were simply not believed in many parts of the Arab world. The very fact that the passport had apparently survived the crash when the black boxes had not was greeted with enormous scepticism in the Middle East. Then came Atta's suitcase which had not been loaded on the plane – a coincidence which was seized upon as more evidence of CIA-Mossad conspiracy.¹⁰ The transcripts of cell-phone conversations between the hijacked passengers and their loved ones were scrutinised for any reference to the hijackers as 'Arabs' – and none was found. As the 'evidence' kept mounting, it was claimed in some Arab media that 5 of the 19 alleged hijackers were still alive (including Atta himself, according to his much quoted Egyptian father), that such devout Muslims would not have been seen in a Florida strip joint before the attack, and that US authorities' refusal to return any of the hijackers' bodies was further evidence of American contempt for Islamic culture. And if any lingering doubts were left, a rumour spread around the world on the internet that CNN was repeating footage of celebrating Palestinians that was taken during the Gulf War and not on September 11th (in fact it was contemporary footage, shot by a Reuters crew). Even the veracity of the bin Laden tape found in Khandahar in which the terrorist discussed details of the attacks was questioned in some quarters for having been faked by the US government.

At the street-level from Palestine to Pakistan, this heady mixture of rumour, gossip, selected facts, religious interpretation and disinformation reinforces perceptions of the west through hostile filters generated from an early age in schools, most notably the *madrassahs*. Much of this hostility derives from long-term regional tensions caused by the clash between modernity and tradition. Because the west is the driving force of the former, epitomised by the word 'globalisation', the incursions of western companies such as Coca Cola, McDonalds and Nike are seen as a form of neo-colonial economic imperialism bringing in its wake 'decadent' western values that threaten to overwhelm local traditions and values. Hence American driven globalisation is seen as a form of cultural imperialism threatening to displace indigenous values with those of free market capitalism. Fuelled by the knowledge that many in the west oppose the spread of globalisation, as evidenced by the riots in Seattle, Genoa and at other trade summits, Middle Eastern dissidents see an enormous propaganda opportunity to challenge US economic hegemony, especially in the poorer parts of the world where the stomachs of the hungry are fed on a regular diet of anti-Americanism. That was why the World Trade Centre was chosen as a symbolic target for attacks in 1992 and almost ten years later.

Another major theme of anti-American propaganda, of course, is Israel. US support for the Israeli intruder into the Arab world is seen as a western form of 'terrorism' against the Arabs. Although bin Laden is a comparatively recent convert to the Palestinian cause, like Saddam Hussein before him, he fully understands how to exploit street-level support for it throughout the Middle East. Further opportunities to exploit anti-American sentiment arise from the presence of US troops in the Holy Land of Mecca and the bombing of Iraq which has caused the deaths of 'one million Iraqi children' (the numbers vary from between one half and one and a half million

'innocent victims'). As the son of the President who launched Desert Storm, the continued bombing of Iraq is seen as vengeance for the failure to remove Saddam Hussein in 1991 and, like bin Laden, Saddam is afforded heroic status because he took on the west and – at time of writing - survived.

It is within this broader context that the dismissal of western 'facts' at the micro-level takes place. Hence the rumour that 4000 Jews did not turn up for work in the World Trade Center on September 11th because the attacks were in fact planned by Mossad in conjunction with the CIA in order to provide a pretext for a long-term ambition to seize oil pipelines in Afghanistan. The goal to remove the Taliban in order to replace it with a more compliant regime was said to be the real intention of the Afghan phase of the war. Every opportunity to discredit American versions of events is seized upon to cast doubts about her motives, just as every criminal attack upon an Arab living in the US or Europe is reported as further evidence of US contempt for Islam. Indeed, one poster displayed by Pakistani protesters actually transposed bin Laden's image upon a photograph of the Twin Towers being hit by a hijacked plane, suggesting that, in some quarters, the connection was never in doubt.

