



# The TRUTH is out there:

## Responding to Insurgent Disinformation and Deception Operations

Cori E. Dauber

**O**PERATION VALHALLA was a completely ordinary engagement, typical of the type of operation U.S. Special Forces units have participated in throughout the Iraq war. Yet, it was, if not a turning point in the war, a perfect example of the challenges fighting in Iraq—and very possibly any future conflicts against Islamist insurgencies—has presented that are new and almost impossible to answer effectively.

Valhalla was an engagement between a battalion of U.S. Special Forces Soldiers with the Iraqi Special Forces unit it was training on one side, and a Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM) death squad (better known as Mahdi Army) on the other. The *engagement* was entirely ordinary: the U.S. forces tracked down the JAM fighters responsible for the especially brutal murders of a number of civilians and several Iraqi troops. When U.S. and Iraqi government forces reached the JAM compound, a brief firefight ensued. However, as the JAM forces engaged well-trained, well-armed Soldiers instead of unarmed civilians, their fortunes took an abrupt turn.

It was what happened after the firefight was over—in fact, after U.S. and Iraqi government forces left the area—that made this particular engagement so worth studying in detail.

Neither the battalion of the U.S. Army's 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) under the command of then Lieutenant Colonel Sean Swindell (at the time a part of the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force, Arabian Peninsula [CJSOTF-AP]) nor the Iraqi government forces took any casualties during the fighting on 26 March 2006, beyond one Iraqi Soldier with a non-life-threatening injury. Sixteen or 17 JAM were killed, a weapons cache found and destroyed, a badly beaten hostage found and rescued, and approximately 16 other JAM members detained, at which point U.S. and Iraqi government forces left the site.

Based on his encounters with Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and other Sunni insurgent groups, Colonel Kenneth Tovo, the commanding officer of both the 10th Group and the CJSOTF-AP at the time, reports that a 24- to 48-hour cycle between an event and the appearance on the Internet of propaganda regarding that event had become routine to Special Forces operating in Iraq during that period. However, on 26 March 2006, by the time the SF and Iraqi forces returned to their compound, roughly an hour after leaving the site of the firefight, someone had moved the bodies and removed the guns of the JAM fighters back at their compound so that it no longer looked as if they had fallen while firing weapons. They now looked as if they had fallen while at prayer. Someone had photographed the bodies in these new poses and the

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PHOTO: An Iraqi mourns his brother outside a local hospital in Baghdad's poor Sadr city neighborhood, 26 March 2006. The original caption for this photo read "17 people were killed in a clash yesterday at a Shiite mosque" implying they were attacked there. (AFP, Ahmad Al-Rubaye)

images had been uploaded to the web, along with a press release explaining that American Soldiers had entered a mosque and killed men peacefully at prayer. All this had taken approximately 45 minutes. As Colonel Tovo said, “Literally they had their story, their propaganda, out on the wires before the assault force was back at the compound, so [in] under an hour, they had their counter-story already on the wires. That’s how brilliant [this was. It] really surprised us that first time, because we were kind of used to the Al-Qaeda and Sunni insurgent model, which was 24 to 48 hours...to get their story out....”<sup>1</sup>

Needless to say, both the American and Arab media picked up the story almost immediately. Also, needless to say, the result was an investigation that took roughly a month, during which the unit was, to put it bluntly, benched. Thus, a unit that could never have been bested in actual combat by JAM forces was essentially neutralized for a month by those same forces using a cell phone camera.

Fortunately, U.S. forces had been accompanied by members of the “combat camera” units, and had themselves been wearing “helmet cams” in several cases. Thus “before” pictures were available to contrast with the “after” pictures the militia members posted to the web. This made all the difference in the investigation. (Indeed, in an interview with the author, Lieutenant Colonel Swindell noted that he would never again participate in an operation without at least helmet cams if combat camera personnel were unavailable, and in fact doubted he would ever again have an operation approved if he did not build into his planning some means for creating a visual record of what his Soldiers did and did not do in it.<sup>2</sup>)

Scholars,<sup>3</sup> specialists,<sup>4</sup> and the press<sup>5</sup> have paid increased attention of late to the enormous effort Islamist groups put into producing a range of media materials (particularly, although not exclusively, on the Internet) designed to recruit, mobilize, instruct, and persuade. This attention is clearly warranted.



AP Photo. The Associated Press Television News

Empty bullet shells on a blood stained floor said to be in a Shiite mosque in the Sadr City area of Baghdad, Iraq, 26 March 2006. Radical Shiites claimed falsely that 18 people were killed by U.S. and Iraqi forces in a mosque.

Lieutenant Colonel Terry Guild, a U.S. Army officer specializing in information operations, put it simply: “[The enemy’s] media infrastructure is quick, it’s collaborative, it’s virtual, it’s global, it’s technical, and it’s getting better all the time.”<sup>6</sup>

However, this work has consistently ignored a key element of much of this material. While it is certainly true these materials serve an important role for the movement’s internal purposes, they also represent a sophisticated story-telling ability, producing texts that can *serve more than one rhetorical purpose at a time*.<sup>7</sup> For many of these groups (although certainly not all) their center of gravity is U.S. public opinion. Certainly this is true for many groups fighting coalition forces in Iraq. In everything they do in terms of the creation of persuasive texts, they will have that audience at least partially in mind. Not every persuasive text is meant to influence audiences in the Islamic world. The U.S. military should be aware of the ramifications enemy propaganda material has for U.S. domestic opinion when considering how to respond to it.

