

How the Pentagon manipulated the media to promote the Iraq war

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On April 20, the *New York Times* published a lengthy article by investigative reporter David Barstow detailing the US Defense Department's extensive and ongoing program of manipulating news coverage of the Iraq war. The article provides a glimpse into the intimate connections between the government, military and mass media and the means by which they have attempted to package and sell a neo-colonial war to the US population.

Barstow writes that the record indicates a "symbiotic relationship where the usual dividing lines between government and journalism have been obliterated." Essentially, the US mass media has allowed itself to become little more than a propaganda instrument of American militarism.

According to the April 20 piece, more than 75 retired officers have been coached by government and military officials to 'spin' the news about Iraq—or simply lie—on countless network and cable channel news programs and talk shows over the course of the past five years or more. Fox News has led the way in presenting these individuals to the public, but NBC, CNN, CBS and ABC have followed suit.

The military analysts have not simply propagandized for ideological reasons; in many cases, they work for defense contractors and are "in the business of helping companies win military contracts."

The existence of such a program, worthy of Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, will come as no surprise to anyone who has observed the increasing resort to anti-democratic and illegal methods by the White House and the Pentagon.

The military analysts' program was put in place prior to the invasion of Iraq. Indeed, as the *Times* makes clear, "even before Sept. 11," Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Victoria Clarke had "built a system within the Pentagon to recruit 'key influentials,'" who might be called on to "generate support" for Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's policies.

By early 2002, as detailed planning for an Iraq invasion was under way, the Bush administration encountered an "obstacle"—US public opinion. "Many Americans, polls showed, were uneasy about invading a country with no clear connection to the Sept. 11 attacks. Pentagon and White House officials believed the military analysts could play a crucial role in helping overcome this resistance."

Clarke and her team set about recruiting the analysts, all of whom were personally approved by Rumsfeld (and with whom he met as a group at least 18 times). "In the fall and winter leading up to the invasion," writes Barstow, "the Pentagon armed its analysts with talking points portraying Iraq as an urgent threat. The basic case became a familiar mantra: Iraq possessed chemical and biological weapons, was developing nuclear weapons, and might one day slip some to Al Qaeda; an invasion would be a relatively quick and

inexpensive 'war of liberation.'"

The analysts then obediently repeated the administration's line all over the broadcast media. As one of Clarke's lieutenants told the *Times*, on certain days, "We were able to click on every single station and every one of our folks were up there delivering our message. You'd look at them and say, 'This is working.'"

The analysts were instructed not to indicate they had been briefed and prepared by the Defense Department.

The increasingly disastrous character of the war, along with revelations of torture and abuse at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, provided further opportunities for the military experts to be trotted out before the public. In September 2003, for instance, as the insurgency was beginning to have an impact and the administration was attempting to justify Bush's request for \$87 billion in war financing, a group of analysts—four from Fox, one each from CBS and ABC—were invited to tour Iraq and promised a look at "the real situation on the ground."

Needless to say, on their return, they offered glowing reports about the situation. Paul E. Vallely, a retired army general who specialized in psychological warfare, told Fox News, about the conditions in Iraq, "You can't believe the progress." He predicted the insurgency would be washed up within months.

Barstow makes the point that the trip also "represented a business opportunity: direct access to the most senior and military leaders in Iraq and Kuwait," some of whom had decision-making power over how the billions of US dollars were to be spent.

Media treatment of the horrific conditions at Guantánamo was another source of major concern at the Pentagon. Groups of analysts visited the base six times from June 2005 to counter "the growing perception" of the internment camp "as an international symbol of inhumane treatment." The collection of retired officers carried out their assignment. "The analysts went on TV and radio, decrying Amnesty International, criticizing calls to close the facility and asserting that all detainees were treated humanely."

The Pentagon analyst program is apparently illegal under US statutes. A provision of the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948 forbids the Voice of America from disseminating information about the US and its policies domestically. The Foreign Relations Act of 1972 amended that act to include a ban on disseminating within the US any "information about the United States, its people, and its policies" prepared for distribution abroad. The so-called Zorinsky Amendment (named after Nebraska Democratic Senator Edward Zorinsky) of 1985 forbids US Information Agency funds to "be used to influence public opinion in the United States."

The article concentrates on the television appearances of the military analysts, and this was undoubtedly where they had their greatest

impact. Barstow is too modest, however, about the role played by the print media and the *New York Times* in particular. He notes merely that members of the group “often published op-ed articles or were quoted in magazines, web sites and newspapers. At least nine of them have written op-ed articles for the *Times*.”