Countering the Image

If the 'gulf of misunderstanding' is so wide, how can this be bridged? But let us first dispel with the euphemistic nonsense that surrounds this topic and which does in fact obscure what we are actually talking about – namely propaganda. Most analysts of propaganda are agreed that, as a process of persuasion, it is a value-neutral process. Most practitioners in the west, on the other hand, are extremely nervous about using the word. One might have expected such experts in targeted persuasive techniques to have dispelled many of the myths surrounding their work. Instead, an entire euphemism industry has developed to deflect attention away from the realities of what they do, ranging from 'spin doctoring' and 'public affairs' at the political level to 'international information' or 'strategic influence' at the diplomatic level and 'information operations' and 'perception management' at the military level. They are of course worried about the historical associations of propaganda as an activity of totalitarian regimes. But, despite the euphemism game, democracies have grown ever more sophisticated at conducting propaganda, however labelled, which only they deny to be propaganda in the first place.

This is not to suggest that all propaganda is the same. Propaganda in the democratic tradition derives largely from the 'Strategy of Truth' in World War Two. It became axiomatic for democratic propaganda as a result of the Second World War experience that it should 'tell the truth, nothing but the truth and, as near as possible, the whole truth'. This does not mean that whole truth was told. Nor was it always told immediately. Indeed, although we are on dangerous ground with the very word 'truth', the British and Americans learned that it was counter-productive to deliberately lie. However, here we need to distinguish between 'white' propaganda and 'black' propaganda. White or overt propaganda originates from a clearly identifiable source such as 'This is the Voice of America' or 'This is Radio Moscow'. It is essential that these overt propaganda radio stations avoid obvious or blatant propaganda of the kind associated with authoritarian regimes and what has been labelled 'The Big Lie'. They do this by being news based and their success is measured by the number of overseas listeners they can attract, which in turn is influenced not so much by their ability to tell 'the truth' but by their reputation for

credibility. This is a much more useful word, and perhaps it would be more useful to talk about 'credible truths'. For example, in 1943, the Americans dropped a leaflet over German lines in Italy stating that if German soldiers surrendered they would be treated well, including a welcome breakfast of bacon and eggs – which was true. However, the German forces refused to believe it because the notion that their enemy would serve prisoners with such rare commodities as bacon and eggs was simply too fantastic for them to accept. Psychologists call this 'cognitive dissonance'.

Governments direct information into foreign countries by whatever means and media that are available for specific political purposes. Democratic governments often maintain that they are merely supplying foreign audiences with news and views that are otherwise denied them by their repressive governments. As such, they are not conducting propaganda at all. 'We tell the truth. They tell lies or, at best, half-truths'. Perhaps, for analytical reasons, it would therefore be more appropriate to talk about 'our truth' and 'their truth'. During the Second World War, however, the British pioneered a form of propaganda which deviated from this. This was 'black' propaganda, or propaganda which emanates from a deliberately disguised source. In other words, the propagandist would say he was one thing when in fact s/he was something quite different. Born of a lie, it is this kind of propaganda which more justifiably equates with the popular perception of targeted persuasion. Credibility is still essential to its effectiveness, however. The audience needs to believe that the source is authentic, that it is who it says it is, and it is for this reason that this type of activity must be kept completely separate from any 'white' operation operating in conjunction or alongside it. It must also be kept completely secret, which is why it is often conducted 'in the shadows'; as soon as the source is revealed, if it ever does, the intelligence community who tend to conduct this work can compromise the credibility of other informational or more 'truthful' activities. For example, in World War Two, working in complete secrecy, the British Political Warfare Executive, under the cover of 'Research Units', ran clandestine black radio stations that purported to emanate from inside Occupied Europe as authentic dissident or resistance movements but which, in fact, were transmitted from British soil. Similarly, during the Cold War, the KGB and CIA conducted ongoing 'disinformation' operations designed to discredit the other side and undermine their enemy's credibility in areas ranging from medical experiments to involvement in Third World revolutionary movements. When the Office of Strategic Influence was announced, the dangers of conducting overt propaganda with black propaganda and deception from under the same roof once again revealed how much had been forgotten.