## The American Public as Center of Gravity

Many insurgent groups in Iraq have a real need to impact U.S. public opinion. For them to accomplish their goals, the U.S. has to withdraw from Iraq. The question is, how to accomplish that. What do they

think is *our* center of gravity? Al-Qaeda knows that the U.S. left Vietnam and has interpreted that to mean that if it creates unacceptable casualty rates and exerts enough pressure, America will leave other theaters as well.<sup>8</sup>

However, the Iraqi insurgents understand they cannot succeed only through their own efforts on the battlefield. Colonel Tovo notes:

I would say that at least for Iraq it's almost always been a media fight. . . . When you look at insurgent movements in history, clearly there are some [insurgencies] that thought they could win militarily. But in the end, really the center of gravity is always the people. You're always fighting a battle for the hearts and minds of the people, so I don't think it has changed with the rise of the Internet and cameras everywhere. It's just easier for insurgents to reach the people. But even when you go back to Algeria, . . . the media is certainly present, but it's much less ubiquitous on the battlefield. They're still looking to get the biggest IO [information operations] effect out of every event. . . . That's the same with a lot of insurgencies, although I would say the thing about the one we're fighting now is that there's much more of an information component and much less of a military component. So whereas you look at the Vietnamese model where truly they thought that they would wear us down and somewhat beat us on the battlefield (although they did not), I think the insurgents in Iraq clearly don't think they have any hope of beating us militarily. It's purely a fight for influencing the population [and] the U.S. population to lose heart and will, influencing the other international actors to drop support for the U.S. effort. So I'd say the information component has grown in importance over time.<sup>9</sup>

The Internet, meanwhile, is a door that swings both ways. For the first time insurgents can now monitor the way their efforts are covered in the American press—almost in real time—from thousands of miles away. This is not only the first war fought with unlimited, global access to their audience, it is also the first war fought as the global press has moved online. Even the smallest news-

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papers now have an online presence, and television networks all stream their coverage on their own websites, to greater or lesser degrees. Insurgents can watch the way their efforts are covered for the audiences they hope to influence and adapt strategies if they do not like what they see. At the same time, they know the Western press carefully monitors their own websites—even if they are designed and maintained predominately to recruit new members or mobilize existing support. Thus, they can use their web presence as a ready conduit through the press to the American audience.

The result is the first war in which virtually every attack is filmed by the enemy for propaganda purposes.<sup>10</sup> So many IED attacks on convoys, suicide bombings, executions of hostages, and sniper attacks on Soldiers are filmed that it is often suggested the attacks are being staged to provide material *for* filming. As Susan B. Glaser and Steve Coll of *The Washington Post* wrote of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's organization in Iraq: "[N]ever before has a guerrilla organization so successfully intertwined its real-time war on the ground with its electronic jihad, making Zarqawi's group practitioners of what experts say will be the future of insurgent warfare, where no act goes unrecorded and atrocities seem to be committed in order to be filmed and distributed nearly instantaneously online." They continue, "Filming an attack has become an integral part of the attack itself."<sup>11</sup>

David Kilcullen, a counterinsurgency expert who advised General Petraeus, notes the "'information' side of al-Qaida's operation is primary; the physical is merely the tool to achieve a propaganda result."<sup>12</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Guild adds: "A U.S. Soldier does a pre-combat inspection, he checks and makes sure he's got his bullets, his water, all that stuff. Well, our enemy is doing that, those pre-combat checks [but they] include making sure that the

video guy is there with the camera, with batteries, to either courier that video to some safe house or to get it uploaded to some web site, make sure that... that message gets out. And it's ingrained. . . . [It] would be unusual if they did not do it."<sup>13</sup>

These “duck-blind” videos clearly serve an internal purpose for these groups, but we are missing something critical if we only analyze them from the perspective of the role they play as part of a system of persuasion between the Islamists and their constituents. The videos are also intended, and used, as a way to communicate with and persuade the American audience. Such communication is possible because American news networks, unable to obtain regular combat footage any other way, have systematically downloaded this material and integrated it into their news reports, often quite seamlessly, for years.

Sometimes the segments are used with visual and aural cues indicating they were taken from a terrorist or insurgent site, although the cues are rarely sufficient given that no effort has ever been taken to explicitly address that this is a normal journalistic practice.<sup>14</sup> CNN, CBS, and NBC have begun to superimpose the words “INSURGENT VIDEO” on at least some of the material, similar to the graphic all networks use when showing material received from the Department of Defense (usually something along the lines of “DOD FILE FOOTAGE”). This practice seems to be a perfectly acceptable solution if the networks apply it consistently, and throughout the length of any footage acquired from terrorist or insurgent sites, which does not seem to be the case at present for any network.<sup>15</sup> (Applying this solution inconsistently might be worse than not applying it at all, because viewers might believe that whenever the graphic is missing, the footage must by definition not come from insurgent sources.)

There should be no mistake about this. Terrorists and insurgents shot this footage of attacks staged for the explicit purpose of providing propaganda for filming. Perhaps more important, terrorists and insurgents edited the footage, even if network personnel subsequently re-edited it. It is propaganda material, not news footage. As Ben Venzke puts it, the “videos are a form of follow-on psychological attack on the victims and societies the group is targeting. They are designed to amplify the effects of attacks.”<sup>16</sup>

The insurgents themselves are now the press's primary source of news footage when it comes to the vital issue of attacks on American military personnel in Iraq. This means the authenticity of the footage is of vital importance, because it played a critical role in shaping the American public's view of the war.

