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MANIPULATING THE MEDIA FOR OPERATIONAL 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

MANIPULATING THE MEDIA FOR OPERATIONAL DECEPTION

The military must manipulate the media in order to deceive the enemy. Since the media is an intelligence source for the enemy commander, information conveyed through the media must be consistent with the overall deception cover plan. There are historical examples where the military has manipulated the media for this purpose. Current joint military doctrine does not prohibit manipulation of the media to deceive the enemy but does prohibit propaganda and manipulation of public opinion.

Deception at the operational level of war has been proven effective in numerous cases and should be part of every campaign plan in the future.

Care must be taken not to shoot the "silver bullet" of lying to the media too often because of the potential backlash. Furthermore, there must be solid operational justification for crossing this line. Manipulation of the media by controlling the release or access to the truth without lying appears to be an acceptable alternative, particularly if release of the information would compromise operational security. Controlling the media will be more difficult in future wars but they will still have to rely on the military for the bulk of their information. If a campaign has a deceptive component, coordination between the deception cell, the commander, and public affairs will be critical.

Introduction

General Norman Schwarzkopf said, "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"1 referring to his command's handling of the media* during the Gulf War. Schwarzkopf's "Left Hook" deception ranks as one of the greatest misdirections of modern warfare. Should he have manipulated the media to help deceive the Iraqis?

The relationship between the media and the military has always been strained. General Eisenhower summarized the adversarial nature of this relationship best when he stated to reporters, "The first essential in military operations is that no information of value should be given to the enemy. The first essential in newspaper work and broadcasting is wide-open publicity. It is your job and mine to reconcile these sometimes diverse considerations."2 This fundamental tension reached a high point in Vietnam where some reporters thought the government and the military were not being totally honest. Early in Desert Shield/Storm, Secretary of Defense Cheney decided that the military would tell only truths to the media. Should the military tell the truth all the time? If so, does this mean the end of deception at the operational level of war?

This paper will show that the media is an effective conduit for passing false information to the enemy commander, that the media has been manipulated in previous examples of operational deception, and that the current Department of Defense policy allows media manipulation. This paper will suggest several forms of media manipulation available to military planners. It will explain how by staggering release of the truth the military can deceive the enemy and not lie to the American public. It will also show that deception operations are practical even with today's investigative media.

Finally, this paper will demonstrate that manipulation of the media is required to deceive the enemy but that great care should be taken not to damage the military's credibility with the American public.

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* Media and press are used interchangeably and refer to both broadcast and print journalism.

Is the media an effective conduit for deceptive information?

The media is a very effective channel for deceptive information because the enemy has easy access to it and is likely to believe what is reported. Bruce Ross wrote that enemy susceptibility to operational deception (OPDEC) through the media is controlled by their degree of dependence on open source intelligence and the credibility of those sources.[3] Commanders can push the enemy toward dependence on open source intelligence. The commander can neutralize other aspects of an enemy's intelligence collection (signals and imagery for example) and force the adversary to rely more on the media. The media is a credible intelligence source in the minds of America's enemies because they see the media as independent and having an adversarial relationship with the U. S. military. In addition, adversaries have ready access to the media. During World War II, German intelligence obtained Allied newspapers through embassies in neutral countries.[4] In the age of global communications, adversaries have access to the media in real-time. For example, Iraqi commanders used the media for frontline information[5] and Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Azziz watched CNN.[6] One only has to note how fast Iraqi leaders responded to diplomatic initiatives reported in the media to verify that Saddam Hussein was also watching.[7] The media is perhaps the most direct route to the enemy commander available today.

Has the military manipulated the media in the past?

Jonathan Alter of Newsweek said, "Using the press to confuse the enemy is part of fighting a war."[8] Leading up to the invasion of Normandy, the Bodyguard deception team planted false information and arranged deceptive media coverage. The press routinely covered General George Patton, commander of the notional First U.S. Army Group (FUSAG) in England.[9] They photographed General Montgomery visiting a fake oil depot and put the pictures in British newspapers.[10] In America, National Geographic published division insignias for false divisions in FUSAG.[11] A BBC reporter even reported on spending a day with II Corps in Scotland when there was no II Corps.[12] The British released magazine and technical journal articles explaining allied weapon developments, invasion training and tactics shortly before the invasion. Diagrams and pictures from these articles got in London papers and eventually to Germany.[13] Even Eisenhower's D-Day BBC broadcast referred to Normandy as "initial landings" and the "first great obstacle"[14] in order to suggest that the real invasion would come later.

