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## Can the information war on terror be won? A polemical essay

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### ABSTRACT

This polemical essay argues that, despite many presentational mistakes in the West's information war on terror since 9/11, the 'propaganda' war is not yet lost. Indeed, it tentatively suggests that although those mistakes have made the task of 'winning hearts and minds' in the Islamic world harder and longer, the root cause of failure to date lies with a failure to 'know yourself' – i.e. to address those elements, such as foreign policy decisions, which fuel support for Al Qaida. Although the terrorist 'organization' has proved exceptionally adept in its own propaganda, it is not just inept western propaganda that lies at the heart of the problem. It is the inability to see yourself as others see you, even if – or perhaps – you disagree with 'them'.

KEY WORDS • information war • propaganda • war on terror

Since 9/11, it has been frequently asserted that the West is losing the propaganda war against Islamic extremism. Of course, the western democracies do not label what they do as 'propaganda'; that pejorative label is reserved for 'enemy' information activities such as Al Qaida websites, bin Laden videotapes and – often unfairly – Al Jazeera news reports. Instead, the West prefers a variety of euphemisms to describe its information campaigns, from public diplomacy in the diplomatic sphere to information operations on the battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq or, most recently, strategic communications. But, whatever it is called, there is widespread agreement that both sides are engaged in information warfare defined in a much broader sense than that outlined in narrow military doctrines. Both Washington and London have relabelled 'The Global War on Terror' as 'The Long War' – which is what the terrorists have been fighting all along. They thought that President Bush was right to initially label it as a 'Crusade' because, for them, that is precisely what it is. For Al Qaida, Iraq and Afghanistan are merely the latest battles in a thousand year crusade being waged by the infidel against Islam.

To get into this mindset is one of the greatest challenges for the West's information warriors. It is part of Sun Tzu's dictum that you should 'know your enemy'. I think it would be fair to suggest that this is one of the greatest failures of western propaganda campaigns since 9/11. It is astonishing to reflect in poll after poll on how levels of anti-Americanism have increased since *Le Monde's* famous headline the day after 9/11 that 'we are all Americans'. The 'war' being fought since then is now longer than the Second World War – and with no end yet in sight. In the Islamic world in particular, even in moderate Islamic countries, some polls have revealed that many people think the American president is a greater threat to world peace than bin Laden, that the West is in fact engaged in a 'clash of civilizations', or even a minority view that the collapse of the Twin Towers was a controlled explosion engineered by the CIA working alongside Mossad, which is why '4000 Jews failed to turn up to work that day'.

It is too easy – and a big mistake – to dismiss such nonsense or, for that matter, the myriad of conspiracy theories and rumours that thrive in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, as the irrelevant ranting of a few mad mullahs. If the 'Long War' is anything, it is a war of ideas or the much vaunted struggle for 'hearts and minds'. Information warfare must embrace both rational (minds) and emotional (hearts) 'human factors' if it is to succeed. So who is winning? Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib have certainly not helped America's cause. These are, however, but two examples of propaganda 'own goals' over the past six years. False stories in western media outlets – such as the *Newsweek* report that a *Koran* had been flushed down the toilet at Gitmo or the faked pictures of British soldiers mistreating Iraqi prisoners in *The Mirror* – certainly undermine Anglo-American assertions about being a 'force for good in the world'. But they are a price to pay for attaching the spread of democracy to the Bush Doctrine as the justification for 'why we fight'.

That phrase was, of course, the title of a series of seven Second World War 'indoctrination films' made by Frank Capra for the US Office of War Information between 1941 and 1946. The rhetoric of the Second World War is ever present in our 21st-century conflict, whether it be an 'axis of evil' or attacks on 'appeasers' who suggest that there might be another way to win a long information war against the ideas – and conditions – that generate extremist violent actions. Part of this dissent suggests that military actions in places like Iraq have made the world a more dangerous place than it was before 2003, with the hawks pointing to 9/11 itself as evidence of terrorist intentions. But 9/11 did not come out of the blue. And despite the views of those American neo-conservatives who suggested that Iraq and 9/11 were connected, it was in fact American policy decisions to implement 'regime change' after the attacks on New York and Washington that created a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In one less spurious sense 9/11 and Iraq were indeed connected, but not in the way 70 per cent of Americans at one point believed them to be. The terrorist attacks can in fact be traced back to Operation Desert Storm and the arrival of infidel troops (men and women) into the holy land of Mecca. While some people who asked why the coalition did not 'finish the job' after Iraqi forces were driven out of Kuwait in 1991, it became bin Laden's obsession to see the expulsion of these *kafir* invaders and the deposition of the corrupt Saudi sheiks who had allowed this desecration. The first attempt to down the World Trade Center was in 1993. Bin Laden publicly declared his war (*jihad*) on the USA in 1996. So it was not so much a question of believing whether Saddam Hussein was behind the 2001 attacks but understanding that one of 9/11's root causes was the USA not engaging in 'regime change' in 1991.