## Insurgent Manufacture of Events

However pervasive the “duck blind” videos are, and however disturbing the networks' use of them, they generally depict events that actually happened (although the news audience has no way of knowing or confirming how accurately). Part of the reason the networks' use of the material is disturbing is because insurgents not only shot it but *edited* it as well: there is no way to know what happened before or after the footage posted.

A different strategy altogether involves the fabrication of events. How many of the facts have been altered and how little relationship the insurgents' story bears to actual events varies from one incident to another. In fact, the networks have been caught up in hoaxes because of their willingness to use footage they could not validate at the time it was aired.

In one case, insurgents were successful because they “piggybacked” their hoax onto an actual event. On 1 December 2005, a single improvised explosive device (IED) killed 10 Marines and wounded 11 others. This was widely reported by the networks the next day. However, on the following day, 3 December, Al Jazeera, the Arab satellite network, aired footage provided by insurgents who claimed it was footage of that very explosion. Whatever the footage was, however, it could not possibly have been of the same attack, because that IED had exploded at night, and this footage was clearly of something that had happened in broad daylight.

Nevertheless, that night NBC aired the Al Jazeera footage. The next morning, CBS aired it, admitting that the Islamic Army of Iraq had provided it, that it was “impossible to authenticate the video,” and

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that the U.S. military was denying it was footage of the incident in question.<sup>17</sup>

While NBC spoke to someone in the military, they chose to air the footage without officially contacting the Marines, who would certainly have tried to wave them off.<sup>18</sup> Whoever they spoke to did try to warn them by providing them background on exactly the information the official Marine representatives would have provided, that this couldn't be the right footage because it was filmed in daylight while the Marines were killed at night. Yet, NBC chose to air the footage anyway.

To be sure, NBC provided far more information to help its viewers assess the footage than CBS did, but what they said hardly explained their decision to use it. Indeed, NBC seemed to be proving that the footage was not legitimate, which made it unclear why they were airing it at all: "Tonight the Arab TV station Al Jazeera reported that an extremist group called Islamic Army in Iraq, which has collaborated with Al-Qaeda here, claimed this disturbing video was of the same attack near Fallujah, and also

claimed responsibility for the bombing. But late tonight a U.S. military spokesman told NBC News the video did not show the actual incident—which happened after dark and not in broad daylight. But the spokesman did not deny the video showed a troubling attack on U.S. forces."<sup>19</sup>

NBC may not have known what it had, but clearly, whatever it was, it was not footage of the attack in question. And they knew that. No matter how many hedges or qualifiers their reporter provided, NBC was still making itself complicit in the dissemination of insurgent propaganda. The footage they did air showed a group of American troops moving forward, and then a large explosion, at which point the segment ends.

With the footage cut at that point, the strong suggestion is that the blast killed the troops, or at least wounded them grievously, and the networks cut it for the reason they always cut footage at that point, to avoid televising overly disturbing images. In fact, though, there's no way to know what happened. If another IED had been large enough to kill



AP Photo, Al Jazeera, AP Television News

An image from video footage claimed to have been made by the Islamic Army of Iraq, broadcast by Al Jazeera television in December 2005, purporting to depict an explosion which hit a U.S. foot patrol.

that many troops, it would have been news. After all, that is why the first night-time explosion was so notable. Therefore it is doubtful that there was another equally large explosion during daylight hours that the press had simply ignored. Was this footage authentic? It likely was footage of a large explosion occurring as U.S. troops moved forward. The question is whether it is footage of the event that is *implied*.

The use of the footage in a story about an explosion large enough to kill ten implies that *this* explosion had also been large enough to kill all the troops in the scene, but there's no basis for assuming that's true, and actually good reason to assume that it isn't. There's reason, then, to doubt the association that results from showing the footage while discussing the known explosion, but the association occurs automatically, and the reporter's qualifiers do not undercut it. Images work because we don't generally stop to analyze the implicit assumptions and associations they create. CBS and NBC created one strong set of associations, while offering a set of qualifiers far too weak to offset those associations. This leaves the viewer believing that if the footage is not necessarily of the first IED attack that killed a large number of Marines, then it is of *another* IED attack that *also* killed a large number of Marines. Indeed, the reporter's discussion of the possible implications of the footage leads the viewer to that conclusion.

Thus, we give the insurgents more credit than they deserve, and for millions of viewers the footage is allowed to do precisely the work the insurgents intended and hoped for it to do. The insurgents apparently did not have footage of the explosion in which ten died, so they improvised, and by so doing were able to suggest that there had been not one but two large explosions that killed U.S. personnel, when in fact there is no evidence to suggest that was the case.

To NBC's somewhat minimal credit, the insurgent's logo was left on the footage, so that the source was made clear—assuming that the audience was paying close enough attention and understood what the logo meant, rather than assuming it was Al Jazeera's imprint. That doesn't change the fact that NBC disseminated enemy propaganda, while making no effort to analyze or discuss the footage as propaganda—which leaves the enemy's information campaign intact, uncritiqued, and therefore to at least some extent, successful.

