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TRUTH AND DECEIT
Media Relations and Military Deception

by

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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Abstract of

TRUTH AND DECEIT
Media Relations and Military Deception

The Joint Force Commander can conduct "good faith" media relations in operations that involve operational deception by directing early coordination between command and control warfare and public affairs. Public affairs programs must remain independent from command and control warfare, but coordination will prevent each from undermining the other and contribute to unity of command.

Military deception deliberately distorts information to mislead the enemy and achieve the security and surprise principles of war. While recognizing the advantages and essential principles of military deception, the Public Affairs Officer must ensure that the U.S. public, media and government officials are not misled about military capabilities and intentions in ways that would influence U.S. policy and public opinion.

In Operation DESERT STORM, deception planners passively used the news media to funnel deceptive information to the enemy. Today, commanders face an increasingly difficult challenge to reconcile the seemingly incompatible goals of truth and deception in joint doctrine. In preparing for future operations, military leaders must understand recent evolutions in Department of Defense policies on media relations, recognize the changing role of the Public Affairs Officer, and update joint doctrine to provide public affairs guidance for command and control coordination.

TRUTH AND DECEIT

Media Relations and Military Deception

INTRODUCTION

The Joint Force Commander (JFC) can conduct "good faith" media relations in operations that involve operational deception by directing early coordination between Command and Control Warfare (C2W) planners and the Public Affairs Officer (PAO). While public affairs (PA) programs must remain independent from C2W to protect the integrity of civil-military relations and honor the intent of the First Amendment, coordination will prevent each from undermining the other and contribute to unity of command. The PAO's role in coordination is to ensure that DOD policy is not violated and the enduring credibility of the armed forces is not compromised for an immediate operational advantage. The PAO's effort is not to collaborate or corroborate operational deception, but to ensure the U.S. public, media, and government officials are not misled about military capabilities and intentions in ways that would influence U.S. policy and public opinion.¹

Joint doctrine provides excellent guidance for public affairs, giving considerable attention to relations with the news media. The doctrine recognizes the pervasive and increasing role of media in future operations and highlights the "...critical task of advancing consistent and credible information about U.S. joint forces to the American public and our allies via the news media."² The doctrine sets forth the DOD Principles of Information and stresses that accurate and timely information is the goal of public affairs.

Military deception is a tool the JFC uses to cause adversaries to misallocate resources in time, place, quantity or effectiveness. It is designed to mislead the enemy by manipulation, distortion, or falsification of evidence, inducing the enemy to react in a manner prejudicial to his interests.³ Deception helps the JFC achieve the security and surprise principles of war and can greatly influence the outcome of major operations. The deliberate process of planning and conducting a deception operation is carefully outlined in joint doctrine.

While joint doctrine briefly mentions coordination between C2W and PA, it is almost silent on how the PAO should conduct this coordination. Operational deception was a critical factor in the outcome of Operation DESERT STORM.⁴ Deception planners passively used the news media as a means to funnel deceptive information to Iraqi military leaders. Using Operation DESERT STORM as a framework for discussion, this paper examines "good faith" media relations and the essential principles of military deception. It attempts to reconcile these seemingly incompatible goals in current joint doctrine and proposes specific guidance for PAOs in C2W coordination.

EVOLVING POLICY ON MEDIA RELATIONS

The news media, as an institution, is a product of the social and political culture within which it operates. American media reflect two centuries of a unique relationship with government. Other democracies have a free press, but the working relationship between their government officials and reporters is profoundly different. This difference is not produced by the government officials and press, but by the form and concept of government itself. The U.S. Constitution places power in the people, viewing

government as the repository of the power delegated by citizens. In Britain, another democracy, the state is grounded in the concept of sovereignty which originally involved the divine right of kings and did not emphasize the role of the voting public, or the press. The British government accustomed itself to power long before the free press emerged.⁵ In America, the government and the press are each subjects of the power of the people, expressed in the voting booth and marketplace. This makes the media, conceptually, a peer to government, not a subject of it. U.S. laws that pertain to media coverage of the government reflect this perspective, and the Supreme Court demonstrates a long-standing reluctance to produce rulings that restrict or inhibit media coverage of the government.

