

War Propaganda: “Fake News” and the Pentagon’s Office of Strategic Influence (OSI)

By [Prof Michel Chossudovsky](#)

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Author’s note

The following text on Rumsfeld’s “Office of Strategic Influence” (OSI) was first published by Global Research in January 2003 two months before the onslaught of the war on Iraq. The analysis largely pertained to the role of the Pentagon in planting fake stories in the news chain with a view to providing a “human face” to US-led military interventions.

Already in 2002, the “Militarization of the Media” was on the drawing board of the Pentagon. Defense Secretary Rumsfeld created the OSI with a view to influencing public opinion in the months leading up to the war on Iraq in March 2003. “The purpose [of the OSI] was to deliberately lie to advance American interests,” (quoted in *Air Force Magazine*, January 2003). It consisted in feeding disinformation into the news chain as well as seeking the support of the corporate media. Acknowledged by the New York Times:

“The Defense Department is considering issuing a secret directive to the American military to conduct covert operations aimed at influencing public opinion and policy makers in friendly and neutral countries [Germany, France, etc], senior Pentagon and administration officials say.

The fight, one Pentagon official said, is over “the strategic communications for our nation, the message we want to send for long-term influence, and how we do it.”

As a military officer put it: “We have the assets and the capabilities and the training to go into friendly and neutral nations to influence public opinion. We could do it and get away with it. That doesn’t mean we should.”...

In February [2002], Mr. Rumsfeld had to disband the Pentagon’s Office of Strategic Influence, ending a short-lived plan to provide news items, and possibly false ones, to foreign journalists to influence public sentiment abroad. Senior Pentagon officials say Mr. Rumsfeld is deeply frustrated that the United States government has no coherent plan for molding public opinion worldwide in favor of America in its global campaign against terrorism and militancy.(NYT, December 10, 2002)

THREATS AND RESPONSES: FIGHT AGAINST TERRORISM; Pentagon May Push Propaganda in Allied Nations

By THOM SHANKER and ERIC SCHMITT DEC. 16, 2002



The Defense Department is considering issuing a secret directive to the American military to conduct covert operations aimed at influencing public opinion and policy makers in friendly and neutral countries, senior Pentagon and administration officials say.

Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld has not yet decided on the proposal, which has ignited a fierce battle throughout the Bush administration over whether the military should carry out secret propaganda missions in friendly nations like Germany, where many of the Sept. 11 hijackers congregated, or Pakistan, still considered a haven for Al Qaeda's militants.

Many administration officials agree that there is a role for the military in carrying out what it calls information operations against adversaries, especially before and during war, as well as routine public relations work in friendly nations like Colombia, the Philippines or Bosnia, whose governments have welcomed American troops.

... But the idea of ordering the military to take psychological aim at allies has divided the Pentagon — with civilians and uniformed officers on both sides of the debate.

Some are troubled by suggestions that the military might pay journalists to write stories favorable to American policies or hire outside contractors without obvious ties to the Pentagon to organize rallies in support of American policies. (NYT, December 16, 2002)

The Ongoing “Militarization of the Media”

Most people do not even know that an Office of Strategic Influence (tantamount to a “Ministry of Truth”) existed within the confines of the Pentagon. Why? Rumsfeld decided to abolish the OSI. In reality, it was never abolished. They just changed the name to something else (as confirmed by Rumsfeld in a November 2002 Press Conference):

Rumsfeld: And then there was the office of strategic influence.... I went down that next day and said fine, if you want to savage this thing fine I'll give you the corpse. There's the name. You can have the name, but I'm gonna keep doing every single thing that needs to be done and I have.

That was intended to be done by that office is being done by that office, NOT by that office in other ways.

[DARPA Press Conference \(Dept of Defense, November 18, 2002](#) emphasis added)

Flash Forward: 2002- 2017

While the OSI process launched by the Pentagon in 2002 is still functional as intimated by Rumsfeld, it has become increasingly sophisticated. Moreover, the media environment has changed dramatically since 2002 with the rapid development of social media.

WASHINGTON BABYLON — July 19, 2007, 2:40 pm

How the Pentagon's "Surrogates Operation" Feeds Stories to Administration-Friendly Media and Pundits

By [Ken Silverstein](#)

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Earlier this week I wrote a story about a program run by the Pentagon's Office of Public Affairs. This program seeks to bypass the mainstream press by working directly with a carefully culled list of military analysts, bloggers, and others who can be counted on to parrot the Bush Administration's line on national security issues.

Harper Magazine, Screenshot

Today, the Militarization of the Media is accepted. It is part of a "New Normal". The actions of both by the Pentagon and NATO are now largely directed against the Blogosphere integrated by social media and independent online news and analysis.