The following day the Marines issued a press release. It was as clear and direct as possible: "A video posted to a terrorist website and aired by some media organizations purporting to show the IED attack that killed 10 U.S. Marines on Dec. 1 is disinformation. The circumstances of the IED attack near Fallujah do not match those shown on the video. While we are unable to discern whether the video shown is authentic, the statement that the video shows the Dec. 1 IED attack near Fallujah is false."<sup>20</sup>

Insurgents have sometimes gone even further, manipulating existing images to create something new and essentially fictitious and they have become increasingly sophisticated in finding ways to do so. ABC News reported that after one Soldier lost a "video diary" he had filmed for personal use in Iraq, parts of it popped up soon after on the Internet and on Al Jazeera—but with the original audio track stripped out. It had been replaced with the voice of another English speaker purporting to be the voice of the Soldier, explaining to his mother, in a Christmas message home that, among other things, "'The crimes by our Soldiers during break-ins started to merge, such as burglary, harassment, raping and random manslaughter,' says the voice. 'Why are we even here? The people hate us.'"<sup>21</sup>

Those who made the video went too far when they ended their piece by saying that it was a tragedy this poor soldier had been killed in Iraq before ever making it home for Christmas. Unfortunately for the insurgents, ABC was able to verify that multiple claims made by the speaker were false (starting with the fact that it was unlikely the Soldier would have been making a "Christmas message" for his family when he had actually left Iraq six months before Christmas.)<sup>22</sup> ABC therefore framed the story as being about a brazen (but ineffective) attempt at propaganda. Thus, while this may have worked with the Arab audience, it did not successfully make the jump to the American audience.

In truth, in an interview with the author, the Public Affairs Officer (PAO) for the 101st Airborne Division, the Soldier's home unit, told me that the insurgent effort was actually quite effective: ABC was preparing to do a story about the tragedy of an anti-war Soldier killed in Iraq, essentially picking up the story precisely as Al Jazeera reported it. Despite the large number of inaccuracies in that story and the over-the-top nature of the claims

made, it was only by finally producing the living Soldier that the PAO was able to prevent Al Jazeera's story from appearing on ABC News. This was, remember, a story created when a script written by the insurgent group the Islamic Army of Iraq provided the basis for an audio track subsequently added by Al Jazeera. Lieutenant Colonel Ed Loomis, the 101st's PAO, said: the "only thing that they [ABC News] said was going to pull the plug on it was, I had to put Tucker [the Soldier in question] in front of the camera. The fact that Tucker was alive, and the fact that they got the rank wrong, and the fact that there was no way that this was a Christmas letter by Tucker to his family in that he had left Iraq six months before Christmas... —lie, after lie, after lie [was not enough]."<sup>23</sup>

Loomis points out that while the script was written by the Islamic Army of Iraq, "Al Jazeera did the soundtrack; reading the letter was Al Jazeera's construct, something for which they have apologized to me over the phone," although he doesn't know whether Al Jazeera ever issued a retraction on the air.<sup>24</sup>

The piece has now found new life on the Internet, targeted towards Americans to demonstrate to them the cruelty of the war in Iraq both to the Iraqis and to their own troops. NBC News has reported that it is the centerpiece of an explicit strategy discussed in Islamist chat rooms, designed to have their people pose on the Internet as American Soldiers wounded in the war and use that deception to turn Americans against the war. (This was perhaps the only time the American press acknowledged that there is a battle for "American hearts and minds" underway, although of course there was no discussion of their own role in it.<sup>25</sup>)

Insurgent groups have made the Internet work for them on other occasions. Capturing trained Marines is hard. Posting claims on the Internet that you have captured Marines is easy—and it is worth the (incredibly low) investment, since the benefit is exactly the same—it just doesn't last as long. Colonel David Lapan, the Marine Corps Deputy PAO, explains how this tactic works:

At one point during our time in Iraq, there were reports that came out that five Marines had been captured in Western Iraq. So, our initial sense is... this sounds like more propaganda, but we can't say that because we have an obligation to tell the truth, and we don't

know that for certain. So I brought that to the attention of the commander who then ordered a 100 percent accountability check throughout all the units in our area to determine, did we have everybody accounted for? So that we could ultimately determine that there were not five guys who were out of our control, but that took about eight hours to accomplish. Now, considering the size and the scope, that's pretty amazing, eight hours to account for about 25,000 Marines and Soldiers across most of Western Iraq, but the key is that for eight hours the "truth" or the perceived truth out there was five Marines had been captured. So, again, the enemy gets to throw whatever they'd like out there in terms of information, pretend that it's truthful, it gets picked up and reported on and repeated, and then the U.S., in having to be truthful does its due diligence and then can finally later say, "This is incorrect." But, for eight hours you've had a different version of what people perceived is true. And that's one of the biggest challenges [we face as PAOs]."<sup>26</sup>

## The Challenge of Responding

The difference between the two sides, as explained by Lieutenant Colonel Guild, is this: "Media for them is a weapon of war. Media for us is not. And that's kind of the line that I've seen over several years, is that these guys are very good at what they're doing, and it's a battlefield operating system [for them]."<sup>27</sup>

There is no underestimating how difficult it is for the military to come up with an effective strategy to counter terrorist and insurgent falsehoods. As Colonel Lapan, the former spokesperson for II MEF-Forward states, "Our adversary doesn't play by rules, and we see that obviously in a number of things much more serious than release of information. But the way to think about it is the enemy has no qualms about beheading people, about torturing people, about purposefully killing women and children, any of those things, so lying isn't really a concern of theirs. And so it's tough when you have to tell the truth, and your adversary doesn't. So the enemy can lie at will; there's no repercussion to doing so, but because we have the obligation to tell the truth, it makes it difficult to counter that."<sup>28</sup>

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Colonel Lapan, to be clear, is not arguing against restrictions that prevent American personnel from lying. He is describing the challenges faced by those who, unless they are *certain* of the truth, cannot respond to an enemy who can continuously simply invent charges, accusations, and even events. There will always be a difference between the two sides in terms of how quickly they can produce and push out material, propaganda or counter-propaganda, for several reasons:

- Generally, the United States military responds to enemy claims, so by definition, the U.S. is in a reactive posture most of the time. (Although there is no intrinsic reason that has to be the case; the DOD, Central Command, and other relevant commands could easily be putting out press releases regarding enemy atrocities, and should be.)

