

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

Psy-ops Journalism: Washington's Budding New Industry ^[1]

The war in Iraq has spawned a new industry in Washington that could be called Psy-ops Journalism. The new breed of journalists are following the money trail to the Pentagon.

Some \$400 million in media consulting contracts has been awarded during the past few years by the Pentagon, for the purpose of helping "to effectively communicate Iraqi government and Coalition goals with strategic audiences." Thus far both the Pentagon and its contract psy-op journalists have experienced a painful learning curve, but the most recent contract award will show how much each has learned. The outlook is not promising.

A practical question is whether psy-ops journalism can work at all. It is a cross between what is accepted as the mainstream journalism of print and TV (and many journalists now blog) and what is known as psy-ops, or psychological operations, those engaged in mind control warfare, to gain military advantage by fooling the enemy.

A famous psy-op of World War II is frequently recalled, when the allied army, through disinformation, conned the Nazis into believing that the D-Day invasion of Europe would come ashore at Calais, not Normandy. A less notable World War II psy-op involved the British, who dropped false military leave passes and counterfeit money over areas of axis-occupied Europe, hoping to distract the enemy.

During the Vietnam war, the Australian military distributed leaflets in the countryside warning the Vietcong that spirits of their dead comrades would return to haunt them if bodies were not buried. The ruse prompted Vietcong guerillas to dig graves instead of doing battle, so the story goes, but apparently they were not distracted for very long.

Even with today's technology, leaflets were dropped by airplanes during the Coalition's invasion of Iraq in March, 2003. Almost half-a-million leaflets were scattered, urging Iraqis to tune in American and British special forces broadcasts transmitted from hovering coalition aircraft.

There was also an effort to influence international press coverage related to Iraq through a new Pentagon psy-ops Office of Strategic Influence, but the project was short-lived when the press got hold of the story, and the White House intervened.

Next there was a failed effort to pay Iraqi newspapers for the publication of articles written by the U.S. military, which the military could have placed free-of-charge as guest editorials, without all the resulting fuss. Again, the clandestine effort fizzled out when the mainstream media got wind of it.

It seems that when the U.S. military wants to get its story out to the media through a contractor, the effort turns out to be counterproductive. It is difficult to determine who is at

fault. The contractor obviously wants to please the Pentagon for another, bigger deal, or may simply not know how to do it well. Or the military may be pushing too hard to get the message out, or may write the wrong thing into its contract program priorities, with which a contractor gets stuck. My hunch is the latter.

In the last few years, the Pentagon has awarded contracts in the hundreds of millions for such communications assistance, with little to show for it. To compete, small businesses are formed with a growing number of freelancers lending their names and resumes, along with the politically connected. Although the estimated sum of \$400 million in contract awards may seem a blip when compared to the cost of the new B-2 stealth bomber, priced at more than \$2 billion each, Pentagon requests for media assistance emerge with built-in visibility, so when projects go awry, the contractors themselves have become the story.

One company, the Lincoln Group, which has won lucrative military contracts, set up shop only three years ago, when the Pentagon sent out word on its contracting Web site that it needed media help. All contracts, of course, do go through the proper competitive bid process.

The problem I see with the U.S. military's request for proposals in the media "help wanted" area, if you will, is that they read more like proposals for a B-2 Stealth bomber, and not for a creative media plan. It's the old story about not knowing what to do, then telling someone how to do it, who probably knows a lot better. Instead, the Pentagon should be stating its objectives clearly, and a savvy media professional is the one who should outline the steps on how to get there.

As I read the latest U.S. military media contract awarded just weeks ago, it is defensive and reactive. The contractor must monitor the U.S. TV networks and cable channels, the Middle East satellite channels and newspapers, in Arabic and English, the U.S. regional media markets, Web sites, Web logs, newsgroup postings and other material publicly available through Internet channels, just for starters. Then what?

Looks as if the contractor may once again become the story, in multi-media.