The Analogy with the Cold War

The Cold War was, if anything, a psychological war in which not only were there two competing, and essentially incompatible, ideologies emanating from Washington and Moscow but it was also a potentially fatal competition in which the actual deployment of nuclear weapons would have secured 'mutual assured destruction'. As such, propaganda – both black and white – assumed the role of a central weapon in a world-wide struggle for hearts, minds, allegiances and allies – a strategic Manichean struggle of such global tension that the only safety valves for military aggression could be provided by the conduct of 'proxy wars'. Propaganda was now a regular feature of such wars – in Korea, Algeria, Vietnam, and Afghanistan – and in other low intensity conflicts from Kenya to El Salvador. Combat propaganda came to be more closely identified with tactical psychological warfare, in theatre, but the wider global

ideological struggle was also a form of psychological warfare at a strategic level which so permeated everyday life, from the Space Race to Olympic Games, from science fiction movies to anti-nuclear demonstrations, that it became virtually impossible for those living through it to separate 'fact' from 'fiction'. Really, it is only a decade since the end of the Cold War that we can begin to appreciate just how all-pervasive the propaganda 'framework' defined by Moscow and Washington permeated everyday life for just over forty years.

This was possible largely because the bi-polar environment remained relatively fixed in terms of communications. Although media theorists such as Marshall McLuhan began to speak in the 1960s of a 'global village', the ability to penetrate the 'Iron Curtain' remained relatively limited. The Soviets in fact spent more money on jamming western radio stations such as Radio Free Europe (originally CIA-backed) and Radio Liberty than they did on external broadcasting. The media operated under strict state control within the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc satellites and could thus be relied up to omit any other 'truth' than that decreed by the Communist Party. The American media, following the McCarthy witch-hunts of the early 1950s, was only too happy to accept Washington's version of the truth about what Ronald Reagan would later call 'the Evil Empire'. By the 1980s, however, new communications technologies (NCTs), initially in the form of the fax machine and satellite television, were beginning to create a new environment in which information could flow far more freely around the globe than ever before and, moreover, it was becoming harder and harder to detect or prevent. Looking back now, especially since the massive growth of the Internet, we can still take this somewhat for granted. But at the time, NCTs were like Trojan horses to a society like the Soviet Union whose determination to remain hermetically sealed off from the pollution of western culture and values even extended to a ban on the popular use of photocopiers. In this respect the 1991 Gulf War was a watershed because it brought CNN – and western values – to the Middle East via live satellite television that was difficult to censor.

Operation Enduring Freedom, the longer it lasts, will assume many of the characteristics of the Cold War, especially in terms of what is now termed perception management. This is because it is a struggle between two competing, and essentially incompatible, driving forces of our information age, namely the champions of modernity and those of tradition. Although much fighting will take place behind closed doors, the battle space will be the global public domain. Yet it is the efforts made in the latter domain that the ability of the US and its allies to prosecute the war in the former which will prove critical.

Information Warfare and Psychological Operations

That the free media become involved, willingly or unwittingly, in wartime propaganda campaigns does not preclude the need of the military to possess their own media of communication to engage with the enemy. The Gulf War was again a watershed in the conduct of psychological warfare or, as it had become known by then, psychological operations (PSYOP). This combat propaganda campaign consisted of leaflets, broadcasts and loudspeaker messages directed at Iraqi troops urging them to 'flee and live, or stay and die'. The largely conscript Iraqi army was highly receptive to such messages, and an astonishing 69 thousand of them surrendered, deserted or defected. This figure was higher than the number of Iraqi

troops that were actually killed during the war, and earned PSYOP a new found reputation as a 'combat force multiplier'.