- False stories can be distributed at any time, whenever the creator is ready to hit the “send” button. The initiator of the story is therefore under no time constraint.

- In this war, enemy forces are non-hierarchical. The forces creating the materials the U.S. has to respond to aren’t necessarily anything more than a “guy and a laptop.”<sup>29</sup> Even the smallest groups have media arms, and even the largest are not very hierarchical in structure. The U.S. military, by contrast, is a large, hierarchical organization that answers to civilian control. Those creating material have to have it approved by their chain of command before they can release it, and the release authority is often several layers above the creator of the material.

Additionally, the U.S. military has at times seemed to do as much as possible to slow down its responses. Although the enemy set an all-time speed record in the case of Valhalla, for example, the U.S. made no particular effort to respond in kind. The operations officer for 10th Group, part

of CJSOTP-AP at the time of Valhalla, Major Chris Smith, explained the delays this way:

We launched an operation against known insurgents. In this operation, we rescued a hostage who was certain to be killed and showed signs of torture, we found weapons galore. . . We were shot at by the insurgents on the objective itself, we ended up killing a good amount of them, and arresting about the same amount who were not shooting at us—showing fire discipline as well. The Iraqis we were advising did this, we had an opportunity that night to speak to...the *Washington Post*—we also had an opportunity to get on television and describe what happened. It took us three days. That is the Army. Three days to allow any news to get out. When we did, it came from the Secretary of Defense and the briefing board that he used there at the Pentagon, the actual briefing board, the graphics that were on there, was our briefing board that had been prepared within hours of the operation. So it sat for almost 70 hours, the same [information] that was briefed three days later, sat for 70 hours. That’s our fault.<sup>30</sup>

The modern media age is a digital one, and in a digital age speed is everything. Our enemy understands this intuitively. The U.S. military, at least in that case, certainly did not. Then-Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld was giving speeches about the digital age, but briefing materials were being held back at the same time, and in this age, a 70-hour delay is an eternity, more than enough time for opinions to form and harden, all the more so for those inclined to think whatever you finally say lacks credibility, particularly if your arguments are image-based.

In fact a 24-hour delay is essentially as devastating as a 70-hour delay. One wonders why the Army didn’t show the press its “before” images as soon as it knew the enemy’s “after” images were on the web, or at least the instant they were cleared for security purposes, assuming that is the reason for the delay. (Although it is unclear what security value the pictures might have had.) And, if clearing the images was the holdup, it’s unclear why a 24-hour delay was necessary before showing the pictures to the press. Once those “after” images were on



the web, clearing the “before” images became a vital, indeed a mission-critical, task. Getting those pictures out was not about making the press happy. It was about heading off a story that could do real damage, particularly in the Arab world.

Because the military held the briefing in Washington, the reporters asking the questions were not the reporters who had been covering the story. The Pentagon press corps is generally well informed about military issues, but they are not necessarily well informed on the specifics of each story, particularly if it has not been their responsibility. A Pentagon briefing meant the reporters involved were not fully up to speed on the claims in dispute, or which questions might determine the validity of U.S. claims now that they were in a position to back those claims up with evidence. The briefers, meanwhile, were several thousand miles and several layers of rank away from the events on the ground. Questions approaching any degree of specificity derailed the briefing as the power of the military’s case—and the basis of its credibility—lost momentum when those giving the briefing had to tell reporters (as should have been entirely predictable), “We weren’t there, but we’d be glad to get you those answers.”

Thus, the following exchange took place:

Q: Sir, yesterday when you spoke at the War College you gave the U.S. a pretty bad grade for the U.S. performance in the war of ideas. And I think this latest is maybe an example of how the other side is triumphing, by turning this into an issue about a mosque. . . . How do you describe the problem, and how do you fix it?

RUMSFELD: I think it’s a tough—sure. It’s a very tough thing to do. When something happens, the people we’re up against are vicious, and they lie. And they are—obviously, they have media committees, they plan what they’re going to do, they plan how they’re going to manipulate the press, and they get out there fast and do it. And there’s no penalty for that. Indeed, there’s only rewards, because the misinformation race is around the world while, as they say, truth is still putting its boots on. Our task is to figure out what actually happened. And that means that they’ve got to go in there and talk to people, and it takes time, and it takes

24 hours, 48 hours, whatever it takes. And they end up—some cases, it takes weeks to figure out what actually took place.

And it’s just very difficult. And here we are, in the 21st century, with all these means of communication and information racing around the globe, and it just makes it a very tough thing to do.