Or at least not officially. Another little-known aspect of Desert Storm blowback from 1991 was also to affect subsequent events in 2003. Operation Desert Storm was halted once Iraqi forces had been physically expelled from Kuwait. There was no UN mandate to do anything else at that time. However, covert radio broadcasts from coalition sources – allegedly the CIA – encouraged uprisings against the Saddam regime amongst the Shias to the south and the Kurds to the north of Iraq. When those uprisings were brutally crushed by Saddam's forces, no help was forthcoming from the coalition. This left a deep sense of betrayal and suspicion amongst the Shias especially. At least the plight of the Kurds had appeared on CNN and a resultant humanitarian mission (Operation Provide Comfort) was despatched to alleviate the suffering. Accordingly, when coalition forces invaded southern Iraq in 2003, without a UN mandate to implement regime change but full of statements about the liberation of Iraqi citizens from Saddam's tyranny, the locals failed to greet them as liberators showered with flower petals. The British forces quickly realized the problem. One of their psychological operations leaflets attempted to reassure them that 'this time we won't let you down'.

Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent insurgency have greatly muddied the waters of western information warfare. Bin Laden seized the opportunity and declared Baghdad as the centre of the new Caliphate. Foreign fighters flooded into the country under the banner of Al Qaida in Iraq. The Global War on Terror now had a new battlefront, although emboldened Taliban fighters were also to renew their conflict in Afghanistan following their expulsion from Kabul in late 2001. So, as the Long War enters its eighth year, let us return to the title of this polemic. I think implicit in the question of my essay is the answer: no. If we take the word 'information' out of the title for a moment, we need to ask whether the war on terror can be won, and we begin to see that the problem arises from the phrase 'war on terror' – just like other 'wars'

declared on drugs, the war on want, cancer or anything else. We know when the war began – on 9/11 – and the first words of the US fight-back aboard Flight 93 – ‘Let’s roll’. But how will it end?

Indeed, what we must now call ‘The Long War’ needs a definition of victory and an understanding of what that victory would look like. The extermination of the ‘bad guys’? Unconditional surrender? A negotiated peace? How do you do that when western governments openly pronounce that they do not negotiate with terrorists (unless they are in Northern Ireland)? War on an idea or a concept, or whatever terrorism is in the minds of its perpetrators, requires both a clearly understood end-state and a grand strategy. We have neither. Until they are in place we may as well call it the Forever War or the Eternal War.

To win a war against an idea, we need to put the word ‘information’ back into the title. It should have primacy over the word ‘war’ itself – although it would be better to drop the word altogether. The word ‘war’ merely empowers terrorists with the status of ‘warriors’. Terrorism used to be about killing civilians. A war on terrorism sees terrorists in armed militias attacking soldiers. As President Bush has stated, it is a ‘new kind of war’. Iraq, on the other hand, has become a classic counterinsurgency challenge. But what about the wider conflict? Western information warriors are not talking about a clash, as in a clash of civilizations, but about a sustained information campaign that needs to be waged against their adversaries who argue that this is precisely what is going on. And for that there needs to be a grand strategy as well.

There used to be one in a previous global ideological conflict, first outlined in George Kennan’s famous Long Telegram back in 1946. In that document – which was also read by Stalin – Kennan wrote that ‘all Soviet propaganda beyond Soviet security sphere is basically negative and destructive. It should therefore be relatively easy to combat it by any intelligent and really constructive program.’ What has been tried since 9/11, however, has been Radio Sawa and Al Hurra television, *Hi* magazine, the Lincoln Group, the failed Offices of Global Communications and of Strategic Influence. These were all tactical fixes for operational problems without any real strategic understanding of what is required for a Long Information War. That is why they are either not working or have been closed down. True, it took time for the previous ideological warfare machinery to be constructed, with the US Information Agency only being formed in 1953. Yet this Cold War machinery for waging strategic information warfare was virtually dismantled within a decade of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Re-creating the USIA today may be part of the solution that is required, but the global information environment is today infinitely more complex than it was in the 1990s, with many new info-players like Al Jazeera or on the internet. The Smith-Mundt Act would have to go, and that

might prove unacceptable to American citizens. But in a world in which the line between the national and the international can no longer be drawn on the shores of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, not just in cyberspace but also in a global 24/7 news mediasphere, a successful information campaign needs to recognize that it is no longer about 'winning' but competing.

Western governments historically were able to monopolize or dominate global news flows and the consequent global views flows which that dominance enabled. They can no longer do that in an age of regional news players like Al Jazeera or the new Iranian Press TV which are streamed on the internet, or indeed in an age of the so-called 'citizen journalist'. For all the military talk about taking 'command and control' of the battle space, when the battle space is the global mediasphere in which an individual with a cell-phone camera can access a global audience on the worldwide web, 'full spectrum dominance' is nigh impossible.

