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# Do You Need to Decisively Win the Information War?

## Managing Information on Operations in Iraq

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This article discusses the practical challenges of information operations in the counterinsurgency campaign in Iraq. It discusses practical aspects of the conduct of information operations in the Headquarters of Multinational Forces Iraq in 2004-05, the Iraqi approach to media during that time, and experiences from the second battle of Fallujah in 2004 and the Iraqi elections in 2005.

*As the West struggled for an operational counter to the Warsaw Pact's military power in the 1980s, hoping to rely on its superiority in airpower to balance its deficiency in ground forces, a cartoon was published showing two Russian generals reviewing a victory parade of Warsaw Pact troops and tanks through the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. One Russian general says to the other: "What a shame that we lost the air war!" Information might be the same. Can you successfully resolve conflict while not decisively winning the information war?*

The Iraq War is a worthy case study for information management in conflict for Australians. It was a modern urban counterinsurgency conducted "among the people"<sup>1</sup> and was under intense international scrutiny. It was deeply unpopular because of its contentious origins,<sup>2</sup> was conducted on a very large scale, involved many civilian and military casualties but, after six years, is finally showing signs of success. Our opponents<sup>3</sup> in Iraq were highly effective in the management of their information. Their overall strategy and tactics came very close to success in 2006 and 2007, and so are likely to be used as a template by our future adversaries.<sup>4</sup>

Like all other operations of war, information needs to be coordinated from the top down. Nations go to war and run information operations, not

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<sup>1</sup> A term made popular by General Sir Rupert Smith in his *The Utility of Force: The Art of Warfare in the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2005) to mark what he considered to be the most prominent characteristic of modern war.

<sup>2</sup> I maintain that the invasion, although contentious, was legal but perhaps not all that wise. The counterinsurgency that followed met the 'just war' criteria. Better lessons may be learned through difficult campaigns than through easy ones.

<sup>3</sup> Our opponents in Iraq were the al Qaeda terrorists, the Sunni insurgents, the Shia Militia (Sadrists) and criminals.

<sup>4</sup> Australia's current war in Afghanistan may be more like Iraq than like East Timor or the Solomon Islands.

militaries. Neither war nor information in war should be the unique province of only one part of government. The occupation of Iraq following the invasion in 2003 is a very good example of the initial clumsiness that we should expect from any nation waging an unexpected war and trying to coordinate any form of operation, especially information. This paper will not examine the use of information in military operations from the strategic level down but will look at it from the operational or theatre level.<sup>5</sup>

Emerging Australian doctrine<sup>6</sup> now uses the term Information Actions<sup>7</sup> to describe what has been called the information war or information operations. Information actions or operations in an information war inform and shape the perceptions, attitudes, behaviour and understanding of targeted population groups in order to reinforce actions within other lines of operation.<sup>8</sup> In the information war, we fight an enemy with words, symbols and ideas. These have the primary purpose of influencing the perceptions, and hence the will, attitudes, and, ultimately, the behaviour of target audiences. In a modern conflict fought among the people, an antagonist's messages will be principally directed at uncommitted, disadvantaged groups, political factions which may be persuaded, vulnerable elements of the opposing force and the media. A nation or coalition involved in a conflict must have the ability to accurately tell its story while discrediting the lies and propaganda of its adversaries. To do this, as doctrine states, in thousands of daily interactions, its personnel must support the mission by avoiding dissonant actions and seizing fleeting chances to advance informational objectives.

The importance of managing information was seen to be at least as great as any other form of operation in the complexity of Iraq, and at least as difficult. Its intensity and its breadth was new, at least to me. We were fighting the information war across the world—"operating 24/7 in the info battlespace"<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The account by Rajiv Chandrasekaran in *Imperial Life in the Emerald City—Inside Baghdad's Green Zone* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006) gives an accurate (but very cynical) account of the first year of the counter insurgency (2003), especially the information war (beginning p. 143) and reflects something of what I found in the second year (2004/05).

<sup>6</sup> Australian Army, 'Realising an Adaptive Army', Version 13, *Adaptive Campaigning 2009*, 24 October 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Information Actions refer to a collection of capabilities brought together and focused to contribute to three broad purposes essential to the success of modern war. "One of these is to win the psychological contest with real and potential adversaries. Another is the need to keep the trust and confidence of home and allied publics while gaining the confidence and support of local publics. The third is winning the strategic, operational, cognitive and technical 'Info Age Applications' contest. Each of these necessary, realistic and tangible aims relies on distinct and understandable logic and fields of competence". BG Huba Wass de Czege, *Rethinking "IO: Complex Operations in the Information Age*, unpublished manuscript, 2 June 2008.