And clearly the United States government has not gotten to the point where we are as deft and clever and facile and quick as the enemy that is perfectly capable of lying, having it printed all over the world, and there’s no penalty for having lied. Indeed, there was a reward, because great many people read the lie and believed it. [*sic*]

And it takes weeks and weeks afterwards to figure what actually took place. I mean, I didn’t know until this morning the details that Pete briefed here, nor did he, for that matter. And . . . I don’t know any solution to that. . . .<sup>31</sup>

Yet, the briefing materials had been available for days; if there was a delay, it was a result of the decision to conduct the briefing in Washington. It may have taken 24 or 48 hours for word to filter up to the Pentagon, but the people on the ground were prepared to brief the press almost immediately. Why wait? What was the benefit of holding the briefing in Washington? The briefing material itself obviously was not improved. Indeed, it was not, apparently, changed in any way. Certainly, the actual briefing was not improved. The briefers, despite their rank, could not answer the critical questions because they had not been there:

Q: General, could you clarify something? The minaret—the building with the minaret that was in the compound, were people killed in that building? And if they were, were they armed?

RUMSFELD: You saw the pictures of the weapons in the building.

Q: Well, I know. Well, but the general also said that the fire came from outside the compound and—

PACE (CJCS General Peter Pace): There was firing from inside the compound. I cannot tell you whether or not there was actually somebody in the minaret firing or

not. I can tell you that the minaret was part of the compound itself, that big rectangle you saw on the corner of the photo. That was the target area. Did not know that that minaret was there on the way in; discovered it once in there. All I'm saying is that there was a minaret, there was a prayer room in this compound. But all the other things I showed you were in the compound. Whether they were taken out of the prayer room or the minaret, I'd have to get you the details on. I do not know those facts.

Q: Do you know whether people were killed in the prayer room?

PACE: I do not.

Q: Because that seems to be the issue.

PACE: I don't know. We can find out. I don't know that.

And then:

Q: Did any Americans engage, or was it only Iraqis that engaged the enemy fighters? Do we know that?

RUMSFELD: I think it was briefed yesterday by the people on the spot, and I would ask them. They came out and gave a good briefing, I think.<sup>32</sup>

## Conclusion

Part of the difficulty in responding to these incidents is that the press tends to report them as "he said, she said." In other words, when there is a conflict over what happened, the press studiously avoids taking a position about what must have or might have happened, or even who has more credibility on the question. However, these are disputes over evidence, and evidence can be weighed and evaluated and the reader given some sense as to who has the stronger case.

NBC ran a piece the morning after they aired the Al Jazeera footage ostensibly of the IED attack on the Marines—from the same reporter—on the military's efforts to counter enemy propaganda. This is the text of that story in its entirety:

Well, as the elections approach and bloodshed here shows no signs of abating, the U.S. military here faces another war. It's called the battle of the media, and so far, it's the U.S. military who's on the defensive.

U.S. and Iraqi Soldiers swept across



U.S. Air Force, TSGT Sean P. Houlihan

**Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and CJCS General Peter Pace answer questions during a press conference in the Pentagon, 28 March 2006.**

Ramadi today, trying to secure the rest of Al Anbar Province before the vote December 15th. The first shipments of ballots for the key national elections have arrived but so has a surge in violent attacks, many accompanied by what some experts call the insurgents' chief weapon: videos, often highly produced, powerful images that appear on Arab TV stations like Al Jazeera or on Internet Web sites associated with groups like Al-Qaeda in Iraq, led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

The most recent salvos, these disturbing pictures broadcast Saturday on Al Jazeera of what insurgents claimed was a roadside bomb attack on a U.S. Marine patrol outside Fallujah, killing 10. The U.S. military says the claim is false. Also false, the U.S. command says, is a report based on this unauthenticated video of armed gunmen claiming Al-Qaeda insurgents control the city of Ramadi.

ALSTON (General Donald Alston, U.S. military spokesman): That was misinformation. That is just the tactic used to try to create fear and intimidate the Iraqi people.

MACEDA: Just clever propaganda, say U.S. military officials, that tries to level the battlefield. The U.S. military insisted today it's making steady gains on the insurgents but admits the war of the media is still an open battle.<sup>33</sup>

The U.S. military, the report fails to point out, is “on the defensive” because the American press keeps airing videos from insurgent and terrorist groups without bothering to report any of the actual arguments the military makes or the rationales it presents for rejecting enemy propaganda. Simply reporting that the military labels propaganda *as* propaganda is hardly likely to sway the public, not compared to showing the visuals themselves, because no reason is given for rejecting the images.

Images are emotional, visceral, and their impact is instantaneous. Words, however, are received and interpreted in a linear fashion, and we are far better trained to be on our guard when responding to them.<sup>34</sup> It will never be a fair contest between the two.

The military must seek to answer visuals with visuals wherever possible, and must keep in mind that in a digital age, any semblance of the old “news cycle” has been completely obliterated. Since the beginning of the “surge”—and the implementation of the new counterinsurgency doctrine—public sup-

**...the American press keeps airing videos from insurgent and terrorist groups without bothering to report any of the actual arguments the military makes or the rationales it presents for rejecting enemy propaganda.**

port for the war in Iraq has begun to rebound. To be sure, the reduction in casualty rates is probably a large part of the reason, but military spokespersons have been more visible (during those periods when the networks have bothered covering the war), while field, company, and even senior commanders are now regularly available to comment on events. As evidence for military claims, visual products are pushed out to the press with far greater rapidity. It seems safe to assume these changes may well have played a role in the change in public opinion. Certainly, the possibility is well worth investigating further, because given the low cost of staging hoaxes by insurgents, and the high rate of return on the investment, there is no reason to believe we have seen the last of this strategy. **MR**

## NOTES

1. COL Kenneth Tovo, interview with the author, Fort Carson, Colorado, 21 September 2006.

2. LTC Sean Swindell, interview with the author, Fort Carson, Colorado, 21 September 2006.

3. See Daniel Kimmage and Kathleen Rudolfo, *Iraqi Insurgent Media: The War of Images and Ideas* (Washington, DC: A Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Special Report, 2007).