This distinction between the government, the media, and the people, was captured in Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney's philosophy in Desert Storm. Cheney said he believed it was essential to provide information, as accurately as possible, to the public, but not necessarily to the press.⁶ Thus, the media was the essential channel, not the important target of public information. Within the Clausewitzian trinity,⁷ news media will influence the people, the government and the military, but does not occupy a point on the triangle. The media is the conduit of perceptions upon which power is exercised.

Cheney's goal seems to have been to minimize the media filters and interpretation of information during Desert Storm. Live press conferences took the middle man out of the flow of information. The information was packaged by the military, not by reporters. It was essentially one point of the triangle communicating directly with another. Consequently, the U.S. media became increasingly frustrated. The vast geography of the battlefield and lack of infrastructure limited the freedom of movement for media, making

it almost impossible for reporters to get unique perspectives on events. Forced to pool their products and collect information in a centralized public forum, they could not report independently and were not able to exercise their role as the fourth estate. While more than 1600 news media representatives filed reports from Saudi Arabia, they felt left out of the news gathering process and declared it, "the most under reported major conflict in history," despite Cheney's assertion that "it was the best-covered war in history."⁸ The media felt controlled, managed and subordinated to the government's authority. The notion of media as just a conduit for information, without regard for the reporter's professional role in collecting, organizing and packaging it, is over-simplistic. In our American social and political culture, it is independent reporting that distinguishes news from propaganda.

"The media will resist management and escort. Perhaps most important, leaders must recognize that PAOs cannot control the media. When an event occurs, senior military officials should expect the media to cover it quickly, if not live. The media have the technical sophistication to report live from anywhere in the world, with or without PAO support."⁹

- General H. Hugh Shelton

In the months following Operation DESERT STORM, DOD adopted Principles of Information for News Media Covering DOD Operations (DOD Directive 5122.5). The nine principles implicitly acknowledge that it is improper for the government to dictate how the news media covers the military, allowing for some obvious restrictions in matters pertaining to operational security, force protection and practical logistics. The principles explicitly outline how the news media should be allowed to engage in their independent process of news gathering. In summary, pools are not to be the standard.

When pools are necessary, they should be as large as possible and disbanded at the earliest opportunity. Media are to be given access to all major military units, but will be required to abide by a clear set of security groundrules when in a combat zone.

Joint Doctrine for Public Affairs (Joint Pub 3-61) charges the JFC with the responsibility to ensure that all planning “efficiently and effectively address the goals of these principles.” DOD agreed to these Principles as an act of good faith to expedite the flow of accurate and timely information, and identified the news media as the principal means for communicating with the public. Joint doctrine recognizes the need to accommodate the mission of the armed forces with that of the news media and directs that “propaganda or publicity designed to sway or direct public opinion, will not be included in DOD PA programs.”¹⁰

There was a tenth principle proposed, but DOD rejected it. The news media wanted DOD to abandon the security review procedures, which reporters prefer to call censorship. While the Pentagon retained the option to resort to security review, most military leaders today consider “security at the source” a better approach.¹¹ Security at the source simply means that media must agree to security groundrules before they are granted access to units, and the units are given guidance on what information is to be withheld from media. The objective is to prevent disclosure of sensitive information by working out the rules in advance for both reporters and friendly forces. Security at the source is a more practical way to deal with the reality of media coverage in modern war. The sheer numbers of media reporting, and their new technologies to move information instantly, make it inconceivable that the military could review all media products before

they are transmitted. It is certainly in the JFC's interest to prevent media access to classified or sensitive information, rather than trying to regain control of it after the media have it.

Media relations in future conflicts will reflect this evolution in DOD policy and joint doctrine. Commanders should expect huge numbers of media, presenting complex transportation and communication problems. The use of pools will be resisted (or ignored) by media who will cite DOD policy to get them quickly disbanded in favor of independent reporting. Press conferences alone will be inadequate for media who will not want the military to package information without their supposed impartial, objective, and balanced scrutiny. The media will expect to move around within the area of operation and will bring new technologies to transmit information instantaneously, most likely without any security review. The media will be a complex battlefield reality that will challenge commanders and their PAOs who must facilitate the accurate and timely flow of information.

