Defeat of the insurgency and terrorism in Iraq requires not only a military approach but also a political component. Although the "surge" may stabilize parts of Iraq and reduce the level of violence while the additional troops remain in place, long-term stability requires a more holistic approach.

Frank Kitson, a retired British military officer whose writings influenced British operations in Northern Ireland, argues that the "main characteristic that distinguishes campaigns of insurgency from other forms of war is that they are primarily concerned with the struggle for men's minds."[1] To defeat the insurgency, coalition forces must persuade the Iraqi population to reject extremism and deny safe haven to those fighting the new Iraqi political order. This will require dialogue, inducements, and the proportionate use of force to win the battle for "hearts and minds."

Effective engagement with key segments of the Iraqi population requires, in turn, a comprehensive information operations campaign. To date, it is this component that is most lacking in coalition strategy. The coalition has failed to counter enemy propaganda either by responding rapidly with effective counter messages or by proactively challenging the messages, methods, and ideology that the insurgents and extremists promote and exploit.

While terminology may vary—some officials refer to information operations as strategic communications, influence operations, psychological operations, perception management, or just propaganda—the intent to influence the hearts and minds of target audiences through the effective use of information remains constant.

In Iraq, while the coalition fumbles its information operations, the insurgents and militia groups are adept at releasing timely messages to undermine support for the Iraqi government and bolster their own perceived potency. They are quick to exploit coalition failures and excesses; they respond rapidly to defend their own actions, often by shifting blame to the authorities; and they hijack coalition successes to argue that change only occurs as a result of their violence. The slow speed of the U.S. military's clearance process—typically it takes three to five days to approve even a simple information operations product such as a leaflet or billboard—creates an information vacuum that Iraqis fill with conspiracy theories and gossip often reflecting the exaggerations or outright lies of insurgents and extremists.
Adversary Capabilities

Insurgent capabilities are advanced. Violence is their most effective propaganda tool. This is not a new strategy. For example, Johann Most, a nineteenth-century German pamphleteer, described terrorism as "propaganda of the deed."[2] In Iraq, violence intimidates the uncommitted, undermines confidence in the authorities, demonstrates potency, and can provoke a disproportionate military response from both the Iraqi authorities and the coalition. For example, in response to a suicide attack or ambush, coalition forces too often respond with disproportionate force, which results in the death of innocent bystanders. The insurgents have also used violence, such as the 2006 bombing of the Askari mosque in Samarra in order to fan the flames of sectarian conflict. Both Sunni and Shi'i groups use violence to silence critics, creating an information vacuum that they fill.

Recognizing that terrorists use violence to psychological affect, the insurgents in Iraq have adopted both an attritional and strategic approach to its application. Improvised explosive devices (IED), small ambushes, snipers, and mortar and rocket attacks inflict a steady stream of casualties that, while insignificant to coalition combat effectiveness, nevertheless, sap the confidence and morale of both Iraqi society and the coalition domestic publics. The insurgents have a strategy. They use rapid movement to keep the coalition off-balance and stage attacks to coincide with breaking events, prominent visits, or external political timetables. For example, attacks increased in the months of September and October in the U.S. election years 2004 and 2006 but fell from September to October 2005, an off-year in the U.S. election cycle.[3] More precisely, on June 13, 2007, Al-Qaeda in Iraq attacked the Samarra mosque a second time (the first was on February 22, 2006), to divert attention from reports of increased cooperation between Sunni tribes and the coalition. Less than two weeks later, on June 25, 2007, a terrorist bombed the lobby of the Mansour Hotel, killing a number of Sunni and Shi'i tribal leaders discussing reconciliation.

