

Fake News and False Flags: Pentagon Paid Millions to Create Fake Terrorist Videos

How the Pentagon paid a British PR firm \$500 million for top secret Iraq propaganda

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Global Research, October 05, 2018
[The Bureau of Investigative Journalism 2](#)
October 2016

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This October 3, 2016 article is of relevance to the current debate on fake news

A controversial foreign PR firm known for representing unsavory characters was paid millions by the Pentagon to create fake terrorist videos.

The Pentagon gave a controversial UK PR firm over half a billion dollars to run a top secret propaganda program in Iraq, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism can reveal.

Bell Pottinger's output included short TV segments made in the style of Arabic news networks and fake insurgent videos which could be used to track the people who watched them, according to a former employee.

The agency's staff worked alongside high-ranking U.S. military officers in their Baghdad Camp Victory headquarters as the insurgency raged outside.



Bell Pottinger's former chairman Lord Tim Bell confirmed to the Sunday Times, which has worked with the Bureau on this story, that his firm had worked on a "covert" military operation "covered by various secrecy documents."

Bell Pottinger reported to the Pentagon, the CIA and the National Security Council on its work in Iraq, he said.

Bell, one of Britain's most successful public relations executives, is credited with honing Margaret Thatcher's steely image and helping the Conservative party win three elections. The agency he co-founded has had a roster of clients including repressive regimes and Asma al-Assad, the wife of the Syrian president.

In the first media interview any Bell Pottinger employee has given about the work for the U.S. military in Iraq, video editor Martin Wells told the Bureau his time in Camp Victory was "shocking, eye-opening, life-changing."

The firm's output was signed off by former General David Petraeus – then commander of the coalition forces in Iraq – and on occasion by the White House, he said.

Bell Pottinger produced reams of material for the Pentagon, some of it going far beyond standard communications work.

The Bureau traced the firm's Iraq work through US army contracting censuses, reports by the Defense Department's Inspector General and federal procurement transaction records, as well as Bell Pottinger's corporate filings and specialist publications on military propaganda. We interviewed half a dozen former officials and contractors involved in information operations in Iraq.

There were three types of media operations commonly used in Iraq at the time, said a military contractor familiar with Bell Pottinger's work there.

"White is attributed, it says who produced it on the label," the contractor said. "Grey is unattributed and black is falsely attributed. These types of black ops, used for tracking who is watching a certain thing, were a pretty standard part of the industry toolkit."

Bell Pottinger's work in Iraq was a huge media operation which cost over a hundred million dollars a year on average. A document unearthed by the Bureau shows the company was employing almost 300 British and Iraqi staff at one point.

The London-based PR agency was brought into Iraq soon after the U.S. invasion. In March 2004 it was tasked by the country's temporary administration with the "promotion of democratic elections" - a "high-profile activity" which it trumpeted in its annual report.

The firm soon switched to less high-profile activities, however. The Bureau has identified transactions worth \$540 million between the Pentagon and Bell Pottinger for information operations and psychological operations on a series of contracts issued from May 2007 to December 2011. A similar contract at around the same annual rate-\$120 million-was in force in 2006, we have been told.

The bulk of the money was for costs such as production and distribution, Lord Bell told the Sunday Times, but the firm would have made around £15m a year in fees.

Martin Wells, the ex-employee, told the Bureau he had no idea what he was getting into when he was interviewed for the Bell Pottinger job in May 2006.

He had been working as a freelance video editor and got a call from his agency suggesting he go to London for an interview for a potential new gig. "You'll be doing new stuff that'll be coming out of the Middle East," he was told.

"I thought 'That sounds interesting'," Wells recalled. "So I go along and go into this building, get escorted up to the sixth floor in a lift, come out and there's guards up there. I thought what on earth is going on here? And it turns out it was a Navy post, basically. So from what I could work out it was a media intelligence gathering unit."

After a brief chat Wells asked when he would find out about the job, and was surprised by the response.

"You've already got it," he was told. "We've already done our background checks into you."