JOINT DOCTRINE ON MILITARY DECEPTION

Deception operations distort, conceal, and falsify intentions, capabilities, and force dispositions in order to mislead enemy decision makers.¹² Deception, as one of the five tools of C2W, is closely coordinated with psychological operations, electronic warfare, physical destruction and operations security. Collectively, the tools of C2W seek to influence adversary decision makers and degrade their command and control capabilities. Successful deceptions produce operational security and surprise which can significantly reduce risk in major operations.

“Surprise is based on speed, secrecy and deception. It means doing the unexpected thing, which in turn normally means doing the more difficult thing in hopes that the enemy will not expect it.”¹³

-Warfighting, USMC FMFM 1

Joint Doctrine for Military Deception (Joint Pub 3-58) outlines the deliberate process for planning a deception operation, guided by six principles of military deception: Focus, Objective, Centralized Control, Security, Timeliness and Integration. The focus, or target, of a deception is the enemy decision maker. The objective is the specific action (or inaction) the deception is intended to solicit from the adversary decision maker. Deceptions must be directed and controlled by a single element to avoid confusion, and strict security is needed to protect the existence and details of the plan. Deception operations require careful timing and integration with the main effort they support.

In Operation DESERT STORM, the coalition's deception objective was to “use operational deception to fix or divert Republican Guard and other heavy units away from the main effort.” The Iraqi senior military leadership was the deception target, and the desired perception was that “the coalition would attack frontally through Kuwait.”¹⁴ The means used to funnel deceptive information included electronic and physical decoys to notionally portray unit locations, and publication of amphibious force presence, preparation and training.

Deception ploys must be carefully matched to the enemy's level of technology.¹⁵ In the weeks preceding the ground campaign, coalition air power had destroyed most of Iraq's ability to collect intelligence. It was apparent that Iraqi leaders had access to CNN and other broadcast media because of their timely diplomatic responses to issues in the

press. The news media became a very effective channel for deception planners, because it had become Iraq's principal means to collect information on coalition forces.

Iraqi troop dispositions indicated that Saddam Hussein expected an attack through Kuwait. In military deceptions, it is much easier to reinforce an existing belief than to create a new one.¹⁶ Therefore, the deception plan sought to feed the Iraqi perception that the main attack would be directly through Kuwait, supported with an amphibious assault. The deception story was plausible. It was believable based on what Saddam Hussein expected, consistent with what he knew about coalition activity, verifiable based on his limited intelligence (mostly press reports), and executable based on the actual capabilities of the coalition forces he knew were in the region. It is important to note that the deception was a true capability, and portrayed a plausible operational plan to accomplish the coalition's mission. In fact, the deception plan was a legitimate alternative, probably the most likely alternative to the real intended course of action.

Deception planning and coordination is conducted by a C2W cell. The organization of the C2W staff is the JFC's prerogative. The nominal C2W cell is composed of a C2W Officer, planners from each of the five elements of C2W, and other staff representatives as required. Joint doctrine on C2W recommends that a PA representative be designated to work with C2W planners to "ensure that PA programs and initiatives complement C2W operations."¹⁷ However, the C2W doctrine stipulates that the PA representative should not be the PAO or anyone acting as a spokesperson, responsible for briefing media. Neither the C2W or PA doctrine offer guidance on how the PA representative is to conduct coordination.

RECONCILING MEDIA RELATIONS AND MILITARY DECEPTION

To prepare for future operations, military leaders must (1) understand the nature and scope of this issue, (2) recognize how the role of the PAO has changed in recent years, and (3) update joint doctrine to provide guidance on PAO/C2W coordination.