Later, in Israel on 4 Jun 1967, Moshe Dyan announced to the press after a cabinet meeting that it was too late to react to Egypt's recent actions and that diplomatic efforts were the only course of action remaining. As a result, most of the press submitted their stories and went home. The Israeli Defense Forces destroyed the Egyptian Air Force the next morning.[15] In 1973, Egypt returned the favor. The Soviets leaked false reports to the foreign press that Egypt was not properly maintaining its Soviet-made anti-aircraft missile systems.[16] When the war started, these well-maintained missiles all but decimated the Israeli Air Force.

The evidence shows that the U.S. military manipulated the media to support the Gulf War deception. In public, the military has denied any organized effort to manipulate the media. Colonel Joseph Purvis, CENTCOM J-5, said there was "no organized plan to use the press to further the deception story."[17] Assistant Secretary of Defense Pete Williams said, "We were not trying to deceive the press. We were trying to fool Saddam Hussein. We've worked very hard to maintain our credibility through this."[18] General Schwarzkopf's statement quoted earlier in this paper supports Mr. Williams' position.

However, since the end of the war, there have been reports of Pentagon leaks of misinformation and Pentagon contacts allowing reporters to draw false conclusions.[19] Early in Desert Shield, when U.S. forces and equipment were still being deployed, CENTCOM briefers insisted that they had the troop strength to defend Saudi Arabia but quietly asked reporters not to report the vulnerability of the early troops.[20] As a result, Saddam and the rest of the world got an overstatement of the U.S. capability.

The manipulation that got the most coverage was the possibility of a Marine amphibious assault. General Schwarzkopf proclaimed his innocence by stating,

> "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."[21]

However, General Schwarzkopf ordered the amphibious exercises in October to ensure media coverage[22] and then made highly publicized visits to the Marine headquarters in December to reinforce the illusion.[23] Out in the desert, no one covered redeployment of the VII and XVIII Corps and this raised questions in the media. One reporter said,

"Someone wanted to obscure the location of VII Corps and that could only mean one thing--the corps had been moved west to prepare for an imminent ground attack and CENTCOM did not want the Iraqi high command watching CNN to know where the corps had been moved to."
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In fact, news reports were largely from the coastal sectors after the coalition achieved air superiority.[25]

The daily press briefings proved an effective tool for guiding a large portion of what the media covered. CENTCOM could highlight some aspects of the deployment and not mention other units or capability. Even the senior leaders would use this simple method of omitting information (for security reasons), thereby telling truths without telling "the truth."[26] The press wasn't fooled but was helpless to do anything but complain. Newsweek called the daily briefings "diversionary tactics."[27]

In perhaps the most effective use of media deception, the military overstated the Patriot missile's capabilities. U.S. leaders had strong political motivation to stretch the truth in this case given the very real possibility of Israel entering the war and fracturing the coalition. The military allowed television coverage to guarantee video on CNN. Military briefers reported a 96 percent success rate.[28] However, by April 1992, Army BGen Robert Drolet testified that Patriots probably destroyed 24 of 86 Scud warheads and that the Army had "high confidence" in the evidence for only 40 percent (9) of these hits.[29] Not only did it calm the fears of coalition allies, the overstatement tried to convince Saddam that the Scuds were not worth launching in the first place.

Finally, there are examples of false reports being planted in the foreign press. On the morning of the invasion, the BBC announced landings on the Kuwaiti coast with heavy losses.[30] In addition, CENTCOM planted false reports of landings in Kuwait and Iraq with Saudi and Kuwaiti news agencies.[31]

Although senior leaders denied any organized effort in the Gulf, the military manipulated the press in a number of ways to support deception of the enemy. If press manipulation has been used in the past, what's the current policy on its use?

What's the current DoD policy?

Joint Publication 3-61 "Doctrine for Public Affairs in Joint Operations" states "information will be made fully available, consistent with statutory requirements, unless its release is precluded by current and valid security classification." It further states "propaganda or publicity designed to sway or direct public opinion will not be included in Department of Defense public affairs programs."[32] It provides for operational security by stating "information will be withheld only when disclosure would adversely affect national and operations security or threaten the safety or privacy of the men and women of the Armed Forces." To summarize, the Department of Defense must release as much information as requested with minimal delay, it must not try to influence public opinion and it may restrict release of information that might harm operational security.