<sup>8</sup> The lines of operations in the emerging doctrine are: Joint land combat; population protection, information actions; population support; and indigenous capacity building. These are similar to the lines of operations used in Iraq in 2004 which were: diplomatic/political, information, military, economic/reconstruction.

<sup>9</sup> Such commonly used jargon was regrettable but almost unavoidable. Despite being jargon, it was true enough. I addressed such information issues in detail in my recent book *Running the War in Iraq* (Pymble: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008).

and experienced the expected friction of any operation of war. What has transpired since I left Iraq in 2005 is that signs of success are appearing. The question then remains: How successful do you have to be in the information war?

## **Information Operations in Iraq**

I had been aware of the importance of information and the practical difficulties of its use during military operations in East Timor. It was not until I was deployed to Iraq as chief of operations for the predominantly US force for a year beginning in April 2004, that I gained first hand experience in its management. I was part of a military<sup>10</sup> that saw an important difference between 'information operations' and 'public affairs'.

Information operations in Iraq were seen as just another tool on the battlefield and information as just another weapon, whereas public affairs is the link between military commanders and the media. In Iraq, for organisational reasons in the Headquarters Multinational Force—Iraq (HQ MNF-I), we initially linked the two within a mixed civilian and military staff structure called Strategic Communications, or STRATCOM. But in doing this we had not fully addressed the important issue of trust.

Deception is a normal part of military operations<sup>11</sup> but it is a mistaken belief that it must be a part of every information operation. If it is, it can severely work to your disadvantage. A credibility problem arises if one minute we are expecting the trust of the media to convey our views, and the next we are using the media as a tool to achieve deception. This was such an important issue that the US Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff in September 2004 provided US commanders worldwide with guidance. He said:

Although both Public Affairs and Information Operations conduct planning, message development and media analysis, the efforts differ with respect to audience scope and intent and must remain separate. While organisations may be inclined to create physically integrated public affairs/information operations offices, such organisational constructs have the potential to compromise the Commander's credibility with the media and the public. Public Affairs officers should work directly for the commander.<sup>12</sup>

In response, the most senior public affairs officer answered directly to the commander, whereas STRATCOM, an integration of media savvy civilian and military officers with public affairs and information operations backgrounds, existed as a separate organisational construct in my operations staff, with the remit of offering our version of events and

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<sup>10</sup> My experience in Iraq was an American experience, I replaced a US officer and was replaced by a US officer.

<sup>11</sup> Deception operations are among the most difficult to conduct, but can be essential to military success. I address two deception operations in which I was involved in Molan, *Running the War in Iraq*.

<sup>12</sup> General Richard Myers, unclassified CJCS Minute, quoted widely in MNF-I briefings.

countering others' versions. My instructions from General Casey were crystal clear and simple—STRATCOM was never to lie to the media. Not knowing what to expect in the initial stages of taking up my job, I was quite comfortable with this direction, and I knew that to lie would ultimately be counter productive.<sup>13</sup>

For me to be effective as a manager of information in this conflict, the leadership of the coalition in Iraq needed to believe that what it was doing was both moral and legal, while at the same time recognising that such views were not likely to be accepted by the majority of the people that our information was trying to influence. We were not so naïve as to expect to be believed, but I do admit to being annoyed that many improbable views put forward by our enemies were so readily accepted. I merely asked for equality of scepticism. My advice would be: Be as suspicious of the so-called underdog's version of events as you are of our version of events.

#### **“WEAPONIZING THE TRUTH”**

As I took over my role of chief of operations, and was being briefed on my new duties, STRATCOM personnel explained to me that what they were doing was “weaponizing the truth”. This is a handy way to think of the information war because it encapsulates both the purpose of information operations (to be used as a tool or a weapon) and the basis of its use (truth<sup>14</sup>).

Casey emphasised that “information turns tactical success into strategic victory” in his regular briefings to new commanders. In September 2004, as he settled into his position as Commanding General, he commented: “STRATCOM is the most important thing we'll do for the next six months”.<sup>15</sup> I regarded this as a rhetorical flourish, not as a direction that I was to do information operations at the expense of everything else. I interpreted it to mean that once you have a good story to tell, a story based on the courage and morality of the soldiers, then it is very important to tell the world about it.