The Gulf War was also labelled the 'first information war'.¹¹ This wasn't a simple description of the military's PSYOP or media campaigns. It also embraced the use of communications in support of Command and Control Warfare (C2W). On the opening night of the war, an enormous effort was made at striking at Iraqi C2W capabilities, including attacks on the Iraqi anti-aircraft defences and on its communications systems (telephone exchanges and power plants) in order not just to gain air superiority but also to cut off the Iraqi troops from their leadership. Again, the success of this effort was felt to have aided coalition victory with minimum casualties to the point where it prompted a doctrinal shift from C2W to C4I (Command, Control, Communications, Computers and Intelligence) that was to emerge during the 1990s first as 'Information Warfare' (IW) and latterly as 'Information Operations' (IO).

It is important to emphasise that these new doctrines are still emerging as part of the on-going Revolution in Military Affairs. Nothing is, as yet, fixed – only the recognition that new technologies, combined with the new international environment brought about since the end of the Cold War, have changed the way we need to think about traditional concepts of battlefields, defence, attack, the role of people and the role of information. In many respects, much of the thinking about IW and IO is not new. Commanders throughout history have always recognised the importance of communication in warfare and that it was just as important to deny information to an enemy as it was to protect one's own communications system. What is different today is the *centrality* of communications and information technology to war fighting capability. Whether it be spy satellites, Stealth bombers invisible to radar, cruise missiles driven by computers, night-sight capability, flying television and radio stations or mobile encrypted communications, today's military forces are heavily dependent – perhaps too heavily dependent – upon systems that not only present new opportunities but also new vulnerabilities.

Before outlining the basic principles of Information Operations, it is necessary to point to certain key ideas behind the emerging doctrines. The collapse of communism and 'the end of history' was essentially a triumph of democracy or, strictly speaking, a triumph for democratic free-market capitalism. As more and more nations on earth transform their political systems into differing forms of democracy, the notion that democracies do not fight democracies – so far – constitutes an underlying assumption about the 'New World Order'. Democracies rely upon public opinion, respect for human rights and toleration of minorities. Free-market capitalism relies upon trade within the context of globalisation. If democracies see their principal enemies as non-democracies – now labelled 'rogue states' within an 'axis of evil' – and now such non-state actors such as terrorist organisations, the theory is that free-market capitalist democracies prefer peace and trade to war. Where free trade is jeopardised by a rogue state – such as Iraq's threat to oil supplies from the Gulf – then war is 'justified'. Where human rights are violated and minorities persecuted by a rogue state – such as Serbia's treatment of the Kosovar Albanians – then 'humanitarian intervention' is justified. When rogue states abandon their authoritarian or anti-democratic regimes, they are welcomed back into the new international community (e.g. Serbia). When they do not, they are subjected to international sanctions (e.g. Iraq). Indeed, in all the military interventions of the 1990s by the international community – Somalia, Bosnia,

Haiti, Kosovo – for whatever reason, the hidden assumption was that democracy would follow and new trading partners could expand the global market.

If the price for the restoration of peace and the rebuilding of civil society was to be democratic reform, there was however to be a limit on the cost. That limit was measured, *inter alia*, in terms of the risk to human life. The western democracies, and the United States in particular, have become quite squeamish about absorbing casualties in conflicts. In the Gulf War, coalition forces killed almost as many of their own troops in 'friendly fire' accidents than the Iraqis managed to achieve in combat. The intervention in Kosovo in 1999 was to be an air campaign, not a ground attack, for the same reason. It is frequently asserted that the US mission in Somalia (Operation Restore Hope) came to an abrupt end because of televised images of dead marines being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu. This, in turn, has given rise to an academic debate about what has been termed 'the CNN Effect', whereby dramatic pictures can drive foreign policy decisions. If this is the case, the absence of such images is a possible explanation for why the international community involves itself in some conflicts but not others. Once more, it reinforces the propagandistic role which modern media can play.