4. See for example the work of Laura Mansfield, available at <[www.lauramansfield.com](http://www.lauramansfield.com)>, or the work of Evan F. Kohlmann, available at <[www.globalterroralert.com](http://www.globalterroralert.com)>.

5. See for example, “Internet Jihad: A World Wide Web of Terror,” *The Economist*, 12 July 2007, available at <[www.economist.com/world/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=9472498](http://www.economist.com/world/displaystory.cfm?story_id=9472498)>, 22 July 2007.

6. LTC Terry Guild, interview with the author, information operations officer, MacDill AFB, Tampa, Florida, 15 August 2006.

7. For example, see the briefing given by the President of the MEMRI Institute, Yigal Carmon, on Capitol Hill on 19 July 2007, on Islamist web sites. In it, he argues that these sites serve two purposes, operational needs such as military training, and indoctrination. See “The Enemy Within: Where Are the Jihadist/Islamist Websites Hosted and What Can Be Done About It?” MEMRI Inquiry and Analysis Series, No. 374, 19 July 2007, available at <<http://memri.org/bin/latestnews.cgi?ID=IA37407>> (21 July 2007).

8. Guild, interview with the author. “One of their goals is to kick us out of Iraq, and they think by doing that they would embolden more people to join their cause, establish Shari’a law there, and expand the Caliphate using Iraq as a base. . . they always go back to the U.S. bailing out of Vietnam. And if they can put enough pressure domestically on the U.S., and show these horrible casualty rates, [they think] that eventually we’re going to pick up and leave.”

9. Tovo, interview with the author.

10. The Chechens originated the practice, to be sure, but in an age when the Internet was young—and certainly would not have been available in an area such as Chechnya. They were producing full-length videos to send back to Russia. IntelCenter, “The Evolution of Jihadi Video (EJV),” v. 1.0, 11 May 2005, 4, <[www.intelcenter.com/EJV-PUB-v1-0.pdf](http://www.intelcenter.com/EJV-PUB-v1-0.pdf)> (8 June 2006). They essentially had an idea that was somewhat ahead of the technology of the day. Today, individual attacks are uploaded to the web as single video segments almost immediately, a very different proposition if you are

talking about the attractiveness of material to the press.

11. Susan B. Glaser and Steve Coll, “The Web as Weapon: Zargawi Intertwines Acts on Ground in Iraq with Propaganda Campaign on the Internet,” *The Washington Post*, 9 August 2005, <[http://web.lexis-nexis.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/universe/document?\\_m=b9d74f52e88e19e8531bae8bae901a31&\\_docnum=1&wchp=dGLbVtb-zSkVA&\\_md5=973034f5f87f54c5c2f367909c698ccb](http://web.lexis-nexis.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/universe/document?_m=b9d74f52e88e19e8531bae8bae901a31&_docnum=1&wchp=dGLbVtb-zSkVA&_md5=973034f5f87f54c5c2f367909c698ccb)> via Lexis/Nexis Academic, (1 June 2007).

12. David J. Kilcullen, “New Paradigms for 21st Century Conflict,” eJournal U.S.A., <<http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itps/0507/iipe/kilcullen.htm>>, (21 June 2007).

13. Guild, interview with the author.

14. Periodic stories refer to claims made by these groups on Islamist web sites, so that the audience must be aware the networks regularly monitor such sites, but that is a far cry from discussing the practice of using them as a source of visual product treated as if it had come from the networks’ own cameramen. Sometimes there are no cues at all, but the fact is all six networks download these segments and have used them in this fashion on a fairly regular basis.

15. The argument that leaving whatever graphics the groups themselves might have superimposed on the footage in place is sufficient seems unpersuasive given how few Americans read Arabic. For many of these videos that won’t be enough of a cue since—probably by design—these videos mimic the layout of those on a news site, for example using a news “crawl” on the bottom. With the groups’ logo either too small to see clearly or unknown to most Americans, the graphics alone will leave a viewer thinking the footage was taken from an Arabic-language news network. For the same reason, leaving up, as some do, the logo of the secondary source—often the Site Institute—is unsatisfactory, because very few nonspecialists would know that the Site Institute is a source of insurgent videos. However, leaving the graphics up and then also leaving the audio track in place, and simply lowering the volume so that the reporter’s voice can be heard over it, is an alternative that networks have sometimes used to great effect, since the musical selections leave little doubt that the footage is not from a news site.

16. Ben Venzke, “Jihadi Master Video Guide (JMVG) v1.1,” 18 May 2006, IntelCenter (Alexandria, VA), <[www.intelcenter.com/JMVG-V1-1.pdf](http://www.intelcenter.com/JMVG-V1-1.pdf)> (16 June 2007).