Operationalising the message is indeed very important, but there must be a message first. Information operations are not a substitute for legal and moral performance. The first milestone in our campaign plan was the January 2005 Iraqi election. All our military and non-military actions prior to January 2005, including the significant second battle of Fallujah in November 2004, led to the achievement of this political milestone. It was more

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<sup>13</sup> However, I did not see it as my duty to correct every bizarre idea or conjecture that was published by the media but at no stage did we lie. Indeed, in handling the media, we lived up to General Casey's prophecy at the time by making mistakes, being clumsy and uncoordinated, but we never lied. And most of the serious media in Iraq understood this.

<sup>14</sup> It almost goes without saying that it was our perception of the truth that was used.

<sup>15</sup> General Casey, unclassified PowerPoint presentation to new commanders. The statement was made in September 2004 but used in an unclassified STRATCOM briefing in February 2005.

important to establish election security, and then run a successful election, than it was to raise expectations about future success by telling a story based on wishful thinking, or worse still, hiding failure by lies. Only when you have the secure and successful election, can you frame the message. Information management may have been a very important element of what we were doing, and it was a method of turning tactical success into strategic victory, but actually establishing a secure environment was the most important thing that we did. Information operations then allowed us to realise the profit.

### **CULTURES**

What was apparent to us all in Iraq was how fundamentally different are the military and the media cultures. The media wants to report everything it can. The military tends to want as little reported as it can and what is reported is to be favourable. Military public affairs officers want to get the bad news out quickly while a military operator may want to delay it somewhat. Public affairs tells the bad, information operations is generally not interested in telling the bad. This created tensions within operations branch on occasions. We continually tried to focus ourselves by saying that the aim of STRATCOM in Iraq was to coordinate and disseminate the US military message in Iraq, not to invent it. Commanders and soldiers create the military message by what they do.

Like all other military and non-military functions that terminated on my desk as chief of operations, where I saw my contribution was in the coordination of information with all other lines of operations. Long term planning was not my specific responsibility but we achieved some measure of medium term coordination of information through the targeting process.<sup>16</sup> We then coordinated hour by hour operations by the close physical positioning of STRATCOM information staff with other key staff groups on the operations centre floor.<sup>17</sup> Then all we had to do was to force everyone to work together.

### **ASSESSING THE EFFECT**

One of the claimed advantages of the STRATCOM construct was the ability to assess the effect of our message. As chief of operations, I had confidence in measuring the output, not the effect of what we were saying. We tried hard to measure effect. Our assessment aims were listed as: Is the media doing something with it? Is the public reading it? Are the right people

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<sup>16</sup> Medium term (days or weeks) coordination occurred in the 'targeting board' of which I was chairman, meeting three times per week. In this process, all forms of power (military and non-military, from bombs to information to money to diplomacy) were focused on the insurgency and other players. Information was an essential element of the day to day business of the targeting board. This should not be taken to imply that we did it particularly well.

<sup>17</sup> The strategic operations centre was the node from which operations were run across Iraq at the theatre level. All functions required to run the war were represented in the one room with communications to all parts of the battlespace.

reading it? Is it having an effect on the right people? What does the information make them want to do?

Most of our assessment resources were not directly under our control and it was difficult to measure things that produced short term affects. We were probably asking the right question but my simplistic view was that the only thing that I could do was to ensure that the right message got out. If I could increase the output of the messages in quantity, timeliness and accuracy, then perhaps we would make some difference somewhere. Measurement was a bonus.

Champions of strategic communications in MNF-I said in internal briefings that towards the end of 2004, "we have turned the corner and we are now *winning the IO War*". I would never have gone that far. At the end of my time in Iraq, we reached an acceptable standard of performance on a few occasions. But we were never going to 'win' if winning is measured by the end effect on the Arab street or the United States or European media consumer, or even our own perceptions of our success from within the coalition. By the start of 2005, we were much, much better at getting a coordinated and consistent message out, but what happened to it once it got out was another issue.

## **Practical Aspects of Iraqi Information Operations**

In Iraq I was responsible to the commanding general for managing all operations that were conducted by the coalition and the Iraqis. This included battlefield manoeuvres of combat and support forces, all operations where military and civilians interacted (mainly the provision of essential services and elections), as well as 'strategic communications'. The positioning of these three functions under one officer at the highest level within the Iraqi theatre, only one step below the commanding general, is an expression of counterinsurgency theory. The coordination of all aspects of power to counter the insurgent and terrorist ideas is paramount. Information might have been central to everything that we did in Iraq, but it was a very difficult weapon to use effectively, and it must be coordinated.

