

Pentagon Practice of Paying Journalists to Influence Public Opinion:

US paid Scribes for Balkans Website

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During the Cold War the U.S. Government subsidized cultural institutions, activities, and publications that were deemed useful to its objectives. The Central Intelligence Agency thus ran the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) that published the Encounter. The cloak-and-dagger stories of spooks dropping [brown envelopes filled with cash](#) on Melvin Lasky's cluttered desk seems almost endearingly quaint in these post-modern times of ours, however, with literally hundreds of "NGOs" of all shapes and sizes eager to do their paymasters' bidding in Kiev, Tbilisi and Belgrade.

It is therefore with some surprise that we learn that the Pentagon's chief investigator is looking into the U.S. military's practice of paying journalists to write articles and commentary for a website aimed at [influencing public opinion in the Balkans](#). According to the AP, the Pentagon's inspector general, Joseph Schmitz, is reviewing the case at the request of Lawrence T. Di Rita, chief spokesman for Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld. He is also looking more broadly at Pentagon activities that might involve inappropriate payments to journalists. Pentagon sources say that the Web project was developed in close coordination with the State Department.

The Balkans Web site, called [Southeast European Times](#) has no immediately obvious connection to the U.S. government but contains a linked disclaimer that says that it is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Defense "in support of the U.N. Security Council Resolution 1244" which ostensibly ended the Kosovo war in 1999. It has articles and commentary by some fifty journalists and commentators who are paid by European Command through a private contractor, Anteon Corp., an information technology company based in Fairfax, VA.

The Web site is theoretically an example of what the military calls "information operations"—programs designed to influence public opinion by countering what the Pentagon considers to be misinformation or lies that circulate in the target country's news media. Balkantimes.com grew out of the Clinton-led NATO air war against Serbia in 1999, and sought to counter what the clintonites called a "Serb propaganda machine" that made effective use of the Internet. Pentagon sources say that "information warfare experts" at European Command do not edit the articles written by contributing journalists for Southeast European Times, but they review the articles after they are processed by Anteon editors, and they sometimes change the headlines.

The trouble with this Southeast European Times is not that it is government propaganda, but that it is (a) unbelievably bad propaganda, and (b) totally unnecessary. It is bad (intrinsically, as well as from the standpoint of its originators' presumed objectives) because it is bland, unimaginative, boring, predictable, devoid of a single interesting or original idea, mostly reliant on wire report compilations, and (judging by the Serbian/Croatian "original" output), poorly written to the point of being semi-literate.

The Pentagon effort is also quite unnecessary because the "pro-Western" view of post-Yugoslav politics is now largely dominant in the domestic media of the successor states. In Serbia it is eagerly purveyed by the Soros-financed or controlled dailies such as [Danas](#) ("Today") , the weekly [news-magazine Vreme](#) ("Times") and the radio-TV conglomerate [B-92](#) . This view rests on one basic and several secondary assumptions. The basic assumption of all is that the Serbs are the chief culprits for everything bad that happened in the Balkans since at least 1991. The secondary ones are that every ex-Yugoslav entity must cooperate unconditionally with The Hague War Crimes Tribunal, that a "multi-ethnic" Bosnia is one of the crowning glories of the "international community," that Kosovo is on the way to achieving similar standards, etc, etc, ad nauseam. As has been noted [in these pages some months ago](#) ,

"These new janissaries, just like those of the Ottoman army of old, have to prove their credentials by being more zealous than the master himself; as the Balkan proverb has it, 'a convert is worse than a Turk.' Nobody is more insanely vehement in his insults against the Serbian people and their history, religion, art, and suffering than a dozen Serb-born columnists who are on [their] payroll . . . "

They invariably parrot the post-modern "Western" views and ambitions. Those media outlets have a tough job of selling The Hague Tribunal and other bad and inherently absurd notions to the Serbian public, but they have to try in order to earn their upkeep. They are doing their propaganda work professionally and, thanks to an abundance of funds, they have attracted a number of journalists and other media professional ready to sell their body and soul to the highest bidder. The Pentagon's Southeast European Times looks, reads and feels ridiculously amateurish, or, worse still, dilettante-ish by comparison.

Back in the Encounter days the CIA set editorial policy, presumably excluding articles inconvenient to its political agenda. Direct intervention was infrequent, however, because it had its "trusties" in the editorial saddle, and, in any case, the non-communist intelligentsia shared the political and cultural assumptions of "the West" and operated unbidden within the boundaries of "Western" opinion. Today, however, the post-national intelligentsia of the post-communist East needs no tight supervision as it knows what is required. The recent engineering of Viktor Yushchenko's victory in the Ukraine illustrates the point: the U.S.-sponsored "Community of Democracies" was an effective conveyor-belt for a multi-million-dollar campaign of propaganda and disinformation underwritten and supported by the State Department. It has a symbiotic relationship with dozens of NGOs through which Washington promotes "democracy" in foreign countries—meaning people, parties and causes favored by the leftist foreign policy bureaucracy inherited from Clinton. These NGOs (see this list) include the Open Society Institute , a few creatures of the National Endowment for Democracy (e.g., <http://www.wmd.org>) and numerous Soros spin-offs (e.g., <http://www.demcoalition.org/html/home.html>). CD is itself handing out U.S. taxpayers' money to these NGOs, and even had advertized a solicitation in the run-up to the show in Kiev.

The Pentagon's silly and wasteful Southeast European Times shows yet again that governments are invariably worse than the private sector in delivering a professional service at a reasonable price, when it comes to disseminating propaganda to the Balkans no less than, say, assassinating Castro, maintaining a viable Social Security program, or providing a decent education to American children.

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