"Strategic Influence" seeks to undermine critique or opinion by the alternative online media directed against (illegal) acts of war. Since 2001, a firm relationship has developed between the mainstream media and the Military establishment. War crimes are tacitly ignored. US-NATO "acts of war" are routinely upheld by the corporate media as humanitarian endeavors, i.e. a so-called "Responsibility to Protect"(R2P).

"America is Under Attack"

On September 11, 2001, Afghanistan had allegedly attacked America, according to NATO's North Atlantic Council. The legal argument was that the September 11 attacks constituted an undeclared "armed attack" "from abroad" by an unnamed foreign power.

In the months leading up to the announced 2003 invasion of Iraq, the propaganda campaign consisted in sustaining the illusion that "America was under attack".

A similar logic prevails today: America's is allegedly being threatened by "rogue states": Russia, China, Iran and North Korea.

"Information Operations" are now envisaged by the Pentagon against alternative media which refuse to acknowledge that "America is under attack". The online independent media are tagged as "adversaries". Countering (critical) social media is part of a US-NATO's agenda. NATO points to the "[weaponization of disinformation](#)", suggesting that online media directed against US-NATO constitutes a "weapon".

Both the US DoD and NATO consider that online "false information" (published by independent and alternative media) has "security implications". The objective is ultimately to dismantle all civil society media and movements which are opposed to America's global

war agenda.

Below is the text on the failed Office of Strategic Influence (OSI), written 15 years ago, published in January 2003.

Michel Chossudovsky, December 17, 2017

War Propaganda

by Michel Chossudovsky

Global Research, January 16, 2003

Military planners in the Pentagon are acutely aware of the central role of war propaganda. Waged from the Pentagon, the State Department and the CIA, a fear and disinformation campaign (FDC) has been launched. The blatant distortion of the truth and the systematic manipulation of all sources of information is an integral part of war planning. In the wake of 9/11, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld created to the Office of Strategic Influence (OSI), or "Office of Disinformation" as it was labeled by its critics:

"The Department of Defense said they needed to do this, and they were going to actually plant stories that were false in foreign countries — as an effort to influence public opinion across the world.¹

And, all of a sudden, the OSI was formally disbanded following political pressures and "troublesome" media stories that *"its purpose was to deliberately lie to advance American interests."*² "Rumsfeld backed off and said *this is embarrassing.*"³ Yet despite this apparent about-turn, the Pentagon's Orwellian disinformation campaign remains functionally intact: "[T]he secretary of defense is not being particularly candid here. *Disinformation in military propaganda is part of war.*"⁴

Rumsfeld later confirmed in a press interview that while the OSI no longer exists in name, the "Office's intended functions are being carried out" ⁵ (Rumsfeld's precise words can be consulted [here](#)).

A number of government agencies and intelligence units -with links to the Pentagon- are involved in various components of the propaganda campaign. Realities are turned upside down. Acts of war are heralded as "humanitarian interventions" geared towards "regime change" and "the restoration of democracy". Military occupation and the killing of civilians are presented as "peace-keeping". The derogation of civil liberties -in the context of the so-called "anti-terrorist legislation"- is portrayed as a means to providing "domestic security" and upholding civil liberties. And underlying these manipulated realities, "Osama bin Laden" and "Weapons of Mass Destruction" statements, which circulate profusely in the news chain, are upheld as the basis for an understanding of World events.

In the critical "planning stages" leading up to an invasion of Iraq, the twisting of public opinion at home and around the World, is an integral part of the War agenda, War propaganda is pursued at all stages: *before, during* the military operation as well as in its

cruel aftermath. War propaganda serves to drown the real causes and consequences of war.

A few months after the OSI was disbanded amidst controversy (February 2002), The New York Times confirmed that the disinformation campaign was running strong and that the Pentagon was:

“...considering issuing a secret directive to American military to conduct covert operations aimed at influencing public opinion and policymakers in friendly and neutral nations ...The proposal has ignited a fierce battle throughout the Bush administration over whether the military should carry out secret propaganda missions in friendly nations like Germany... The fight, one Pentagon official said, is over ‘the strategic communications for our nation, the message we want to send for long-term influence, and how we do it....’We have the assets and the capabilities and the training to go into friendly and neutral nations to influence public opinion. We could do it and get away with it. That doesn’t mean we should.’⁶

Fabricating the Truth

To sustain the war agenda, these “fabricated realities”, funneled on a day to day basis into the news chain must become indelible truths, which form part of a broad political and media consensus. In this regard, the corporate media –although acting independently of the military-intelligence apparatus, is an instrument of this evolving totalitarian system.