### **HEADQUARTERS ORGANISATION**

To perform the operations task, my staff was notionally 315 strong, but normally only manned to 250. The importance of information was shown by the fact that seventy of these 250 personnel were directly allocated to the information function within my staff division, and many more (mostly linguists) supported us in monitoring and translation of non-English media, but were not counted in this total.

The location of the STRATCOM section was the subject of much discussion as we designed HQ MNF-I. Our view, based on counterinsurgent theory and most recent US experience from Bosnia, was that dissemination of

information was an 'operation' and so should be part of my operations branch. This was what initially occurred. We watched the headquarters function in the first few months after the occupation ended and although activity was high, we did not fully realise how high it was to become until the second battle of Fallujah (November 2004) and the Iraqi election (January 2005).

In these early months we found that although STRATCOM was in operations branch, the head of the section spent most of his time working directly to General Casey. After several months of observation and discussion, we agreed that form should follow function and that STRATCOM would move to a position directly under the US commanding general, to take effect immediately after the battle of Fallujah and before the elections, sometime in December 2004.

### **SPOKESPERSON**

The Coalition media output from Iraq in the year since the invasion (2003) was prolific, and to have a public face in the form of a spokesperson is important. The faces of the invasion and the occupation were Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt and his civilian counterpart, Dan Senor. I considered them effective but I was very much aware that their uncompromising attitude may have reinforced negative views in the minds of those who opposed the invasion. But no spokesman would have changed the set attitudes that most people had towards the invasion, and the war was in its initial clumsy stage, and so was hard to sell to anyone.

Kimmitt and Senor were effective as spokespeople because they were tough and aggressive. At that stage of the war, that was the attitude of the force. If you are going to have a spokesman for a military that is actually fighting a war, and your main target audience is the receptive parts of your own (US) population and in particular your own military, the spokesman can afford to be uncompromising. That may not apply in all operations. Both the nature of military operations and the spokesperson may need to change over time.

### **AUTONOMY AND THE MEDIA**

At the end of June 2004, the occupation ended and Iraq had its own government with a measure of autonomy. The emergence of the Allawi Government gave us an opportunity to put an Iraqi face on the conflict. General Casey directed that the coalition step back, and Senor and Kimmitt retired in favour of an Iraqi spokesperson.

We soon realised that the new arrangement was not working. We offered training, coaching and mentoring to the nominated Iraqi spokesman and his supporting staff and provided the information for them to consider putting out to the media, but the result was rarely satisfactory. The Iraqis were good when Prime Minister Allawi wanted to say something or his spokesman felt that he was on solid ground, but this was mainly on internal Iraqi political

issues. It was still just as important for the coalition (and the United States in particular) to get their points across on routine issues. Because of our support for the concept of Iraqi sovereignty, it was just not happening. We could see that we were in a media black hole and urged that the policy be changed many times. General Casey, however, was adamant about giving the Iraqis a fair run, even if it cost us in terms of reputation.

### **COORDINATED MESSAGE**

Two particular challenges faced us during the occupation and its immediate aftermath. The invasion of Iraq was contentious enough in countries that were part of the coalition, but 2004 and 2005 saw the re-emergence of a strident anti-Americanism across the world. At the same time, various Arab satellite channels were challenging what for many years had been a Western monopoly of the dissemination of information by satellite. To overcome this, our force not only needed to have a good message, but it also had to be very focused, coordinated and aggressive in its dissemination, and it had to be disseminated through means other than an erratic Iraqi spokesperson.

Despite the intensity of the challenge, there is no doubt that we got much better at putting out a coordinated message. The message had to be coordinated from Washington, then through CENTCOM and into the coalition force in Iraq, regardless of whether it originated in Iraq or in other capitals. It was a message designed for every spokesperson at each level to feed off. I often satisfied myself that the mechanics were working when I could see the same message coming from the lips of the US president in one report, and then from a Marine captain in Anbar Province. Each media liaison officer down the chain would be guided by our message from the top, would give the message a local flavour, and put it out at his or her level. This was not 'manipulation' and there were no lies. These were our messages hard won by blood and sacrifice—they were our truth. All we were doing was to make sure that they got out to all concerned in a timely and consistent manner.

At each daily briefing taken by all senior commanders across Iraq, the current approved message would come on the video conference screen to update everyone across the theatre. In most messages there are about five thoughts. Each thought was important. They were not designed to be read out but to just reside in a spokesperson's mind, and be offered at an appropriate time. These were not directions but guidance, and they did not change frequently. In an average interview, spokespeople at any level might perhaps use one message.