Operation DESERT STORM will not suffice as a template in planning future operations, but it serves as a warning. This issue, ethical concerns of using the news media in military deception, will become increasingly relevant. Joint Vision 2010 proclaims Information Operations (IO) as a “central precept” in future operations.¹⁸ The model of future operations emphasizes the protection of friendly systems, while attacking the adversary’s ability to collect, process, disseminate, and use information. However, even as offensive IO quickly blinds the enemy, it is inconceivable that the National Command Authority would ever authorize any significant disruption of news media products. Because future adversaries know that the American social and political culture compels news media to scrutinize information, in the independent reporting process, press reports will be absorbed as intelligence, with some measure of credibility. For deception planners, the news media will become an increasingly lucrative vehicle for deception operations.

“The problem is, in the world of CNN, the Saddam Husseins of the future are going to have their television sets turned on in their headquarters.”¹⁹

- General Norman Schwarzkopf

In recent years the role of the PAO has significantly changed. Today, PAOs spend most of their energies advising commanders on how to best articulate their command information to both internal and external audiences. They help the commander

develop communication strategies and prepare for media encounters. As the staff member most knowledgeable of the news media industry, the PAO facilitates media access by coordinating and managing transportation, logistics and opportunities for reporters to file their stories. While they commonly provide background information to help reporters understand the context of complex issues, PAOs invest very little time as spokespersons. Today, commanders and their troops are the preferred messengers. The media, and the American public, have become accustomed to hearing from those in command or conducting operations. The use of a "professional spokesperson" is often seen as a defensive mechanism employed by large organizations with something to hide. Senior leaders increasingly value PAOs for their sound strategic thinking, not "on camera personality."

The joint doctrine recommendation that someone other than the PAO or spokesperson be used to coordinate with C2W is an outdated notion. Deliberately maintaining an intentional level of ignorance in the PAO is foolish. It may give the PAO some deniability, but it completely undermines the military's credibility. If the commander thinks the PAO is not capable of protecting classified or sensitive information while dealing with media, the PAO should be replaced with one who can. As a principal advisor to the commander, the PAO cannot give good counsel with incomplete information. Since the modern press conference is often conducted by the commander, the notion of "not informing the spokesperson" is senseless and should be removed from doctrine. The commander should exercise the prerogative to organize the staff in a manner that best achieves unity of command. The commander should direct

the PAO to review all issues in operational planning that even remotely concern the news media, including C2W.

“Since deception is a basic principle of war, what about lying to deceive the enemy? That is not permissible when it goes through the press and deceives the American citizens. The lie would not only be dishonorable, but would erode the credibility of the military service once the lie has been discovered.”²⁰

- Richard Halloran, Defense Reporter for The New York Times.

It is never appropriate or acceptable to lie to a reporter. Operational security demands that selected information be withheld, and most reporters genuinely accept this. While military personnel always have the option to refuse to answer a question, they must never knowingly lie. There is, however, an area between lying and withholding where perceptions must be carefully managed. It requires careful, deliberate, and sophisticated ethical judgment. The American public expect military leaders to minimize risk, and deception is a classic tool to do so. But there are limits on deceptive activities. The PAO must advise the commander on the appropriateness of a deception plan if media will have access to any element of it. The PAO must help the commander make choices on whether it is appropriate to create, reinforce, or clarify public perceptions.

The PAO must focus on the desired end state in both public affairs and media relations. Joint doctrine stresses that timely and accurate information is the goal of PA programs. This describes the standard of performance sought in a daily routine - be responsive and distribute correct information as soon as it's releasable. However, the ultimate end state in public affairs and media relations is trust and credibility. Efforts to secure and maintain trust and credibility transcend the operation itself. Trust and

credibility endure when hindsight reveals that the military acted in good faith with the press and the American people. Intentions and behavior must be honorable.

Allowing deceptive information to flow through news media to the enemy decision maker must be balanced against its potential impact on the media, the public, and U.S. decision makers. The PAO must carefully consider unintended effects of the deception. The governing factors are public opinion and U.S. policy. Joint doctrine is very specific. **“Misinforming the media about military capabilities and intentions in ways that influence U.S. decision makers and public opinion is contrary to DOD policy.”**²¹ The key is to think through reasonably predictable effects on public opinion and U.S. policy. As a media relations officer, the PAO should possess a genuine sense of fairness to reporters who are presumably motivated by a sense of duty, drawn from the U.S. Constitution that the military is protecting and defending. The military must conduct itself in a manner that is consistent with the American public’s social and political expectations of integrity.