So what can be done? Many argue that what is needed is a renewed emphasis on soft power. But in trying to make western democracies more attractive so that others want to be like them, the democracies and their free media – which still arouse global popularity – unleash images and perceptions that damage that attractiveness. In the Muslim world, audiences for Hollywood movies receive constant reinforcements of how western values are decadent, violent, promiscuous, corrupt, drug- and divorce-ridden. Whereas western governments see democracy, individualism and free market liberal capitalism as the tenets of their value system – that was what won the Cold War after all – Islamic extremists use western media products as symbols of their own moral authority, not that of the West. This is one of the main issues strategic communications strategies must combat.

There have undoubtedly been some serious mistakes which will make the Long War longer and the strategic communications campaign more difficult. The initial response – perhaps understandably – to 9/11 was hard power. But, following immediate worldwide sympathy for the USA, the story since then has been one disaster after another and has resulted in a considerable drop in trust, not only of and among the USA's closest allies, but also of their elected heads of government. But when you are 'at war' – as distinct from being in a counter-terrorist campaign – your warriors are in the driving seat and they deploy information warfare strategies in accordance with their military doctrines.

It is really only in the last 18 months that we have seen this primacy shift back to thinking about how soft power and public diplomacy may be better suited to winning the struggle for hearts and minds at the strategic level. However, as I said, the task of soft power and public diplomacy is even harder now than it was before the hard-power response in Afghanistan and Iraq.

On the internet the early rhetoric becomes not something one can express regret about, but rather 'facts' providing 'proof' of some neo-Conservative plan to dominate the world's oil and impose democracy on the Middle East.

Part of the problem lies with what politics in the West has become. And the way we do politics reflects the way we do information. True democracies are their own worst enemies in this regard, especially if counter or anti-terrorist legislation undermines civil liberties and cherished freedoms, which are such a central part of their value systems. As the Very Reverend Nathan Baxter, then Dean of the National Cathedral in Washington, DC, who had led the nation in a National Day of Prayer and Remembrance on 14 September 2001, warned: 'we must not become the evil we deplore'. He might have added that 'we' must not do things which play into the hands of the enemies of democracies.

There is no need to rehearse the mistakes that have undermined western credibility or why those mistakes were made. But it does need saying that strategic communications, to be effective, must be credible. In the struggle for moral authority, credibility is everything. It is not like virginity; it can be got back. Although this will take time, western information warriors need to understand in the meantime the dangers which, for example, short-termist politics – or even black propaganda campaigns such as that tried in 1991 – can have upon the long-term credibility of a value system that others really do want to emulate.

The West is certainly facing a formidable enemy in terms of the propaganda it conducts. Its response has been cumbersome and, it has to be said, misdirected. But the propaganda war is not yet lost. What the West can do in positive, non-warlike, actions can have a genuine impact. But a temporary success seems to be followed by yet another informational disaster. Nor can the struggle for hearts and minds be waged solely by the military.

How long will it take to win? In Islamic thought, a genuine grievance against a member of the Umma requires seven generations to avenge. A historian defines a generation as 25 years. So there you have it. If the West is to start winning today, making no more mistakes, it needs a grand strategy for the next 175 years. But what is really required is a switch in thinking. A counter-terrorist campaign might not take quite so long. Many more 'bad guys' will no doubt be killed, causing family members to join the quest for vengeance, thereby prolonging the war still further.

Perhaps it is finally time to stop thinking about the conflict in terms of it being a war at all. Even 'information war' seems unduly bellicose. This is not appeasement. That much misunderstood policy was originally about negotiating away legitimate grievances in order to avoid war. It was Hitler's determination to go to war regardless, together with Britain's refusal to

negotiate over illegitimate claims to incorporate non-Germans in Poland into the Third Reich, which prompted Neville Chamberlain's declaration of war on Germany. But appeasement became a word associated with cowardice in light of these events. It became part of a propaganda war.

So it is not just a matter of knowing the enemy. Indeed, since 9/11, when we were all Americans, the USA has become the enemy in the minds of many people around the world. What is really needed is the second part of Sun Tzu's axiom: to know yourself. To do that requires knowledge of history. After all, history, as we all know, is written by the victors.

### Biographical note

**Philip M. Taylor** is Professor of International Communications at the University of Leeds. For over 30 years he has been researching aspects of propaganda in its historical and contemporary forms, and he has published almost 80 articles and 12 books on the subject. His next book (co-authored with Paul Moorcraft) is *Shooting the Messenger: The Political Impact of War Reporting* and will be published by Potomac in 2008. He is also a Fellow of the Center on Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California and Adjunct Professor at the Universiti Teknologi Mara, Shah Alam, Malaysia.

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