The message varied from the time of Abu Ghraib through the battle of Fallujah into the election. These messages were how we thought of the war at each stage. An example of a STRATCOM message, put out in early 2005 after the successful election but in that worrying time when the newly elected Iraqi government was having trouble establishing itself, is shown below:

The goal is to empower the Iraqi people to take the fight to the extremists, and to help Iraqi Security Forces take control of their own needs.

We recognize courage when we see it—and we see it in the Iraqi people, the success of the recent Iraqi elections clearly indicates that they are committed to restoring stability in Iraq.

Iraq's newly elected assembly will carry out the important work of establishing a government, providing security, enhancing basic services, and writing a democratic constitution.

Democratic nations grow in strength because they reward and respect the creative gifts of their people. Freedom is the direction of history, because freedom is the permanent hope of humanity.

Iraq is a vital front in the war on terror. We will succeed because the Iraqi people value their liberty and they are determined to write their own history.

Sometimes General Casey, in reviewing the day's messages, would suggest a change. Sometimes the staff would suggest a change and the next day a suggested form of words was put up at the briefing and Casey might approve it, amend it, or just emphasise the change to all commanders. But of course you cannot have a consistent message unless there is an overall campaign plan, strong direction from the top, a rational organisation, policy and guidelines for what we want to accomplish, and unless you are engaged in a principled undertaking which is being prosecuted morally and legally.

Read out of the context of the war, our messages can appear jingoistic to those not involved or committed to the struggle that faced us each day. It is easy to be cynical when you have no personal involvement, just as it is easy to be overly emotional in putting out messages from within a war when the brutality is everywhere. When the involvement is personal, individuals are forced to take a view on basic issues such as democracy, courage, sacrifice, freedom, good and evil. To most of us in Iraq, this was a struggle that each day required courage and sacrifice and was being conducted for high ideals such as democracy and freedom. With the hindsight of several years, and with the full knowledge of what has happened in Iraq since I left in 2005, I still believe these principles to be correct. The basis of any information operation is that you believe your own message. We had no trouble seeing who were evil in Iraq. Our message was 'our truth'.

## **Iraqi Approach to Media**

I was not aware of any part of the Iraqi media that was favourably disposed to the Coalition. Some were just a little less unfavourably disposed. Even those that we financed demanded the right to criticise. The coalition and the Iraqi Government took action against media that incited hatred, such as closing down extremist Shia newspapers and banning al Jazeera journalists. But many parts of the Iraqi media were also prepared to criticise the insurgency and the terrorists as well as the coalition.

## **THE INSURGENTS AND THE MEDIA**

The insurgency and the terrorists had their own media capability and their own ability to disseminate information. They produced DVDs either inside the country or outside, featuring the beheading of hostages and improvised explosive device attacks on US forces. If an attack on the Coalition was to be conducted for money, as so many were, often the condition for final payment was proof by video. These videos could then be used for recruiting purposes, and could be found as far afield as Indonesia. They were very effective. An interrogation report of a young foreign fighter who had been detained by us quoted him as saying: "I wish that I had not watched so much al Jazeera!"

The enemy's approach to media supportive of the coalition is of note. We had come to expect that our enemies would use fear and intimidation to halt any media coverage within Iraq which was not sufficiently supportive of them. Iraqi media critical of the insurgency were forced to live like we did, in defended fortresses in the middle of cities, because to do otherwise was to invite death. The terrorist media management techniques were straight forward. Some satellite stations were attacked by simply parking a car bomb in front of the building and exploding it. There were many acts of kidnapping and murder as part of our enemies' media management.<sup>18</sup> Once insurgent or terrorist attacks on the Iraqi media became intense, many left Iraq and broadcasted from remote locations.<sup>19</sup>

## **"IRAQ'S MOST WANTED"**

Towards the end of 2004 a phenomenon occurred that gained our attention. In Mosul, the local police chief had been invited to appear on local Iraqi television to tell about a murder that had occurred recently and to discuss the capture of the perpetrator. The policeman turned out to be a natural media performer and he was invited to come back the next week. When he did, he brought with him the detainee that had been captured by his policemen and who had confessed to the crime. The ex-terrorist recounted his story and told the viewers who had paid him, where he had come from and who had trained him, admitting to the crime on television. A week later, the policeman brought both a terrorist who had confessed to a murder for money and the family of the policeman who had been murdered by him. This was the ultimate in reality television and ratings started to climb. Soon more captured insurgents and terrorists were appearing and confessing, and the next of kin were demanding on screen to know why they did it. This was

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<sup>18</sup> In Mosul, a female presenter of a television program was kidnapped when she went to pick up her child after work, and she was then murdered in front of her child. The child was released several days later.

