The enemy is us
In war, you deny information, spread lies and use psychological warfare. An expert on military information operations explains how Bush has mastered this technique -- and used it against the American people.

By Sam Gardiner

Sept. 22, 2004  |  On Thursday, Iraq's interim prime minister, Iyad Allawi, will speak before a joint meeting of Congress, and from what he said in London on his way to the United States, it looks like Americans are going to be getting more of the strategic information operations that have been crucial to Bush's policy on Iraq from the beginning.

On Monday, Allawi said at a press conference: "Terrorists are coming and pouring into Iraq to try to undermine the situation in Iraq ... And God forbid, if Iraq is broken or the will of Iraq is broken, then London will be a target, Washington will be a target." In those sentences, Allawi employed the basic doctrine of strategic information operations: Influence emotions, motive and objective reasoning. Use repetition to create a collective memory in the target audience. And the recurrent message of both Allawi and the Bush administration is: Iraq = terrorists = 9/11.

The Army Field Manual describes information operations as the use of strategies such as information denial, deception and psychological warfare to influence decision making. The notion is as old as war itself. With information operations, one seeks to gain and maintain information superiority -- control information and you control the battlefield. And in the information age, it has become even more imperative to influence adversaries.

But with the Iraq war, information operations have gone seriously off track, moving beyond influencing adversaries on the battlefield to influencing the decision making of friendly nations and, even more important, American public opinion. In information denial, one attempts to deceive one's adversary. Since the declared end of combat operations, the Bush administration has orchestrated a number of deceptions about Iraq. But who is its adversary?

In August 2003, the administration's message was that everything in Iraq was improving. The White House led the information effort and even published a paper on the successes of the first 100 days of the occupation. By October the message had shifted: Things were going well in Iraq, but the media was telling the wrong story.

Then, toward the end of 2003, the message was that the whole problem in Iraq was "dead-enders" and "foreign fighters." If it weren't for them, the situation would be fine. Then, after Saddam Hussein was captured in December, the message shifted again: The coalition had discovered along with the former dictator documents revealing the insurgent network, which now would be broken. Once again, everything would be fine.

At the approach of the hand-over to Iraq's interim government in late June, the administration said the event represented the worst fears of the insurgents, who did not want any movement toward democracy. The White House warned that there would be increased violence as the
insurgents tried to prevent the interim government from assuming its proper role in running the country. In fact, violence did increase before the transfer, but there was even more violence afterward. But the administration's information about the situation in Iraq sharply declined.

Denying information to adversaries is one way of maintaining information dominance. (According to the Army Field Manual, this dimension involves "withholding information that adversaries need for effective decision-making.") In the case of Iraq, this has meant eliminating press releases and press briefings. Since the hand-over of power, the U.S. Embassy in Iraq has issued only six releases, including one on the new Iraqi environment minister's visit to a landfill project. The most recent press release, on Aug. 12, was about a boxer on Iraq's Olympics team. The last press briefing by the Multi-National Force in Iraq was June 25. The interim Iraqi government does not hold press conferences.

The White House Web site also reflects the strategy of withholding information. It used to actively provide content on Operation Iraqi Freedom (or as the Web site now says, "Renewal in Iraq"), but the last new entry is dated Aug. 5.

The effect of the White House's control of information has been dramatic. The chart above shows how English-language press coverage of Iraq has fallen off since July. Early in July, it was typical to find almost 250,000 articles each day mentioning Iraq. That number has dropped to 150,000. The goal of denying the adversary access to information is being realized. But, again, who is the adversary?

Before, during and immediately after the war, the White House orchestrated an intensive program of press briefings and releases to saturate media time and space, stay on message, keep ahead of the news cycle and manage expectations. The White House conference call set the daily message. The press briefings from the Central Command headquarters in Doha, Qatar, were designed to dominate the morning and afternoon press coverage, while the afternoon press briefing by the Pentagon was intended for the evening news.

The White House is also using psychological warfare -- conveying selected information to organizations and individuals to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning and ultimately behavior -- to spread its version of the war. And the administration's message is obviously central to the process. From the very beginning, that message, delivered both directly and subtly, has been constant and consistent: Iraq = terrorists = 9/11.

The president tells us that we are fighting terrorists in Iraq so we don't have to fight them here in the United States. But I know of no one with a respectable knowledge of the events in Iraq who shares that view. My contacts in the intelligence community say the opposite -- that U.S. policies in fact are creating more terrorism.