Joint Publication 3-58 "Joint Doctrine for Military Deception" states "Misinforming the media about military capabilities and intentions in ways that influence U.S. decision makers and public opinion is contrary to DoD policy."[33] This is the only reference to how deception might interface with public affairs and it appears consistent with Joint Pub 3-61 in that it forbids trying to influence the public. It suggests that media manipulation for deception is permitted. The historical examples are consistent with this policy. Suggesting that the invasion of France would come at Pas de Calais instead of Normandy or highlighting Marine amphibious forces off of Kuwait instead of the XVIII Airborne Corps near the Iraqi border are both viable courses of military action that did not affect public opinion. To summarize, current policy allows manipulation of the media (and therefore the public) as long as the misinformation does not try to influence U.S. public opinion. As will be discussed later in this paper, one must consider the tenuous media-military relationship before attempting media manipulation.

How could the military manipulate the media to deceive the enemy?

Assuming there is a compelling reason to manipulate the media, there are passive and active methods. One example of a passive method would be to highlight certain systems or units during press briefings while hiding others behind operational security. For example, Patriot missiles were highlighted and showed Saddam that his Scuds were being destroyed. Another passive method would be to show evidence of one course of action, but not another. Organized media coverage of the amphibious exercises and later coverage of the Marines in the Gulf War are

good examples of this type. One could simply show friendly capabilities to the media and let the adversary imagine likely courses of action.[34] Careful revelation of certain true information by top leaders can support a deception. All of these can be used without lying to the media or the American public and without trying to influence public opinion.

If one chose to actively manipulate the media, there are several ways of affecting media coverage to support a deception. The military could direct some of the media's "expert" speculation on potential strategies. In Desert Storm, Pentagon officials had to steer some network commentators away from speculating about a "left hook" to protect the ongoing deception.[35] The military could leak certain information to the domestic and foreign press or co-opt influential reporters. They could produce computer-enhanced videos that show contrived scenes or they could plant misinformation on the internet.

These possibilities are only limited by one's imagination. The point is that the media can be manipulated to send messages to an enemy that is listening.

Can we deceive the enemy and tell the whole truth to the American public?

How can the military balance its obligation to tell the truth to the American public and still deceive the enemy? At first glance, this appears to be a fundamental contradiction. The answer lies in the sequencing of the truth. The military can release information that does not reveal deception or any other critical operational information. After the operation is complete, further detail on any deceptions can be released so the public gets the whole truth, but in a time phased manner. Furthermore, if the military chooses to lie to the enemy through the press, the military can admit the lie and provide the operational justification.

Can the military still deceive the enemy with an investigative media?

While the military can meet its obligations to tell the truth and protect the operation by withholding information at first and releasing it later, the media is motivated to get unique information and release it as soon as possible. This suggests that the media would broadcast or publish information that might reveal the military deception.

This "scoop" mentality and fierce competition may lead to at least inadvertent release of important information. Since a story has to grab the attention of the audience, reporters usually

seek bad, shocking or unique news. One reporter, referring to the military's role in Bosnia peacekeeping, stated, "It's not news. You're doing such a good job it's boring."[36] Frank Sesno, CNN, said he would announce operationally sensitive information on the air.[37] Another reporter stated that she would talk to coalition partners to get the story if the U.S. military was stonewalling her.[38]

Competition is increasing. Three hundred and ninety-five (180 American) journalists were in England for D-Day, and over 1600 were in the Gulf.[39] One can just imagine the operational security damage that could be done by a group this large if left to roam the front lines and rear areas and allowed to broadcast and publish unchecked. The Iraqis captured Bob Simon of CBS on 7 Feb 1991 when he and his crew stumbled across enemy lines. Simon and crew were taken to Baghdad and later released.[40] What intelligence could he have given the enemy if pressured? Most reporters lack military training and may not know what information is important to the enemy.[41] For example, a Saudi town was named in a report on a unit in the Gulf. This information was sufficient to give away the "left hook" invasion plan one week prior to G-day.[42] Media analysts, paid to speculate, might arrive at the actual plan of attack. In fact, CENTCOM planners worried that analysts would guess their ground plan.[43] Experts on the Nightline broadcast of 3 Oct 1990 were close.[44] Others reached the same conclusion but stopped their speculation voluntarily.[45] Speculation will continue to be a problem. After all, as Jonathan Alter of Newsweek said of war, "Speculation is half the fun of covering one."[46]

The military must control the press in some cases to prevent deliberate or inadvertent release of critical information. The media calls it censorship while the military calls it operational security. The tension is as old as the Constitution because Congress provides for defense, but can not abridge freedom of speech.[47]

Some would argue that the military can not control all media so they should not control any of it. For example, media outside the theater with access to commercial satellite imagery could reveal a deceptive force deployment.[48] Also, the military usually does not control print or broadcast media outside the area of operation, so how could they stop a reporter in Washington, D.C. from revealing a deception?