<sup>19</sup> The influence of some of the international networks in Iraq was often overstated. I remember seeing one assessment that indicated that even al Jazeera was watched by only 15 percent of the Iraqi people who had satellite receivers. Its influence was undeniably greater in other Arab countries.

such a hit that the concept spread to other cities and other stations, and became a hit all across Iraq. Translated from the Arabic, the title of the show was “In the Grip of the Law”. To my American friends, it was always “Iraq’s Most Wanted”. But it raised some uncomfortable issues.

The first question was: Could the Iraqis exploit those they detained in this manner? The answer was simple—yes they could. Those that we called terrorists or insurgents and that were detained by the coalition and kept in our prisons were treated as prisoners of war, regardless of their legal status. In accordance with the laws of armed conflict, we could not exploit them on television. Those detained by the Iraqis were criminals who were considered by the Iraqi Government to have broken civil law in Iraq, and could therefore be treated differently.

The second question concerned whether the confessions that some of these ‘reality show’ stars made were voluntary. Their appearance was such that soon there were allegations that they had been handled roughly in order to confess. The US Embassy was commissioned to investigate the show but was unable to prove that confessions were being beaten out of the prisoners.

Despite natural scepticism, their finding had credibility. The process of being captured is normally not pleasant. These prisoners were normally interviewed soon after being captured during a violent action that involved fighting, weapons and restraints. The consequence on all concerned was, at least, visible cuts and bruises. It was not possible for the US Embassy to prove that the confessions had been beaten out of them. Later eventualities, particularly concerning brutal torture by elements of the Iraqi police, fed our scepticism. But the Iraqi viewing public loved the show, especially those who had a relative murdered or kidnapped by the insurgents and the terrorists, and they were many.<sup>20</sup>

## **Information and Fallujah**

The second battle of Fallujah in November 2004 had particular challenges for us in terms of the information war. It is very difficult to sell the idea of an assault through a city of 300,000 people, even in Iraq. In esoteric military terms, I describe the second battle of Fallujah as a strategically defensive fight that used offensive tactics. We were attacking Fallujah to remove an insurgent/terrorist safehaven and to restore the status quo in order to conduct an election. And this action was conducted with the authority of the legitimate Iraqi government and under a UN mandate.<sup>21</sup> Our method of

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<sup>20</sup> I had one experience where the Iraqi military officer I was meeting apologised profusely that he had to rush off home to catch the show, because his sister was on it after her husband was kidnapped and then killed.

<sup>21</sup> This is described in more detail in Molan, *Running the War in Iraq*.

attack was decided by the fact that most of the non-combatants had left Fallujah prior to the attack.<sup>22</sup>

The above rationalisations are very important not just morally to justify our own actions and our soldiers sacrifice, but to establish our message in our own minds. Of course, it was inevitable that journalists, looking for an easy story to serve to their editors, trotted out the old headline that we destroyed Fallujah in order to save it.

Predicting this approach, some months earlier I had the imagery analysts count the number of structures in Fallujah, so that we at least had a start point. Comparing imagery over time, we were able to count the structures destroyed or severely damaged by direct strikes in the April fighting and in the lead-up to November. They came to fewer than ten percent. In my view, it was less than honest to say that we “destroyed the city”. But my perception of honesty was not the issue and the headlines screamed that Fallujah had been destroyed. Repeated often enough, its destruction became an accepted fact. Most people still believe that the city had been wantonly destroyed by US troops and that the bodies of women and children lay thick among the ruins.

It was one of our major aims that most of the civilians in Fallujah must have left before the assault, and we worked successfully to achieve this. Fallujah emptied out because of our warnings and the imminence of an attack, but mostly because of abuse by the Islamic extremists that had taken over the town. I admit that the damage that we caused was visually spectacular. A modern army had fought through the city, then cleared every building of insurgents and terrorists a second time, and many buildings a third time.