Furthermore, there is squeamishness about inflicting casualties on the other side. It looks bad on television if democracies are being seen to wage war against 'innocent women and children'; it undermines their moral position about democratic principles and values. Hence, only 'smart' weapons were used against Baghdad and Belgrade and any 'collateral damage' was apologised for immediately. The international outcry – amongst journalists – at the NATO bombing of Serbian State Television (RTS) in 1999 missed an essential point about Information Warfare. The media are no longer simple observers of war, they are actual participants within it and are thus 'legitimate targets'. Whereas in the deceptively named World War Two 'strategic' bombing campaign against Nazi Germany, the primary targets were weapons factories and shipyards, now the largely accurately labelled precision-guided weaponry is directed at power stations, television and radio transmitters and telephone exchanges.

This in turn illustrates another important strand of thinking in IW/IO. In their influential work, *War and Anti-War*, Alvin and Heidi Toffler argued that the way nation states wage war reflects the way they conduct themselves economically in peace. In an earlier work, *The Third Wave*, Alvin Toffler argued that nation states historically develop through three stages, or 'waves'. First wave societies are largely agrarian in nature, the second wave is industrial and the third wave is post-industrial or 'informational' society. Agrarian societies wage war seasonally so that the farmer-soldiers can return for the harvest. Industrial societies wage industrialised warfare with machine guns, tanks, battleships and bombers and fight to the bitter end – Total War – suffering mass casualties (military and civilian). Informational societies for whom bits and bytes are now the currency of commerce thus place greater emphasis on information as a weapons system.

These larger issues about Information Age capitalist democracies belie some of the difficulties about applying theory to practice. In some societies, the three different waves overlap simultaneously. But in advanced democratic societies with advanced military establishments, they are moving swiftly from the second to the third wave. Indications of this include the transition from manufacturing industrial bases to commercial and financial service based economies. Media organisations, such as

Time Warner, are amongst the largest multinational corporations in the world, whereas about 90% of the world's computers utilise Microsoft's operating systems. Italy's richest media baron, Berlusconi, is elected Prime Minister while CNN's founder, Ted Turner, can donate one billion dollars to the United Nations to help it with its finances. In such an environment, it should come as no surprise that many businesses are now thinking about 'corporate information warfare'.

From Information Warfare to Information Operations

What is the relevance of propaganda to all of this? The answer will become clearer if we now turn in detail to IW/IO doctrine. We first need to distinguish between the role of information in warfare and information warfare itself. The former has always consisted on activities involving intelligence gathering, surveillance and reconnaissance, information about weather and terrain and indeed any other activity designed to assist command decisions about where and when to deploy armed forces. Information warfare, on the other hand, consists essentially of four elements: (1) the denial and protection of information, including Operational Security (OPSEC); (2) the exploitation and ability to attack enemy information and data systems, which now embraces electronic warfare (EW), attacks on computer networks and on enemy power systems; (3) deception by various means including spoofing, imitation and distortion; and (4) the ability to influence attitudes. According to the Joint Publication 3-13, IW is defined as 'information operations conducted during time of crisis of conflict to achieve or promote specific objectives over a specific adversary or adversaries'. The same document defines IO as 'actions taken to affect adversary information and information systems while defending one's own information and information systems'. This divides IO into two further activities, Cyber Operations (consisting of Computer Network Attack and Computer Network Defence), and Influence Attitudes, consisting of PSYOP and Deception.