In the Gulf, logistical and physical security considerations drove the military to institute media pools. DoD public affairs officials claimed it was the only way to accommodate the over

1600 registered media and assure that some (165) got to travel with combat units on G-day.[49] But, the pools served another purpose. Since the military provided access to the military units, the pools were a way to limit or control access to information for media reports.[50] There were many complaints from the media that the military had too much control.[51]

In addition to grouping the reporters into pools, the military required all reports to follow established security rules. The media could not release information concerning specific unit capabilities, locations or intentions. The media had to accept the security rules before the military granted them access to units.[52] The reports were then subject to review by media pool escort officers before transmission.[53] If the reviewer thought something needed to be changed, he either reached agreement with the reporter or the reporter could appeal the change up the chain of command all the way to the Pentagon. This review process seemed to work well, but it provided military control over the content of the reports.[54] Furthermore, the military restricted transmission to only the military's communications systems. For communications security reasons, the military was unwilling to allow media-controlled transmitters near the battlefront.[55]

The military often told its units what information to withhold from media.[56] Lieutenant General Boomer of the Marine Corps sent messages to his troops advising them of what topics were appropriate. Operations security was paramount but he also told them not to complain about camp conditions.[57] This "denial at the source" also limited what reporters were exposed to and therefore limited what was reported.

General Winant Sidle, whose commission's recommendations led to the press pools, said that the press wanted to censor itself, but he thought the media didn't understand the military enough to make the right call consistently.[58] Most in the media understand that some control is needed. Arthur Lubow stated in New Republic that the media "must be permitted at front and must submit to sensible censorship."[59]

Given the media's motivations, can the military expect them to cooperate in protecting a deception? History suggests yes. In Operation Husky, the invasion of Sicily in 1943, Eisenhower briefed 30 American reporters on the assault plan 10 days before invasion but restricted them from printing their reports until later. The Allies had an elaborate deception plan showing the invasion would be in the Balkans or on the island of Sardinia. Had the reporters not cooperated, they could have revealed the deception.[60] In 1944, General Eisenhower asked the media not to

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speculate about the timing or location of the Normandy invasion.[61] In the Gulf, British General Rupert Smith briefed reporters on the ground war plan one week before G-day then kept them in the front line pool.[62] Major General McCaffery (24th Mechanized Infantry Division) briefed his press pool before the invasion of Iraq and then told them they couldn't report the information until later. The same reporters praised him later for facilitating their reporting. The Washington Post writers group figured out the "left hook" plan but did not report it.[63] These cases of self censorship and/or restraint suggest that the military can trust the media not to reveal deceptive information, particularly if the military advises the media ahead of time and allows the reporters to transmit their stories later.

Should the military manipulate the media for operational deception?

The media is a viable conduit for passing deceptive information to the enemy commander. There are plenty of historical examples where the media has been used in this way, albeit in a supporting role. Current joint military doctrine carefully sidesteps the issue of manipulation of the media to deceive the enemy, but specifically prohibits propaganda and any attempt to manipulate public opinion. Historically, operational deception has been effective and recently the U.S. military has given it more attention as part of information operations. The media remains the primary conduit to the American public for military information. However, the media is extremely sensitive to perceived cover-ups or manipulation. Given the very real possibility that they would lose some of their objectivity toward the military after being manipulated, the military must have good justification for using the media for deception. So, the question remains. Should the military do it or not?

Some public affairs officers say, "don't do it."[64] They argue that the relationship between the people and the military is too important in the long run to risk for short-term gain on the battlefield. The danger is mistaking credibility with the media for credibility with the public. Although the media does filter and spin the information they report to some degree, if they are objective, they are just a means of conveying words and pictures of military deeds to the public. If the military's actions are honorable, their credibility with the public will remain intact even if the media feels it has been manipulated. Studies have shown that the public supports restrictions on reporting for security reasons.[65] However, the military will cross an important line if media

manipulation is not just used to reduce risk in military operations but instead used to reduce embarrassment after something has gone wrong. The public affairs officers would say that "no lies" is a good policy because it is understandable by all. "No lies except under certain conditions" opens Pandora's Box.