Casey had directed an information operation to be conducted to support the assault. On the heels of the assault troops were to be information teams, with the overall effort run by a US brigadier general. The aim was to increase the reactivity of information by by-passing the military chain of command. The information found on the ground in Fallujah by the information teams was passed directly to my headquarters and was offered immediately to the world. This was the most sophisticated information operation that I saw run in Iraq. Its product was a daily multi-media

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<sup>22</sup> Some public US estimates of the number of civilians still in Fallujah by the time of the attack were as high as 30,000. My estimate at the time was much lower, less than 10,000 in a city of whose pre-war population was 300,000, and which had approximately 3000 to 6000 combatants present when the fighting commenced. We could have made more of the evacuation of the city by its population, and we were criticised by the Marines later for not doing so. My memory is that we were just not sure how many civilians were still in Fallujah until after the battle. To have proclaimed that the city had been generally evacuated, and then have to explain the presence of thousands of dead or alive civilians, would have been dangerous for all. We made all humanitarian support preparations on the basis that the majority of the population was still present, but we took risks on the tactics that we used because we suspected that most had gone.

summary of the actions of our enemies in Fallujah, to complement the reports of the sixty or so embedded journalists recording the actions of the assaulting troops. The reports, using videos and stills with text, covered the roadside bomb and car bomb factories, the extent of the enemies preparedness, chemical weapon 'cookbooks', the number and type of weapon caches, the 'slaughter houses' (some with kidnapped hostages among bloodstained walls and torture instruments—one shackled but still alive), the National Islamic Resistance Operations Centre, complete with laptops containing evidence of executions on them, and locations for the entry of foreign fighters into Iraq.

We disseminated this information very efficiently but no one really cared. Many commentators, especially in Europe and the United States, had made up their minds and were not going to pay any attention to any source that could be linked to the United States. Most of the Arab networks no longer had stringers with the insurgent forces in Fallujah, and so many just made up stories that fitted with their audiences preconceptions.<sup>23</sup> Some of these stories leaked into mainstream western networks and so were seen by audiences in the west as coming from trustworthy sources.

Ironically, one of our main defences against such ridiculous stories were the embedded journalists, because they could see what was occurring and generally reported it accurately. I was aware that the western media would scrutinise and broadcast the November battle live to millions in the United States and around the world. Experts would second-guess and closely examine everything we did. My memory tells me there were about sixty media outlets represented in the assault force by about ninety journalists and cameramen. We had given no direction on this, and the size of the media contingent surprised us when the Marines told us what they had organised. It certainly surprised General Casey that the Marines, on their own initiative, had put an embedded media crew into just about every assault company.

Our surprise did not relate to having something to hide. Our concern was that at some stage the media would get something wrong, not necessarily through malevolence but through honest error. More media could mean more unhelpful errors. But the US Marine Corps is strong on its image, and their embedded reporters were normally better than the 'blow-ins' who turned up just before major battles or events. They had a greater chance of understanding what the soldiers were trying to do by living with them and sharing the dangers.

To prepare for propaganda attacks from a hostile media, General Casey gave me one very important task. He directed me in no uncertain terms to

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<sup>23</sup> Examples are: wholesale destruction of mosques and hospitals, indiscriminate area bombing, desertion by US servicemen, use of chemical weapons, the loss of many helicopters, bodies of women and children littering the streets, execution of captives.

ensure that there was no more than a one-hour turnaround between an allegation appearing in the media and our response being fired back. An example might have been a headline saying, "Coalition fires on mosque in Fallujah". Within an hour, I would have to find out where the mosque was, when the event happened, if the firing occurred and, if it did happen, why. We were not to deny anything immediately, or investigate everything in such detail that we would be accurately replying five days later, far too late for the media cycle.

It was my responsibility, then, to find the facts behind allegations and find them quickly. This sounds straightforward enough until you remember that those who had the answers were in Fallujah fighting for their lives. In the military, for very good reasons, we try always to do things through the chain of command. That is, we do not go directly to anyone's subordinates, but go through their boss unless there is a very good reason. This was one of only a few occasions when I felt justified in ignoring the chain of command and reaching well down into the ranks. I would find it very difficult to convince those at the sharp end that a story in the media was as important as the physical fight that they were in, but I had a one-hour deadline and it was critical to meet it.<sup>24</sup>

Having agreed to the proposal to place STRATCOM directly under the US commanding general proposal prior to the intensity of operations related to Fallujah, my experience during the battle changed my mind. During that battle, when it was even more critical to synchronise information with the other combat and non-combat operations being conducted, my view was (and remains) that strategic communications should remain under Operations in any headquarters. However, our agreed position had already been conveyed to the Commanding General, and in the manner of such things, I was then unable to change it back. STRATCOM moved out from under Operations to a direct relationship with General Casey just before the first Iraqi elections.