In close liaison with the Pentagon and the CIA, the State Department has also set up its own “soft-sell” (civilian) propaganda unit, headed by Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Charlotte Beers, a powerful figure in the advertising industry. Working in liaison with the Pentagon, Beers was appointed to head the State Department’s propaganda unit in the immediate wake of 9/11. Her mandate is “to counteract anti-Americanism abroad.”⁷ Her office at the State department is to:

“ensure that public diplomacy (engaging, informing, and influencing key international audiences) is practiced in harmony with public affairs (outreach to Americans) and traditional diplomacy to advance U.S. interests and security and to provide the moral basis for U.S. leadership in the world.” ([Source](#))

The Role of the CIA

The most powerful component of the Fear and Disinformation Campaign (FDI) rests with the CIA, which, secretly subsidizes authors, journalists and media critics, through a web of private foundations and CIA sponsored front organizations. The CIA also influences the scope and direction of many Hollywood productions. Since 9/11, one third of Hollywood productions are war movies. “Hollywood stars and scriptwriters are rushing to bolster the new message of patriotism, conferring with the CIA and brainstorming with the military about possible real-life terrorist attacks.”⁸ “The Sum of All Fears” directed by Phil Alden Robinson, which depicts the scenario of a nuclear war, received the endorsement and support of both the Pentagon and the CIA.⁹

Disinformation is routinely “planted” by CIA operatives in the newsroom of major dailies, magazines and TV channels. Outside public relations firms are often used to create “fake stories” Carefully documented by Chaim Kupferberg in relation to the events of September

11: "A relatively few well-connected correspondents provide the scoops, that get the coverage in the relatively few mainstream news sources, where the parameters of debate are set and the "official reality" is consecrated for the bottom feeders in the news chain."10

Covert disinformation initiatives under CIA auspices are also funneled through various intelligence proxies in other countries. Since 9/11, they have resulted in the day-to-day dissemination of false information concerning alleged "terrorist attacks". In virtually all of the reported cases (Britain, France, Indonesia, India, Philippines, etc.) the "alleged terrorist groups" are said to have "links to Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda", without of course acknowledging the fact (amply documented by intelligence reports and official documents) that Al Qaeda is a creation of CIA.

The Doctrine of "Self Defense"

At this critical juncture, in the month(s) leading up to the announced invasion of Iraq, the propaganda campaign is geared towards sustaining the illusion that "America is under attack". Relayed not only through the mainstream media but also through a number of alternative internet media sites, these "fabricated realities" portray the war as a bona fide act of self-defense, while carefully concealing the broad strategic and economic objectives of the war.

In turn, the propaganda campaign develops a *casus belli*, "a justification", a political legitimacy for waging war. The "official reality" (conveyed profusely in George W's speeches) rests on the broad "humanitarian" premise of a so-called "preemptive", namely "defensive war", "a war to protect freedom":

"We're under attack because we love freedom... And as long as we love freedom and love liberty and value every human life, they're going to try to hurt us." 11

Spelled out in the National Security Strategy (NSS), the preemptive "defensive war" doctrine and the "war on terrorism" against Al Qaeda constitute the two essential building blocks of the Pentagon's propaganda campaign. The objective is to present "preemptive military action" -meaning war as an act of "self-defense" against two categories of enemies, "rogue States" and "Islamic terrorists":

"The war against terrorists of global reach is a global enterprise of uncertain duration. ...America will act against such emerging threats before they are fully formed.

...Rogue states and terrorists do not seek to attack us using conventional means. They know such attacks would fail. Instead, they rely on acts of terror and, potentially, the use of weapons of mass destruction (...)

The targets of these attacks are our military forces and our civilian population, in direct violation of one of the principal norms of the law of warfare. As was demonstrated by the losses on September 11, 2001, mass civilian casualties is the specific objective of terrorists and these losses would be exponentially more severe if terrorists acquired and used weapons of mass destruction.

The United States has long maintained the option of preemptive actions to counter a sufficient threat to our national security. The greater the threat, the

greater is the risk of inaction— and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves, (...). To forestall or prevent such hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act preemptively.”¹² ([National Security Strategy, White House](#), 2002)

Feeding Disinformation into the News Chain

How is war propaganda carried out? Two sets of “eye popping” “statements” emanating from a variety of sources (including official National Security statements, media, Washington-based think tanks, etc.) are fed on a daily basis into the news chain. Some of the events (including news regarding presumed terrorists) are blatantly fabricated by the intelligence agencies. These statements are supported by simple and catchy “buzzwords”, which set the stage for fabricating the news:

Buzzword no. 1. “Osama bin Laden’s Al Qaeda” (Osama) is behind most news stories regarding the “war on terrorism” including “alleged”, “future” “presumed”, and “actual” terrorist attacks. What is rarely mentioned is that this outside enemy Al Qaeda is a CIA “intelligence asset”, used in covert operations.