On the other end of the spectrum, a military deception planner might argue that, in the age of global communications, the media is just too good a path to the enemy commander to be passed up. He might argue the media should be the primary means of deception in some cases. He might suggest using false stories and doctored video at appropriate times and places to fool the enemy. He might also argue that the public would support these manipulations if it reduced the risk to their sons and daughters on the battlefield. If the military's intentions are honorable and the operation is successful, manipulation of the media, to include outright lying, is more than justified. The problem with this scenario is the risk of a media revolt once the media discovers the manipulation.[66] If the military loses the media's good will, completing or even protecting the deception would be much more difficult and could put the entire operation at risk.

In between these two extremes is a middle ground where the military does not overtly lie to the media and public, but they carefully manage access to the complete truth to preserve the deception operation. It is important to note that, taken to the extreme, telling "the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth" makes deception at the operational level impossible. Therefore, some manipulation of the media is required for OPDEC to occur at all. Furthermore, the military must maintain the deception cover story consistently through all deception channels.[67] Press coverage of the First U.S. Army Group in England had to be consistent with the deception being carried out by agents, electronic means and physical decoys. An enemy with a good idea of the friendly order of battle would be able to infer deception by the conspicuous absence of coverage of a particular unit if that coverage is being controlled in order not to lie to the public. Several reporters picked up the lack of coverage of the VII Corps in the Gulf while they deployed west but luckily the Iraqis did not. Therefore, some manipulation, whether by withholding information temporarily or actually planting false information, is required to support the overall deception operation.

However, in order to avoid the backlash from the media and to maintain the credibility of the media as a deceptive conduit, the military should use media manipulation carefully and

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sparingly. This is consistent with good deception planning practice. Dr. Michael Handel reminds us that the information available to the enemy should be 10 percent falsehoods covered in 90 percent truths.[68] One could argue that, given the risks associated with the military-media relationship, media manipulation should always remain a supporting method of deception. Also, it may be necessary to enlist the cooperation of the media in some of the manipulations. General Eisenhower and General McCaffery's examples are good models. They maintained the good will relationship with the media while maintaining the deception.

In the cases covered in this paper, the deception planners have traveled down the middle of the road. The Normandy example is on the active manipulation side and the Gulf War is more on the passive manipulation side. Given the dangers of either extreme, the middle of the road is best.

What does this mean to a Joint Task Force Commander?

A Joint Task Force Commander (JTFC) should consider deception operations as part of his campaign planning and must handle the media. Careful consideration must be given to the relationship between deception and media coverage. Here are a few recommendations:

- Do not try to change the current joint doctrine on deceptive use of the media. One might be tempted to establish policy that rules out lying to the media. Operational deception is too important to success of the mission to take it away from a JTFC. Current policy allows media manipulation for operational reasons, but draws the line at manipulation of the American public.

- The deception planners and the public affairs officers must coordinate their efforts.[69] The public affairs officer must know the deception cover plan to make sure he doesn't inadvertently reveal it. The deception planner must understand the public affairs game so he knows what he can reasonably expect to keep secret.

- JTFCs and their planners must be made aware of the implications of lying to the media. A cooperative media can help the commander get information out to people in the theater, family members back home and his own troops. A media that feels it has been slighted will emphasize small problems, dig for mistakes and could reveal operationally significant information to the enemy.

- The JTFC should not lie to the media unless it would significantly reduce the risk to his troops or mission accomplishment. Conferences have been held and books have been written on the military/media relationship and they all conclude that trust is the key. If a commander is going to break this trust, he must have justification. Bruce Ross argued that the National Command Authorities should make the decision to lie to the media, not the JTFC.[70]

Conclusion

This paper argues that the military must manipulate the media in order to deceive the enemy. Since the media is an intelligence source for the enemy commander, information conveyed through the media must be consistent with the overall deception cover plan. There are historical examples in which the military manipulated the media for this purpose. Current joint military doctrine does not prohibit manipulation of the media to deceive the enemy but does prohibit propaganda and manipulation of public opinion. Deception at the operational level of war has been proven effective in numerous cases and should be part of every campaign plan. Care must be taken not to shoot the "silver bullet"[71] of lying to the media too often because of the potential backlash. Furthermore, there must be solid operational justification for crossing this line. Manipulation of the media by controlling the release or access to the truth without lying appears to be an acceptable alternative, particularly if release of the information would compromise operational security. Controlling the media will be more difficult in future wars, but they will still have to rely on the military for the bulk of their information. If a campaign includes a deception plan, coordination between the deception cell, the commander and public affairs will be critical.

Should General Schwarzkopf have used the media? The evidence suggests he did and for good reason, despite his statement to the contrary. Future commanders should follow his example for managing the media while deceiving the enemy.

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