Still, the administration has made its case for the 9/11 terrorism and Iraq connection with some sophistication. For example, on March 25, 2003, the United States renamed the Iraqi fighters in civilian clothes known as the Fedayeen Saddam. Either the Office of the Secretary of Defense or the White House (I have been told it was both) directed that they now be called "terrorist death squads" -- promoting the overarching message: Iraq = terrorists = 9/11.
Recently, the purported terrorist connection was reinforced by another change in terminology. When coalition forces bomb a house in Fallujah, the Multi-National Force press releases now announce that they bombed a "safe house." But Marines don't come to that phrase naturally. Marines hit enemy positions. They strike targets. The implication is fairly obvious. Since terrorists use "safe houses," the insurgents in Fallujah must be terrorists. And some of us thus come to believe that we are in Iraq to fight the "global war on terrorism."

Appealing to the emotions aroused by 9/11 is classic psychological warfare. And repetition of the terrorist argument is utterly consistent with the theory that one can develop collective memory in a population through repetition.

Images are also essential in psychological warfare, so negative images must be defeated as quickly as possible. That's why the images of the contractors killed in Fallujah were so worrisome to the administration. Government intelligence sources told me there was fear they would have an impact like the images of dead U.S. Army Rangers being dragged through the streets in Somalia did in 1993, causing rapid erosion in support for that war.

Although we don't know all the facts yet, it's almost certain that the White House or the Pentagon ordered the Marine attack on Fallujah to fight those negative images. Five U.S. soldiers were killed on the same day as the private contractors when their Bradley fighting vehicle was destroyed. But there was almost no official reaction to their deaths, no pictures; their deaths did not pose an image problem.

Now, the New York Times reports that military operations to open up the no-go areas in Iraq will not occur until November or December. The official line is that the administration wants to wait until Iraqi security forces are better trained.

My military mind only hurts when I hear this argument. The United States has been trying to train the Iraqis to take over for almost two years now. The effort began with the training camp in Hungary before the war, but that program failed. The robust training program that began in the early stages of the occupation was declared a failure with the onset of the insurgents' offensive in April. The administration has not been able to staff the headquarters tasked to direct the training. Nor is it even certain who among those being trained are on our side. The Marines around Fallujah joke that after they take a member of the Iraqi National Guard to the firing range for practice, the sniper who shoots at them that night shows a remarkable improvement in his aim.

It's clear the Americans will bear the major brunt of the attack on Fallujah. What could possibly be behind the administration's decision to wait until November or December to launch it? There's certainly no commander in the field saying, "Let's give the bad guys another 60 days to operate freely inside their sanctuaries before we attack." Such a decision would be particularly bizarre when attacks against coalition forces are more frequent than ever, attacks on oil pipelines are on the rise, and the United States is suffering increased casualties.

Any military officer would say that you have to take the fight to the enemy. So what can we conclude about this decision? There is only one conceivable answer -- the White House is delaying military operations until after the Nov. 2 election for political reasons. In the meantime,
information-denial operations must be ratcheted up to control the story. But that is becoming more difficult.

During the early part of the war, there was more deception than truth in the comments and press briefings of the secretary of defense and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Among the fabricated stories was the early surrender of the commander and the entire 51st Iraqi mechanized division. We were told of an uprising in Basra -- it did not happen. We were told Iraqis had stolen U.S. uniforms to commit atrocities -- this was not true. We were told on White House and State Department Web sites that the Iraqi military had formed units of children to attack the coalition -- untrue. We were told of a whole range of agreements between the French and Iraq before the war over weapons -- false. We were told Saddam had marked a red line around Baghdad and that when we crossed it Iraq would use chemical weapons -- completely fabricated.

We were told of an elaborate scheme by Saddam's forces to ambush U.S. Marines on March 23 as they fought toward Baghdad. The president mentioned this incident many times. It turns out what really happened that day is that the Marines were repeatedly attacked by a U.S. Air Force A-10. It was a friendly-fire incident, not an Iraqi ruse. But building on the theme of Iraqi evil was more important than the truth.

Military intelligence officials' prewar assertion when no WMD were found that Iraq had moved its weapons to Syria is another example of information denial. But although the Iraq Survey Group report to be released at the end of this month will announce once and for all that Iraq did not have WMD, the WMD argument already served its purpose in garnering support for the invasion. The important message now remains: Iraq = terrorists = 9/11.

The fog of war has not yet lifted. But when the strategy is to hide the war from the American people, rather than to get them to approve its instigation, fabrication is more difficult to sustain.

Karl von Clausewitz, the Prussian theorist of war, wrote, "War is an extension of politics by other means." When I taught Clausewitz to students at various military war colleges, I told them that he meant international politics. But I may have been wrong -- I fear war has become an extension of domestic politics, moving beyond influencing adversaries on the battlefield to influencing the decision making of friendly nations and, even more important, American public opinion. Why have the American people become the adversary?

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