It took many months for there to be any improvement in the media management by the Iraqi Government. By the second Battle of Fallujah in November 2004, it was marginally better in the dissemination of the written word, but we still did not have a regular spokesperson at the theatre level. I felt that the coalition needed a spokesperson in Iraq for coalition issues to complement the Iraqis, especially when the coalition was being accused of evil deeds. The United States needed a spokesman in Iraq because it was in the US interests to convey its own message, a message sometimes distinct from the coalition or Iraqi messages.

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<sup>24</sup> One exception was the shooting of a wounded enemy by a Marine, which was filmed by a journalist. We could not confirm it within the hour, and did not know of the film for some time. Rather than argue the point, the Marines removed the soldier from his unit and commenced a formal investigation. This was what was then announced.

Abu Assad Dulaimy, spokesman for the insurgency in Fallujah in December 2004, was supposed to have said that the insurgency “lost the media battle”. This was used by advocates to show our information success—if the enemy said that we won, then it must be true. In my view, the enemy lost the battle of Fallujah as they lost most tactical actions in the second year of the war—because of our soldiers’ courage. We were just much better at telling our story about how we won. If that is media victory, then so be it. Media victories are only as good as the story that you have to tell, and as commanders and soldiers create the story at the cost of real lives, we have an overwhelming obligation to tell it effectively.

### **First Iraqi Elections**

By the time of the Iraqi election in January 2005, the first of our major milestones, I was fully aware of both the importance and the difficulty in moving information effectively. We had improved greatly but I was still dissatisfied with our slow information movement in an age when the media worked directly from an incident site via satellite to the worlds’ living rooms. Since Fallujah, we had been regularly turning information around within General Casey’s one-hour deadline. But on election day, if media reports were sensationalised, the spread of bad or inaccurate news could keep Iraqis at home and cause the election to fail. We had to be ready to counter attack with information at a higher level of effectiveness than even Fallujah.

To overcome the normal inertia in our military systems, I decided to impose ‘positive reporting’. In the past, our subordinates reported when they had something to say. For the elections, I decreed that all levels would send situation reports on the hour, every hour, directly to me at the strategic level, whether they had something to say or not. The reports were to be ‘sound bite’ reports mentioning positive and negative issues, and if we wanted more, then we would come back down and ask. But everyone had to report, on the hour every hour, on election day.

When I proposed this, you would have thought I was asking our subordinate organisations to sell their children. The controversy went up and down the chain of command for some days, not from the commanders but from their staffs. I had directed a rehearsal of the reporting system several days before the election, which predictably failed. I raised this to commander level, starting with Casey and then contacting each of the key commanders across the country, impressing on each the importance of the reporting in “converting tactical success to strategic victory”. We tried it again and the response was better; then we did a third rehearsal and it worked well enough. The reluctance of our subordinate formation reflected the fact that the closer soldiers get to the fighting, the less interested they are in the information war. But information flow, on this of all days, was no afterthought. It stood right in the centre of our strategy. On election day, it worked. Even the BBC said something good about Iraq!

## Conclusion

Fighting with information requires less courage than close physical combat, but has an importance all of its own. I believe the dictum that “information turns tactical success into strategic success” is correct. I could see that there was little point in winning the tactical fight at great sacrifice if no-one knows, cares or believes. But we who were on the ground did not fight the insurgency in Iraq with the expectation that the world would applaud our effort. In Iraq I could see true evil in our enemies, and I believed that we were in Iraq and prosecuting the counter-insurgency for high ideals—the only basis for effective information management. The real strength of our message was our own beliefs and the achievements of our soldiers.

Signs of success are now visible in Iraq and the final agreement on the withdrawal of US troops has taken place. The new president may even increase the pace of withdrawal. There is still a place for information operations related to our involvement in Iraq because many are now saying that the withdrawal of US troops represents the last defeat of the United States, rather than a significant achievement. The way the Iraq war started, and the world-wide mindset that this created, was a major challenge for managers of information. The best information operations in the history of warfare would not have changed the minds of most cable networks and media outlets in the United States and Europe, and nothing was going to change how the Arab street saw our actions.

But it would appear that we have been successful in Iraq, despite the contested moral high ground of the invasion, and we did this generally without convincing the sceptics. The information war is important, at times critical, but of greater importance is the legality and morality of the mission and how you carry it out. Information operations may not always be successful, in fact, they may rarely be successful. But they must be conducted if for no other reason than to establish a record. If they are successful, and you can measure this success, it is a bonus. If they are not, in certain circumstances it is still possible to win.

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