Editor & Publisher points out that a number of the analysts were regularly cited in the press and that one of their number, Gen. Barry McCaffrey, was quoted often in 2002 and 2003 in support of the attack on Iraq and wrote op-eds for the *Washington Post*.

Thomas McNerney, “one of the prominent cabal members,” writes *Editor & Publisher*, “shows up in several *Times* articles since 2002—as late as 2006 he is quoted as still believing Saddam had WMD and simply hid them in Syria and elsewhere.”

In an online question-and-answer session April 21, Andrew Rosenthal, editorial page editor, responded to a question about the *Times* op-ed pieces written by Pentagon analysts. Rosenthal refers to only one of the pieces by name, “Rebels, Guns and Money” (November 10, 2004), authored by retired army Gen. James A. Marks. He claims blandly that the column “discussed the tactics, strategies and techniques involved in urban warfare, looking ahead to an impending military assault on the city of Falluja. General Marks did not take a stand on how the war was going in Iraq.”

This is serious misrepresentation of Marks’ repellent propaganda piece. First of all, Rosenthal claims that the assault was “impending” on November 10. In fact, the attack by US marines began November 8, and by November 10 it was already clear that a major war crime was underway. The *Times* does not care to reveal that it published an article celebrating the destruction of a major city while it was taking place.

Marks’ article begins triumphantly, “The Marine and Army forces now entering Falluja, Iraq have prepared for this fight for some time, and not just since the collapse of Saddam Hussein’s regime last spring.” It strongly touts the US forces’ prowess at “urban fighting.” The piece is meant to prepare the American public for the devastation and loss of life in Fallujah.

“We will use precision weapons where there is a high probability of killing innocent Iraqis, but for the most part we will use conventional artillery, mortars and rockets. Buildings will crumble—the train station demolished on Monday will not be the last [so much for Rosenthal’s “impending”]—because we will destroy them and so will the insurgents. Dust will be everywhere, small fires and smoke will obscure the vision of our troops and the enemy.

“But it will not be as out of control as it may seem; the destruction will have a purpose... Our goal is to bring democracy and liberty to Iraq, and that won’t happen if we destroy whole cities and towns. Fortunately, our soldiers have extensive training in urban operations down to the platoon and company level.”

Marks concludes by asking rhetorically when American troops would come home, and continues: “One of the most difficult aspects of counter-insurgency operations is deciding when to declare victory and head on home, and it is far too early to even begin thinking about that. But with each American and Iraqi soldier that steps into Falluja this week, we are that much closer to the end.”

The retired general, as part of the Pentagon propaganda campaign, was making the case on the pages of the *New York Times* for mass murder.

In any event, the *Times* did not especially need the intervention of outside “experts.” It had a sufficient number of internal advocates for the Iraq war and for US domination of the Middle East in columnist

Thomas Friedman and reporters like Judith Miller and Michael Gordon.

During the buildup to the war, Miller’s articles on Iraqi WMD served as a transmission belt for government misinformation and lies. The pieces, it later emerged, were largely based on information provided by Iraqi exile leader and convicted embezzler Ahmad Chalabi. The whole operation was directed by the office of Vice President Dick Cheney and the civilian leadership in the Pentagon.

The response of the US media to the revelation of the Pentagon campaign to manage the war news has been largely to ignore it. The television networks, the guiltiest parties in Barstow’s piece, have either stonewalled inquiries or played the innocent victim.

CBS News and Fox wouldn’t make any comment at all. NBC News issued a brief and evasive statement, claiming it had policies in place “to assure that the people who appear on our air have been appropriately vetted and that nothing in their profile would lead to even a perception of a conflict of interest.” CNN officials said they were unaware that Gen. Marks, one of its main analysts, was, according to Barstow, “deeply involved in the business of seeking government contracts, including contracts related to Iraq.”

The network executives knew precisely what was going on with their military analysts and approved the program. They were as interested as the government and the military in spreading false information to justify an invasion and occupation. As the complicity of the Democrats in Congress has underscored, the need to control Middle East oil reserves is the consensus policy of the American ruling elite.

The moral and intellectual deterioration of the American media has reached an advanced stage. The US has become a society dominated by massive social differentiation. The top officials at the media conglomerates are enormously sensitive to the need to conceal social reality in America as well as the consequences of US foreign policy.

In 1922, at a time when America was a rising political and industrial power, the liberal journalist and political commentator Walter Lippmann could write confidently that “on the whole, the quality of the news about modern society is an index of its social organization. The better the institutions, the more all interests concerned are formally represented, the more issues are disentangled, the more objective criteria are introduced, the more perfectly an affair can be presented as news.”

Following from Lippmann, the opposite holds true as well. ‘The worse the institutions ... ’



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