He would be flying out on Monday, Wells was told. It was Friday afternoon. He asked where

he would be going and got a surprising answer: Baghdad.

“So I literally had 48 hours to gather everything I needed to live in a desert,” Wells said.

Days later, Wells’s plane executed a corkscrew landing to avoid insurgent fire at Baghdad airport. He assumed he would be taken to somewhere in the Green Zone, from which coalition officials were administering Iraq. Instead he found himself in Camp Victory, a military base.

It turned out that the British PR firm which had hired him was working at the heart of a U.S. military intelligence operation.

A tide of violence was engulfing the Iraqi capital as Wells began his contract. The same month he arrived there were five suicide bomb attacks in the city, including one a suicide car bomb attack near Camp Victory which killed 14 people and wounded six others.

Describing his first impressions, Wells said he was struck by a working environment very unlike what he was used to. “It was a very secure building,” he recalled, with “signs outside saying ‘Do not come in, it’s a classified area, if you’re not cleared, you can’t come in.’”

Inside were two or three rooms with lots of desks in, said Wells, with one section for Bell Pottinger staff and the other for the US military.

“I made the mistake of walking into one of the [U.S. military] areas, and having a very stern American military guy basically drag me out saying you are not allowed in here under any circumstances, this is highly classified, get out-whilest his hand was on his gun, which was a nice introduction,” said Wells.

It soon became apparent he would be doing much more than just editing news footage.

The work consisted of three types of products. The first was television commercials portraying al Qaeda in a negative light. The second was news items which were made to look as if they had been “created by Arabic TV”, Wells said. Bell Pottinger would send teams out to film low-definition video of al Qaeda bombings and then edit it like a piece of news footage. It would be voiced in Arabic and distributed to TV stations across the region, according to Wells.

The American origins of the news items were sometimes kept hidden. Revelations in 2005 that PR contractor the Lincoln Group had helped the Pentagon place articles in Iraqi newspapers, sometimes presented as unbiased news, led to a Department of Defense investigation.

The third and most sensitive program described by Wells was the production of fake al Qaeda propaganda films. He told the Bureau how the videos were made. He was given precise instructions: “We need to make this style of video and we’ve got to use al Qaeda’s footage,” he was told. “We need it to be 10 minutes long, and it needs to be in this file format, and we need to encode it in this manner.”

US marines would take the CDs on patrol and drop them in the chaos when they raided targets. Wells said: “If they’re raiding a house and they’re going to make a mess of it looking for stuff anyway, they’d just drop an odd CD there.”

The CDs were set up to use Real Player, a popular media streaming application which connects to the internet to run. Wells explained how the team embedded a code into the CDs which linked to a Google Analytics account, giving a list of IP addresses where the CDs had been played.

The tracking account had a very restricted circulation list, according to Wells: the data went to him, a senior member of the Bell Pottinger management team, and one of the U.S. military commanders.

Wells explained their intelligence value. "If one is looked at in the middle of Baghdad...you know there's a hit there," he said. "If one, 48 hours or a week later shows up in another part of the world, then that's the more interesting one, and that's what they're looking for more, because that gives you a trail."

The CDs turned up in some interesting places, Wells recalled, including Iran, Syria, and even America.

"I would do a print-out for the day and, if anything interesting popped up, hand it over to the bosses and then it would be dealt with from there," he said.

The Pentagon confirmed that Bell Pottinger did work for them as a contractor in Iraq under the Information Operations Task Force (IOTF), producing some material that was openly sourced to coalition forces, and some which was not. They insisted that all material put out by IOTF was "truthful".

IOTF was not the only mission Bell Pottinger worked on however. Wells said some Bell Pottinger work was carried out under the Joint Psychological Operations Task Force (JPOTF), which a US defense official confirmed.

The official said he could not comment in detail on JPOTF activities, adding "We do not discuss intelligence gathering methods for operations past and present."