17. They were not specific about who they had spoken to in the military, simply saying, “The military is denying.” Charles Osgood, “Al Jazeera Broadcasts Alleged Attack on U.S. Patrol,” CBS Sunday Morning, 4 December, 2005, via Lexis-Nexis

Academic, <[http://web.lexis-nexis.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/universe/document?\\_m=d6361356adb4a956c77a672563b8b3c2&\\_docnum=3&wchp=dGLbVlz-zSkVb&\\_md5=e2908a6a0b275e544c871e98b49f8a2e](http://web.lexis-nexis.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/universe/document?_m=d6361356adb4a956c77a672563b8b3c2&_docnum=3&wchp=dGLbVlz-zSkVb&_md5=e2908a6a0b275e544c871e98b49f8a2e)> (21 July 2007).

18. Interview with COL David Lapan, Deputy Director Marine Public Affairs, 25 August 2006. At the time, COL Lapan was the official spokesperson for IIMEF Forward, and would have been aware of—indeed likely would have handled—any inquiry from NBC.

19. Jim Maceda, "Al Jazeera Shows Video of Bombing in Iraq," *NBC Nightly News*, 3 December 2005, Lexis-Nexis Academic, <[http://web.lexis-nexis.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/universe/document?\\_m=3c8ab0a9300bd83820d7ad88211cabf2&\\_docnum=2&wchp=dGLbVlz-zSkVb&\\_md5=4337f9e099c022a82b4ae983e419dacf](http://web.lexis-nexis.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/universe/document?_m=3c8ab0a9300bd83820d7ad88211cabf2&_docnum=2&wchp=dGLbVlz-zSkVb&_md5=4337f9e099c022a82b4ae983e419dacf)> (20 July 2006).

20. Multi-National Force West, Public Affairs Office, Camp Fallujah, Iraq, "Press Release #05-369, Terrorist Video Claiming to be Attack That Killed 10 Marines is False," 4 December 2005, <[www.iimefpublic.usmc.mil/public/InfolineMarines.nsf/DPSByID/DAC2D6A2B8AA3983C32570CD0038CA5A/\\$file/PRESS%20RELEASE\\_05-369.pdf](http://www.iimefpublic.usmc.mil/public/InfolineMarines.nsf/DPSByID/DAC2D6A2B8AA3983C32570CD0038CA5A/$file/PRESS%20RELEASE_05-369.pdf)> (6 July 2006).

21. Rhonda Schwartz and Maddy Sauer, "Dead U.S. Soldier in Anti-War Video 'Alive and Well,'" *The Blotter, ABCNews.com*, 8 January 2007, <[http://blogs.abcnews.com/theblotter/2007/01/dead\\_us\\_soldier.html](http://blogs.abcnews.com/theblotter/2007/01/dead_us_soldier.html)>, 2 March 2007.

22. LTC Edward Loomis, Division Public Affairs Officer, 101st Airborne Division, phone interview with the author, 9 February 2007.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*

25. Lisa Myers, "Islamic Extremist Web Sites Using Fake Video Footage to Present an Anti-American View on the War in Iraq," *NBC Nightly News*, 7 June 2007, via

Lexis-Nexis Academic, <[http://web.lexis-nexis.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/universe/document?\\_m=434fc9ce0ad82c9ec7d643895772474e&\\_docnum=1&wchp=dGLbVlz-zSkVb&\\_md5=23056fc88ad2f6ceffa737ea43d6df04](http://web.lexis-nexis.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/universe/document?_m=434fc9ce0ad82c9ec7d643895772474e&_docnum=1&wchp=dGLbVlz-zSkVb&_md5=23056fc88ad2f6ceffa737ea43d6df04)> (21 July 2007).

26. Lapan, interview with the author.

27. Guild, interview with the author.

28. Lapan, interview with the author.

29. Kimmage and Rudolfo do argue however (*Iraqi Insurgent Media*, 2007) that independent media producers have been discouraged, at least by the larger Iraqi groups.

30. MAJ Chris Smith, Operations Officer, U.S. Army 10th Special Forces Group, (A), interview with the author, 21 September 2006, Ft. Carson, Colorado.

31. Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense, and General Peter Pace, USMC, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Department of Defense Regular Briefing, 28 March 2006, Pentagon Briefing Room, Arlington, VA, Federal News Service, via Lexis-Nexis Academic, <[http://web.lexis-nexis.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/universe/document?\\_m=6684e9e894ebb90d237a4b46ea8b3e29&\\_docnum=2&wchp=dGLzVlz-zSKVA&\\_md5=a434f3765a2017240b0c896072e6076f](http://web.lexis-nexis.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/universe/document?_m=6684e9e894ebb90d237a4b46ea8b3e29&_docnum=2&wchp=dGLzVlz-zSKVA&_md5=a434f3765a2017240b0c896072e6076f)> (14 July 2007).

32. *Ibid.*

33. Jim Maceda, "More Bloodshed Expected as Elections Draw Closer in Iraq," 4 December 2005, *Sunday Today*, Lexis-Nexis Academic, <[http://web.lexis-nexis.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/universe/document?\\_m=3c8ab0a9300bd83820d7ad88211cabf2&\\_docnum=1&wchp=dGLbVlz-zSkVb&\\_md5=19a2eedb52ba827a033a87f63bc88ef6](http://web.lexis-nexis.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/universe/document?_m=3c8ab0a9300bd83820d7ad88211cabf2&_docnum=1&wchp=dGLbVlz-zSkVb&_md5=19a2eedb52ba827a033a87f63bc88ef6)> (20 July 2006).

34. See for example, Cori Dauber, "The Shot Seen 'Round the World: The Impact of the Images of Mogadishu on American Military Operations," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 4 (Winter 2001): 653-88.

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