It is this particular area, Influence Operations, increasingly known as 'Perception Management', which concerns us most here. Perception Management may well be yet another pseudonym for propaganda. According to some theorists, it needs to embrace a number of established communication practices, including public diplomacy (and private diplomacy), media relations (known as Public Information in Europe, and as Public Affairs in the USA), PSYOP and even the exercise of 'soft' power such as cultural and educational relations. These are the areas in which the ability to convince others of 'our truth', whether by short-term activity such as radio broadcasting or press conferences, or by longer-term work in the areas of educational and cultural activity, depends critically upon the credibility of the information source. That credibility, as we have seen through our historical examples, very much depends upon the willingness of the target audience (whether it be individuals, specific groups of entire populations) to believe what they are being told. This is a much harder task when the target audience, especially in an authoritarian regime where the media are state controlled and fundamental aspects of democracy like opinion polling are denied, has been subjected to believing a different set of 'facts' or values. 'Their truth' may be so deep-rooted by years of 'their' state's propaganda, and reinforced by a terroristic police regime which punishes harshly any dissent from the accepted state norm, that IO has its work cut out for it. For example, a rudimentary and far from coordinated Information Operation, was conducted against Serbia during the Kosovo conflict. This was an attempt to convince the Serb people that all was not as the Milosovic regime would have them believe. Over 100 million leaflets were dropped

over Serbia and Kosovo during the campaign explaining that NATO was not fighting the Serbian people but the Milosovic government which was conducting 'ethnic cleansing' in Kosovo. The international media, in a re-run of the Gulf War media management campaign, bought into this agenda and rarely questioned the legitimacy of NATO's air strikes in international law, even when 'collateral damage' took place. This time, however, news services like CNN, Sky News and BBC World could be received by a sizeable portion of the Serb population. Although many Serbs, only months earlier, had been involved in street demonstrations against Milosovic, they refused to believe the free democratic western media because they seemed to be in collusion with the NATO alliance. Rather, they were more prepared to believe their own media which argued that the Kosovar Albanians were fleeing the province because of NATO bombing, not because of ethnic cleansing by 'their' troops. When a nation is attacked, cognitive dissonance takes place on a massive scale.

This is not to suggest that no 'ethnic cleansing' took place in Kosovo. Yet post conflict investigations are revealing that it was nothing like on the scale that NATO spokespeople were claiming at the time. So whereas NATO perception management was highly effective in NATO's member countries, among their populations who largely supported the necessity of the air campaign and within their own national media organisations, it singularly failed in any short-term sense with the Serbs. The defiance of Yugoslavian soldiers as they withdrew from Kosovo, filmed by television news crews, was plain for all to see – casting some doubt on the veracity of PSYOP as a 'combat force multiplier', or at least when the target was a professional army, unlike the conscripted Iraqis. As for the Serb population, it took another year to overthrow the Milosovich regime in a 'velvet revolution' after he had revealed his own attitude to the democratic process by ignoring the outcome of the national election. When a nation goes to the polls, the state does need to accept the outcome.

The war against international terrorism provides fresh challenges. Identifying the location of the 'enemy' is a significant problem and no amount of leaflets dropped on Afghanistan warning Al Quaida that 'we are watching you' will remove this. Another PSYOP theme was to identify the enemy terrorists as foreigners to Afghan soil and to separate support for the Taliban out from Afghan nationalism. Perfecting this theme will be a significant part of any future military campaign if the United States is not perceived as violating international law by intervening in the internal affairs of other countries. But perhaps therein lies the real nut to crack. It is not what the USA does to win the war against terrorism, but what it is perceived to be doing. There will always be those who will refuse to believe that America is a 'force for good in the world' – and the hardest task in any propaganda campaign is to try and convert the unconverted. There is also a tendency to minimise the importance of reinforcing the views of the already converted, and this may mean that, in a long struggle, eyes are taken off the need to do this 'over the long haul'. But the greatest effort needs to be made with the vast majority of people who occupy the middle ground and whose support or opposition may depend not so much upon how events unfold but upon the perceptual framework in which events are seen to unfold.

It is ironic that the United States, as the leading proponent of Information Operations as the new doctrine for the 21st century Information Age, found itself in an election quandary following the Presidential campaign of 2000 that was eventually resolved by legal process. The son of the President who had originally declared the existence of a

New World Order was, prior to September 11th, dividing the international community through his rejection of the Kyoto environmental protocols and with his determination to push ahead with the 'Star Wars' missile defence system. In this respect, bin Laden chose to attack the US with the wrong President. Whereas America before September 11th may have been turning in on itself, it now realises that its very own homeland safety is dependent upon not so much the 'nation-building' of the Clinton era but on the Reaganque reascendancy of international information in order to tell 'her truth'.