Lord Bell, who stood down as chairman of Bell Pottinger earlier this year, told the Sunday Times that the deployment of tracking devices described by Wells was "perfectly possible", but he was personally unaware of it.

Bell Pottinger's output was signed off by the commander of coalition forces in Iraq. Wells recalled: "We'd get the two colonels in to look at the things we'd done that day, they'd be fine with it, it would then go to General Petraeus".

Some of the projects went even higher up the chain of command. "If [Petraeus] couldn't sign off on it, it would go on up the line to the White House, and it was signed off up there, and the answer would come back down the line'.

Petraeus went on to become director of the CIA in 2011 before resigning in the wake of an affair with a journalist.

The awarding of such a large contract to a British company created resentment among the American communications firms jostling for Iraq work, according to a former employee of one of Bell Pottinger's rivals.

"Nobody could work out how a British company could get hundreds of millions of dollars of

U.S. funding when there were equally capable U.S. companies who could have done it," said Andrew Garfield, an ex-employee of the Lincoln Group who is now a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. "The American companies were pissed."

Ian Tunnicliffe, a former British soldier, was the head of a three person panel from the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA)-the transitional government in Iraq following the 2003 invasion-which awarded Bell Pottinger their 2004 contract to promote democratic elections.

According to Tunnicliffe, the contract, which totaled \$5.8m, was awarded after the CPA realized its own in-house efforts to make people aware of the transitional legal framework ahead of elections were not working.

"We held a relatively hasty but still competitive bid for communications companies to come in," recalls Tunnicliffe.

Tunnicliffe said that Bell Pottinger's consortium was one of three bidders for the contract, and simply put in a more convincing proposal than their rivals.

Iraq was a lucrative opportunity for many communications firms. The Bureau has discovered that between 2006 and 2008 more than 40 companies were being paid for services such as TV and radio placement, video production, billboards, advertising and opinion polls. These included US companies like Lincoln Group, Leonie Industries and SOS International as well as Iraq-based firms such as Cradle of New Civilization Media, Babylon Media and Iraqi Dream.

But the largest sums the Bureau was able to trace went to Bell Pottinger.

According to Glen Segell, who worked in an information operations task force in Iraq in 2006, contractors were used partly because the military didn't have the in-house expertise, and partly because they were operating in a legal "grey area".

In his 2011 article Covert Intelligence Provision in Iraq, Segell notes that U.S. law prevented the government from using propaganda on the domestic population of the U.S. In a globalized media environment, the Iraq operations could theoretically have been seen back home, therefore "it was prudent legally for the military not to undertake all the...activities," Segell wrote.

Segell maintains that information operations programs did make a difference on the ground in Iraq. Some experts question this however.

A 2015 study by the Rand Corporation, a military think tank, concluded that "generating assessments of efforts to inform, influence, and persuade has proven to be challenging across the government and DoD."

Bell Pottinger's operations on behalf of the U.S. government stopped in 2011 as American troops withdrew from Iraq.

Bell Pottinger changed ownership after a management buyout in 2012 and its current structure has no connections with the unit Wells worked for, which closed in 2011. It is understood the key principals who were involved in this unit deny any involvement with tracking software as described by Wells.

Wells left Iraq after less than two years, having had enough of the stress of working in a war

zone and having to watch graphic videos of atrocities day after day.

Looking back at his time creating propaganda for the US military, Wells is ambivalent. The aim of Bell Pottinger's work in Iraq was to highlight al Qaeda's senseless violence, he said- publicity which at the time he thought must be doing some good. "But then, somewhere in my conscience I wondered whether this was the right thing to do," he added.

Lord Bell told the Sunday Times he was "proud" of Bell Pottinger's work in Iraq. "We did a lot to help resolve the situation," he said. "Not enough. We did not stop the mess which emerged, but it was part of the American propaganda machinery."

Whether the material achieved its goals, no one would ever really know, said Wells. "I mean if you look at the situation now, it wouldn't appear to have worked. But at the time, who knows, if it saved one life it [was] a good thing to do."

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