Buzzword no. 2. The “Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)” statement is used to justify the “pre-emptive war” against the “State sponsors of terror”, -i.e. countries such as Iraq, Iran and North Korea which allegedly possess WMD. Amply documented in the case of Iraq, a large body of news on WMD and biological attacks, are fabricated.

The “WMD” and “Osama bin Laden” statements become part of day to day debate, embodied in routine conversations between citizens. Repeated ad nauseam, they penetrate the inner consciousness of ordinary people molding their individual perceptions on current events. Through deception and manipulation, this shaping of the minds of entire populations, sets the stage -under the façade of a functioning democracy—for the installation of a de facto police State. Needless to say, war propaganda weakens the antiwar movement.

In turn, the disinformation regarding alleged “terrorist attacks” or “weapons of mass destruction” instills an atmosphere of fear, which mobilizes unswerving patriotism and support for the State, and its main political and military actors.

Repeated in virtually every national news report, this stigmatic focus on WMD-Al Qaeda essentially serves as a dogma, to blind people on the causes and consequences of America’s war of conquest, while providing a simple, unquestioned and authoritative justification for “self defense.”

More recently, both in speeches by President Bush and Prime Minister Blair, as well as in the news, WMD statements are now carefully blended into Osama statements. UK Defense Minister Jack Straw warned in early January “that ‘rogue regimes’ such as Iraq were the most likely source of WMD technology for groups like al-Qaeda.”¹³ Also, in January, a presumed al Qaeda cell “with links to Iraq” was discovered in Edinburgh, allegedly involved in the use of biological weapons against people in the UK. The hidden agenda of “the links to Iraq” statement is blatantly obvious. The objective is to discredit Iraq in the months leading up to the war: the so-called “State sponsors of terror” are said to support Osama bin Laden, Conversely, Osama is said to collaborate with Iraq in the use of weapons of mass

destruction.

In recent months, several thousand news reports have woven “WMD-Osama stories” of which a couple of excerpts are provided below:

“Skeptics will argue that the inconsistencies don’t prove the Iraqis have continued developing weapons of mass destruction. It also leaves Washington casting about for other damning material and charges, including the midweek claim, again unproved, that Islamic extremists affiliated with al-Qaeda took possession of a chemical weapon in Iraq last November or late October.”¹⁴

North Korea has admitted it lied about that and is brazenly cranking up its nuclear program again. Iraq has almost certainly lied about it, but won’t admit it. Meanwhile Al Qaeda, although dispersed, remains a shadowy, threatening force, and along with other terrorist groups, a potential recipient of the deadly weaponry that could emerge from Iraq and North Korea.¹⁵

Britain’s Prime Minister Tony Blair listed Iraq, North Korea, the Middle East and al-Qaeda among “difficult and dangerous” problems Britain faced in the coming year.¹⁶

The WMD-Osama statements are used profusely by the mainstream media. In the wake of 9/11, these stylized statements have also become an integral part of day to day political discourse. They have also permeated the workings of international diplomacy and the functioning of the United Nations.

Notes

1. Interview with Steve Adubato, Fox News, 26 December 2002.
2. *Air Force Magazine*, January 2003, italics added..
3. Adubato, *op. cit.* italics added
4. *Ibid*, italics added.
5. Quoted in Federation of American Scientists (FAS) Secrecy News, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/news/secrecy/2002/11/112702.html>, Rumsfeld’s press interview can be consulted at: <http://www.fas.org/sgp/news/2002/11/dod111802.html>.
6. *New York Times*, 16 December 2002.
7. *Sunday Times*, London 5 January 2003.
8. Ros Davidson, Stars earn their Stripes, *The Sunday Herald* (Scotland), 11 November 2001).
9. See Samuel Blumenfeld, Le Pentagone et la CIA enrôlent Hollywood, *Le Monde*, 24 July 2002, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/articles/BLU207A.html>.
10. Chaim Kupferberg, The Propaganda Preparation for 9/11, *Global Outlook*, No. 3, 2003, p. 19, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/articles/KUP206A.html>.
11. Remarks by President Bush in Trenton, New Jersey, «Welcome Army National Guard Aviation Support Facility, Trenton, New Jersey », 23 September 2002.

12. National Security Strategy, White House, 2002, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html>

13. Agence France Presse (AFP), 7 January 2003.

14. *Insight on the News*, 20 January 2003.

15. *Christian Science Monitor*, 8 January 2003

16. Agence France Presse (AFP), 1 January 2003

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America's War on Terrorism

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