The military advisors to President George W. Bush share many of the concerns about who the real enemies of the new international system really are – rogue states, non-democracies, terrorists, international criminals and drug traffickers. The surviving communist regimes, in North Korea, the People's Republic of China and, to a lesser extent Cuba, are being accommodated through private diplomacy backed up by the use of 'soft' power in the form of Radio Free Asia and Radio and TV Marti. The anti-communist psychological warfare of the Cold War era has moderated somewhat because if democracy hasn't quite arrived in those regimes, then there is some hope that the forces of free-market capitalism might bring democracy in its wake. Yet the perceived farce of the Bush-Gore election can only serve to jeopardise the credibility of the leading advocate of the benefits of democratic transition. And now the war against international terrorism has jumped to the top of the agenda, there is an important need to educate potential supporters of terrorism that America is not the 'Great Satan' many believe her to be.

There is one further threat on the horizon. As IO doctrine unfolds, there are those who would see deception as an integral part of winning any future conflict through perception management. Although deception has been an integral part of war-fighting since the Trojan Horse, it has largely been conducted in strict secrecy and on the assumption that it can usually only work once. Emerging IO doctrine places deception alongside other aspects of Influence Attitudes, including PSYOP and possibly even media operations. If that happens, the credibility of both of those activities – which depend upon credibility for their success – will be severely compromised. And if one part of the information operation loses its credibility, then the entire operation will suffer the same fate. 'Our truth', with its basis in democratic values, could be undermined irreparably by the desire to win while avoiding casualties almost at the expense of those values.

This is not to deny the importance of deception in wartime. It is merely to warn of the dangers that were inherent in the deployment, for example, of black propaganda in World War Two. Then, white organisations like the BBC understood that they could not risk their credibility by being tarnished with the black activities of the Political Warfare Executive. It simply wasn't worth it in the long term. One can only hope that the lesson will not be lost on the proponents of Information Operations in the war against Terrorism, although the debacle of the Office of Strategic Influence would suggest otherwise. Take for example a relatively recent twist, namely the notion of SOFTWAR. This is defined as 'the hostile use of global visual media, especially television, to shape another nation's will, by changing its view of reality'.¹² Because IW/IO embraces vulnerabilities as well as offensive opportunities, Serb success with this SOFTWAR concept during the Kosovo conflict, including the use of the Internet,¹³ there may be a temptation that instead of just defending against such attacks, there will be a need to plan offensive SOFTWAR strategies in the event of

future conflict. If this is done via the free media, then unless it is kept absolutely secret for an indefinite period of time, the credibility of all other information operations will be seriously undermined.

Conclusions

Propaganda is a complex business and one which has not been helped by those who define it in terms of it being a 'good' or a 'bad' thing. Propaganda is simply a process of persuasion designed to benefit its originator. The current NATO definition is that it is 'any information, ideas, doctrines or special appeals disseminated to influence the opinion, emotions, attitudes or behaviour of any specified group in order to benefit the sponsor, either directly or indirectly'. This broad concept could just as easily be applied to advertising or public relations. It therefore remains a value-neutral *process*. Value judgments about whether it is in fact a 'good' or a 'bad' thing would more profitably be examined by reference to the *intentions* of those originating the messages. If the intention is to promote aggression and hatred, violation of human rights, persecution of minorities, or denial of free speech or religion, then there is no place for it in the democratic process. But if the intention is to promote democratic values, which survive or fall on the altar of the will of the people, then democracies need not fight shy of the word. However, the main problem arises because propaganda is designed to benefit the interests of the source rather than those of the recipient. This problem diminishes if the desires of the recipient coincide with those of the source. In other words, if a people has elected a government – and has the opportunity to reject it at some future date – then the people in whose name the government rule and its military fight are quite prepared to accept, or reject, the arguments and opinions used to justify their government's actions.

