

Militainment gone amok

By Rory O'Connor
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America is a strange country. All of its best generals are journalists,” Defense Undersecretary Douglas J. Feith told the San Francisco Chronicle in recent interview.

Now the generals have their own cable channel. As the Fourth Estate continues to morph into what General/Journalist Tommy Franks calls the “Fourth Front” in the ongoing and endless war on terror, and as the lines blur ever-further between military public affairs – disseminating accurate information to the media and the public – and psychological and information operations – using often-misleading information and propaganda to influence the outcome of a campaign or battle – the inevitable has finally happened.

The Military Channel.

How did it happen?

As the Hollywood Reporter aptly put it, “Discovery Wings Channel has been drafted.”

That’s right – Discovery Communications International (DCI), a media behemoth that boasts 60 networks representing 19 entertainment brands (including TLC, Animal Planet, Travel Channel, Discovery Health Channel, Discovery Kids, and, in partnership with the New York Times, the Discovery Times Channel) will “re-launch” its six year-old Discovery Wings cabler next month as the Military Channel, focusing on all aspects of the armed forces, military strategies and personnel throughout the ages.

“By covering all aspects of the military and the people who define it, we will extend the Discovery brand, create a service that appeals to our existing viewers and attract new viewers and sponsors,” said Billy Campbell, president of Discovery Networks US, who called military-related issues “a topic of fascination and relevance in our world.”

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Soon you too will be able to ‘go behind the lines’ and undertake a “new mission” as Discovery offers what its press materials dub “a Broad Focus on All Aspects of the Military With a Wide Array of Programming About its People, Strategy, Technology and History.”

What kind of programming? The kind that will bring you “compelling, real-world stories of heroism, military strategy, technological breakthroughs and turning points in history.”

But wait – there’s more: “The Military Channel also provides access to military personnel and hardware, allowing viewers to experience and understand a world full of human drama, courage, innovation and long-held traditions.”

Judith A. McHale, President and CEO of Discovery Communications explains: “In an increasingly fragmented marketplace, the Military Channel will broaden Discovery Communications’ offerings and further differentiate our portfolio of emerging networks.”

Meanwhile, as the estimable Mark Mazzetti of The Los Angeles Times reported this week in a piece headlined “PR Meets Psy-Ops in War on Terror,” the use of misleading information as a military tool has begun sparking debate in the Pentagon – and putting Defense Department credibility to the test.

Here’s a case in point, as reported by Mazzetti:

“On the evening of Oct. 14, a young Marine spokesman near Fallujah appeared on CNN and made a dramatic announcement.

“‘Troops crossed the line of departure,’ 1st Lt. Lyle Gilbert declared, using a common military expression signaling the start of a major campaign. ‘It’s going to be a long night.’ CNN, which had been alerted to expect a major news development, reported that the long-awaited offensive to retake the Iraqi city of Fallujah had begun.”

In fact, the Fallujah offensive would not kick off for another three weeks. Gilbert’s carefully worded announcement was an elaborate psychological operation – or “psy-op” – intended to dupe insurgents in Fallujah and allow U.S. commanders to see how guerrillas would react if they believed U.S. troops were entering the city, according to several Pentagon officials.

In the hours after the initial report, CNN’s Pentagon reporters were able to determine that the Fallujah operation had not, in fact, begun.

“As the story developed, we quickly made it clear to our viewers exactly what was going on in and around Fallujah,” CNN spokesman Matthew Furman said.”

Pentagon officials say the CNN incident was just part of a broad effort underway

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within the Bush administration to use information to its advantage in the war on terrorism.

It was not the first time – nor will it be the last.

Although the Pentagon was forced to close its controversial Office of Strategic Influence two years ago following reports that it intended to plant false news stories in the international media, the reality is that much of its mission has merely been moved to other offices of the government. Most of the work remains classified, although officials say the emphasis to date has been on influencing how foreign media depict the United States.

“The movement of information has gone from the public affairs world to the psychological operations world,” one senior defense official told Mazzetti. “What’s at stake is the credibility of people in uniform.”

A recent decision by commanders in Iraq to combine public affairs, psychological operations and information operations into a “strategic communications” office caused such conflict and controversy within the Pentagon that Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Gen. Richard B. Myers distributed a letter to the Joint Chiefs and U.S. combat commanders in the field warning of the dangers.

But Myers’ concern is apparently not shared by many top civilians at the Pentagon and National Security Council, who believe the 24-hour news cycle and the influence of Arabic satellite television make it essential for U.S. military commanders and civilian officials to make the control of information a key part of their battle plans.

“Information is part of the battlefield in a way that it’s never been before,” one senior Bush administration official told the L.A. Times. “We’d be foolish not to try to use it to our advantage.”

And a recent report by the Defense Science Board, a panel of outside experts that advises Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, concluded that a “crisis” in U.S. “strategic communications” had undermined American efforts to fight Islamic extremism worldwide.

The report cited polls in the Arab world revealing widespread hatred of the United States throughout the Middle East. 94 percent of Saudi Arabians now have an “unfavorable” view of the United States, for example. And in Egypt, the second largest recipient of U.S. aid, the figure is 98%. Therefore, the Defense Science Board recommended a presidential directive to “coordinate all components of strategic communication including public diplomacy, public affairs, international broadcasting and military information operations.”

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“Pretty soon, we’re going to have the 5 o’clock follies all over again, and it will take us another 30 years to restore our credibility,” one senior Defense official said, referring to the much-ridiculed daily media briefings in Saigon during the Vietnam War.

According to several Pentagon officials, the strategic communications programs at the Defense Department are being coordinated by – guess who? – Undersecretary of Defense for policy, Douglas J. Feith.

Rory O’Connor’s blog, “Media Is a Plural,” can be found at www.roryoconnor.org.