“In the very early days of the war, the deception planners came down with their deception plan. One of the principal proposals was that we would plant false stories in the newspapers... But a decision made in Washington, which I supported, was that’s not the way we do things in the United States of America. We don’t lie to the press. We do not put false stories in the newspaper to manipulate the enemy. We’re not going to do that. Now, I will tell you, quite candidly, when the reporters’ focus was on the Marines going out on amphibious operations, I never stood up and said, “Wait a minute. We don’t’ plan to do any amphibious operations.” I was delighted that the press was doing that. I will swear on a stack of Bibles that we never, ever deliberately manipulated the press, and we never, ever deliberately planted a false story.”²²

- General Norman Schwarzkopf

ASSESSMENT OF GOOD FAITH MEDIA RELATIONS

To determine the appropriateness of deception operations which may be reported by media, the PAO must conduct an assessment of potential unintended effects on public opinion and U.S. policy. The PAO must ensure that the legitimate professional interests of the news media are addressed as well as the operational needs of the JFC. The following seven questions are proposed as a guide to formulate the assessment.

1. Who is the target and what is the objective of the deception?

The PAO should begin with the same question deception planners begin with. The target of the deception must be an enemy decision maker. The objective must be to influence that decision maker to act in a way that friendly forces can exploit to achieve surprise and reduce risk. This objective is an honorable one, if the intent is to increase the probability of success while minimizing the loss of lives. The U.S. public, media or government must never be the target of deception. Deception is a C2W tool, not a PA strategy.

2. Could the deception story mislead U.S. citizens, media or government officials in a way that could influence U.S. policy or public opinion? In Operation DESERT STORM, many U.S. citizens, news media and government officials were deceived by the amphibious assault story. However, the deception had no reasonably predictable impact on public opinion or U.S. policy. Public support for operation DESERT STORM was established when Americans understood that Iraq had the fourth largest army in the world. The Iraqi Army was characterized as "battle hardened" by the previous war with Iran. Many civilian "military experts"

predicted a fierce ground battle with the potential for hundreds of U.S. casualties. The deception story, an amphibious assault, was not inconsistent with the public's perception at the outset of the war. The U.S. Congress provided bipartisan support for Operation DESERT STORM, accepting what are now known to be erroneous estimates of high U.S. casualties.

Suppose the deception planners had wanted to threaten Saddam Hussein with tactical nuclear weapons. Since it is not the policy of the United States to routinely deploy tactical nuclear weapons on ships and aircraft, this deception story may have created questions and a public debate on U.S. policy. Therefore, a tactical nuclear weapons deception ploy would be unacceptable in the given circumstances, because it may have affected U.S. policy or public opinion.

3. Is the deceptive information fundamentally true? Amphibious forces were present in the Persian Gulf. From the earliest stages of the war, the amphibious assault was an actual capability, and a primary alternative plan of action. The deception story did not claim forces, equipment or tactics that the coalition didn't have at its disposal. This is important for two reasons. First, the American public was not misled into thinking the armed forces had capabilities that they did not actually have. Secondly, using information that is fundamentally true contributes to plausibility in the deception story. If deception planners grossly exaggerated the forces available in the theater, it may have created suspicion in the adversary, and confusion among American citizens and government officials.

4. Does media access to the deceptive information violate existing public affairs guidance, DOD policy or current groundrules? The DOD is relatively consistent in policies that govern what information is releasable. Security, privacy and propriety concerns are understood by reporters and are somewhat predictable. It would be inappropriate to violate normal DOD policy in order to project deception in the news media. It would cause confusion among reporters who are expected to adhere to groundrules, and any noticeable departure from policy might signal deception to the enemy.