Traditionally, the free democratic media served as a watchdog to ensure that this concordat was happening, and to provide a counter-balance to government arguments where necessary or appropriate. In 'our wars', as we have seen, this tends not to happen as the media and public alike rally behind 'our boys'. The problem is that, with the exception of the Iraqis and the Serbs, we don't fight 'our wars' anymore. This may have something to do with the decline of ideology, or at least of the kind of polarised ideology of the Cold War era. Democracy is in the ascendancy while the number of its enemies in the form of state-actors is in decline. The nature of its enemies is changing to one where transnational factors and sometimes even individual actors pose the greatest dangers. We would expect our professional armed forces to remain professional in the event of a national emergency, and it is appropriate that they should embrace new ways of thinking and new skills in a rapidly changing world in which they might be deployed in humanitarian or other forms of interventions. If their future role is not just to defend democracy but also to promote it, then this could be construed as a new form of 'ideological' attack on those non-democratic actors that constitute its principal enemies. In such a climate, it is essential for them to realise that if they are to be in the business of selling democratic values, they should also beware the dangers of selling them out.

Endnotes

¹ See Antony J. Blinken, 'Now the US Needs to Win the Global War of Ideas', 8 December 2001, International Herald Tribune Online, www.iht.com.

² 'Blair seeks to remove misunderstanding between Muslims, West', URL: www.jang.com.pk/thenews/nov2001-daily/02-11-2001/world/w7.htm

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- ³ See A. Campen and D. Dearth (eds.), *Cyberwar 3.0: Human Factors in Information Operations and Future Conflict*, Fairfax, VA: AFCEA International Press, 2000.
- ⁴ This term was coined by Winn Schwartau in testimony before the House Committee on Science, Space and Technology, on 27 June 1991.
- ⁵ See the debate on 'Why do they hate us'? on csmonitor.com, 17 October 2001, www.csmonitor.com
- ⁶ Background Briefing on Enemy Denial and Deception, DoD briefing, 24 October 2001. www.defenselink.mil/news/Oct2001/t10242001_t1024dd.html
- ⁷ 'Rumsfeld Says He May Drop New Office of Influence' By Eric Schmitt, *The New York Times*, 25 February, 2002
- ⁸ See Barry Fulton, Richard Burt and Olin Robinson, *Reinventing Diplomacy in the Information Age. A Report of the CSIS Advisory Panel on Diplomacy in the Information Age*, Washington, D.C.: CSIS, December 1998; Mark Leonard and Vidhya Alakeson, *Going Public. Diplomacy for the Information Society*, London: Foreign Policy Centre/Central Books, 2000; United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, *A New Diplomacy for the Information Age*, Washington, D.C.: 1997, USACPD.
- ⁹ www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2001/09/mil-010921-2a613963.htm
- ¹⁰ These 'urban myths' are tracked on <http://www.snopes2.com/>.
- ¹¹ Alan D. Campen, *The First Information War*, Fairfax, VA: AFCEA International Press, 1992.
- ¹² Chuck de Caro, 'SOFTWARE and Grand Strategy: Liddell Hart Updated' in A.D. Campen and D. H. Dearth (eds.), *Cyberwar 3.0: Human Factors in Information Operations and Future Conflict* (AFCEA International Press, 2000) pp. 87-96.
- ¹³ See Philip M. Taylor, 'Propaganda and the Web War. Kosovo: The Information War', *The World Today*, Vol. 55 (June 1999) No. 6, pp. 10-12; and Philip M. Taylor, 'The World Wide Web Goes to War, Kosovo 1999' in D. Gauntlett (Ed.), *Web.Studies: Rewiring Media Studies for the Digital Age* (Arnold, 2000), pp. 194-201.