Made in the USA “free press” in Iraq

US military covertly pays to plant stories in Iraqi media

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The same day that the Bush administration, backed by congressional Democrats, was outlining its “strategy for victory” in Iraq, news broke that the US military has been secretly paying Iraqi newspapers to publish pro-American propaganda stories.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported on Wednesday that the articles, written by US troops under the direction of the military’s “Information Operations Task Force,” are translated into Arabic and planted in Baghdad newspapers with the assistance of the Washington-based Lincoln Group and its subcontractor BKSH & Associates.

The Lincoln Group was awarded a $5 million contract for the project in 2004 after a Pentagon advisory committee cited a “fundamental problem of credibility” in winning over Muslim public opinion, and called on the government to reinvent and expand its information programs, the *New York Times* reported on Thursday.

According to military officials critical of the operation, the US task force has also purchased one Iraqi newspaper outright and taken control of a radio station, using them to pump out pro-US propaganda to the Iraqi people. Neither of these news outlets is identified to the public as under US control.

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the US has paid to have scores of articles published in the Iraqi press, the majority of which are presented as unbiased, factual news accounts. Often, the Lincoln Group’s staff in Iraq, or its subcontractors, pose as freelance reporters or advertising executives when they drop the stories off at Baghdad press outlets.

The reports plug the alleged efforts of the US rebuilding effort—with headlines such as “More Money Goes to Iraq’s Development.” Other articles, such as one headlined “Iraqis Insist on Living Despite Terrorism,” peddle the illusion that the population of Iraq supports the US occupation.

One of the stories prepared this week by the US military and delivered to the Lincoln Group for translation and dissemination is titled “The Sands Are Blowing Toward a Democratic Iraq.” It begins, “Western Press and frequently those self-styled ‘objective’ observers of Iraq are often critics of how we, the people of Iraq, are proceeding down the path in determining what is best for our nation.” The article pleads for unity and nonviolence and quotes the prophet Muhammad.

In a country that has been devastated by war—with large portions of its infrastructure in ruins and estimates of more than 100,000 civilians killed—the US has turned to covert psychological warfare in an attempt to sway public opinion under conditions in which the vast majority of people want the occupying troops out of their country.

A number of the newspapers publishing the US-planted stories ran them as news articles, undifferentiated from other reports. One such paper was the Baghdad-based *Al Mutamar*, a daily run by associates of Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Chalabi, who has close ties to the Pentagon. Luay Baldawi, the paper’s editor, said the articles come in via the Internet and are frequently unsigned.

Nearly $1,500 was paid to the independent newspaper *Addustour* to run the story “More Money Goes to Iraq’s Development” on August 2. The newspaper’s editor said he had “no idea” of the report’s source.

Al Mada managing editor Abdul Sahra Zaki was angered to learn that three paid stories published by the paper had come from the US military. The *Los Angeles Times* recounted how the covert operation played out at *Al Mada*, a newspaper with a reputation among many Iraqis for professionalism and investigative reporting:

“Employees at *Al Mada* said that a low-key man arrived

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at the newspaper's offices in downtown Baghdad on July 30 with a large wad of US 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 was the same as that of a Lincoln Group worker in the records obtained by the *Times*."

US law forbids the military from planting propaganda in American media outlets or carrying out psychological operations in the US itself. Considering the globalized nature of the modern media—including the Internet and 24-hour cable news networks with international audiences—the news-planting operation in Iraq crosses this line. As one private contractor involved in Pentagon information operations told the *Times*, "There is no longer any way to separate foreign media from domestic media. Those neat lines don't exist anymore."

In any event, such prohibitions have not stopped the Bush administration in the past. Last March, the administration instructed US government agencies to ignore an order by the General Accounting Office (GAO) to stop the distribution of "covert propaganda" by US government agencies. (See "Bush administration defends use of covert propaganda in US")

The GAO ruling was in response to the proliferation of video news releases (VNRs) produced by at least 20 US agencies, including the Pentagon and the State Department. A congressional report estimated that the Bush administration spent $254 million in its first term to produce thousands of these VNRs, which include phony, scripted interviews with government officials and utilize public relations employees posing as on-the-spot reporters.

Many of these "news" segments are broadcast by television producers without any advisory to the viewing public that they have been produced by a government agency. They have included numerous VNRs produced by the State Department and Pentagon aimed at promoting the Iraq war among the US population.

In another instance, it was revealed earlier this year that conservative black journalist Armstrong Williams received $240,000 in US government funds to promote Bush's "No Child Left Behind" education program on his nationally syndicated television and radio shows. (See "Journalist took $240,000 to push Bush education program")

The latest revelations of the Pentagon's news-fabrication operation in Iraq are all the more contemptible in light of Washington's claims that it is promoting journalistic ethics in the occupied nation. One workshop run by the State Department to train Iraqi reporters in basic journalism skills is named "The Role of Press in a Democratic Society."

At a Pentagon news briefing on Tuesday, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld claimed that the Iraqi media were making great strides toward democracy, saying the country "has a free media, and they can—it's a relief valve. They could have a hundred-plus papers. There's 72 radio stations. There's 44 television stations. And they're debating things and talking and arguing and discussing."

The defense secretary made no mention of the fact that the US has been engaged in a multimillion-dollar program to funnel pro-US propaganda into these news outlets, and in several cases has taken them over outright!

Asked on Thursday whether the Bush administration approved of the covert propaganda operation, White House spokesman Scott McClellan commented, "We're very concerned about the reports. We have asked the Department of Defense for more information."

Government officials, in fact, are well informed on business dealings with the Lincoln Group. Earlier this year, the company won a major contract with US Special Operations Command, based in Tampa, Florida, worth $100 million over five years. The company has been commissioned to develop a strategic communications campaign in connection with US Special Operations troops stationed around the world.

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