In Operation DESERT STORM, there were several groundrules imposed on reporters. Media reports were not to contain details of future operations, specific information on troop strengths or location, specific information on missing or downed airplanes or ships during search and rescue operations, or information on operational weaknesses that could be used against U.S. forces.²³ When the media covered the amphibious exercises off the coast of Oman, their coverage was consistent with the usual coverage expected in major U.S. training exercises. The reports filed from Oman, were very similar to reports routinely filed during work-ups in the Atlantic and Pacific Fleet training cycles. The media reports were consistent with current DOD policy, PA guidance and groundrules.

5. Is the deceptive information consistent with current public affairs themes and messages? Message deconfliction is essential to unity of command and a coherent PA program. Public affairs messages highlighted the

coalition's mission to force the immediate and complete withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait. The deception story, to invade Kuwait from the sea, was consistent with public statements about the mission. However, if the deception planners proposed the threat of a ground assault to capture Baghdad, there would have been inconsistency between the public affairs description of the mission, and the deception story. This could have created stress among U.S. citizens, government officials and coalition partners who supported the restoration of Kuwait, not necessarily the invasion of Iraq. The deception story must not undermine PA programs.

6. Is there a plan to move media to the main effort before combat operations commence? This question drives to the heart of "good faith" media relations. At the moment of truth, the military leadership must demonstrate its regard for the legitimate role news media play in our American social and political culture. Leaving the media with deception forces, when the main effort begins somewhere else, sends a clear message to the press. Media access and coverage of the operation was not a priority in planning. Having a plan to move the media into an advantageous position to cover the main effort demonstrates an appreciation for media, who have traveled to the battlefield to connect the U.S. public to the deployed American combat forces. Media will be more receptive to the honorable intentions and advantages of military deception, if they are "read in to the plan" in time to see it unfold. This act of good faith is essential to retaining the news media's trust and confidence. Military leaders use deception to help their troops achieve victory. They should ensure the news media and their audiences witness it. Success on the battlefield can be quickly diminished in a confrontation with

frustrated reporters who may be inclined to focus on integrity instead of the JFC's operational art.

7. Is the JFC prepared to brief media on the details of the deception plan once the main effort begins? Joint doctrine states that “the fact that deception was used during an operation should be protected, both to allow the use of the same deception tactics and techniques in later operations, and to protect sensitive deception means.”²⁴ This is simply not practical if news media have knowledge of the deception. If the military knowingly allowed media access to any element of the deception, the PAO should have a plan to brief the media as soon as the main effort begins. This is another act of good faith. It should be self evident to news media that the deception plan was concealed to protect operation security. But the media will be compelled by editors to quickly explain why their reports contained deceptive (erroneous) information. The JFC should be prepared to help the news media defend its credibility. The military leadership must take responsibility for the deception plan and explain why it was essential to the main effort.

CONCLUSION

As a military officer the PAO must first recognize the value of operational deception and its essential use to achieve surprise and security. As an advisor to the JFC, the PAO must also be the honest broker of information and protect the enduring credibility of the armed forces. The PAO's horizon of professional interest extends far beyond the current operation. For the deception planners, the "end of the day" is success on the battlefield. For the PAO (and JFC), however, the "end of the day" includes a post-war analysis and judgment by the public. The American people and news media will assess the military's integrity, truthfulness and honor. Ultimately, military leaders will be judged not solely on whether they won or lost, but how they played the game.

"Whatever else the press arrangements in the Persian Gulf may have been, they were a good faith effort on the part of the military to be as fair as possible to the large number of reporters on the scene. They were a good faith effort to get as many reporters as possible out with the troops during a highly mobile, modern ground war. And they were a good faith effort to allow as much freedom in reporting as possible while still preventing the enemy from knowing what we were up to."²⁵

- Pete Williams, Asst. Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs

NOTES

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²³ Pete Williams, "The Press and the Persian Gulf War," Parameters, Autumn 1991, 5.

²⁴ Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Doctrine for Military Deception, (Joint Pub 3-58) (Washington D.C.: March 31, 1996), IV-8.

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