When insurgents, terrorists, and militiamen do attack, they use multimedia to amplify their actions and convey sophisticated messages to multiple audiences. Their strategy is broad; they employ low technology strategies to permeate their themes down to the grassroots and exploit mosques both to convey their point to the faithful and to suggest religious legitimacy. Extremist graffiti provides a constant reminder of their presence. In Baghdad and Fallujah, for example, slogans scrawled on walls and houses extol the virtues of various groups and leaders and condemn the Iraqi government and/or coalition while, in Kirkuk, militiamen scrawl slogans extolling Shi'i leader Muqtada al-Sadr on building walls in contested neighborhoods.

Messaging can be diverse. Insurgents and militiamen also utilize the arts, including paintings, poetry, and songwriting, and post flyers, distribute leaflets, author articles, and even publish their own newspapers and magazines.

The insurgents, terrorists, and militiamen are also proficient in high technology messaging. They use SMS text messaging and Iraq's telephone system to intimidate Iraqis and even coalition members. They produce CDs and DVDs, which they distribute widely within communities that U.S. forces and the Iraqi government also seek to influence. To show their prowess, the insurgents often distribute sophisticated videos of an attack on coalition troops within hours of the operation. The Sunni insurgents even have their own television station, Al-Zawraa, which while banned by the Iraqi government, still broadcasts from Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan.[4] even as coalition pressure has forced it to switch satellite hosts
The insurgents, terrorists, and militiamen are adept at the art of manipulation. They need not rely only upon their own terrestrial and satellite stations but can also use foreign journalists and media outlets to ensure that their messages and actions are conveyed to the widest possible audience. By providing Western journalists with access to insurgent leaders and bomb makers, they ensure their message reaches the U.S. and British heartland. They know that videos of atrocities and statements sent to Arabic satellite stations such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya will often be rebroadcast, at least in part, by Western television stations such as CNN or the BBC.

Perhaps the insurgents' and militias' most important tool, though, is the Internet. It provides not only a mass audience but also enables a quick response to Iraqi government and coalition arguments. Both the Islamic Front for Iraqi Resistance and Ansar al-Sunna, two of the largest and most deadly Sunni insurgent or terrorist groups, for example, maintain websites, which reappear in new forms almost as rapidly as the coalition or Iraqi government can shut them down. The videos these websites carry cascade across the Internet and appear quickly on mainstream websites such as LiveVideo.com and YouTube.com.

Here, U.S. authorities handicap themselves. U.S. military lawyers fear "blowback" to U.S. domestic audiences, which they interpret as a violation of the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948, which prohibited domestic distribution of propaganda meant for foreign audiences. As a result, U.S. commanders forbid coalition authorities to openly engage on the Internet. This decision has ceded this key tool to the Iraqi insurgents. The insurgents now provide, over the Internet, self-starter kits to transform any disaffected Muslim youth, be he in Ramadi, Rabat or Rochester, into an effective propagandist. Such mass mobilization allows the insurgents to overwhelm at minimal cost the expensive, pedestrian, and ineffective strategic advertising campaigns of the coalition. For example, production of a DVD highlighting insurgent attacks on U.S. troops may cost less than US$100 to make using equipment that costs less than $1,000. Maintaining an Internet bulletin board with postings picked up by Al-Jazeera television and then, perhaps, CNN, may cost as little as $1,500 and certainly no more than $10,000. In contrast, the value of the U.S. military's information contracts exceeds $250,000,000 per year, with only a fraction of the effectiveness of their adversaries.

While the impact of insurgent propaganda is obvious, the coalition has yet to monitor enemy messages systematically at the grass roots level. There are no standing orders or central database to record enemy graffiti, for example. Absent such monitoring, any coalition attempt to seize information momentum falls short.

Coalition Information Operations

Coalition information operations are a shadow of their opponents. While the coalition has spent a hundred million dollars on advertising in Iraq, the strategy of re-awarding huge contracts to advertising firms who spend tens of millions of dollars on nationally-broadcast radio and television commercials but who cannot demonstrate effective audience penetration is questionable. Local Iraqi firms have designed the most effective commercials at a relatively low cost. For example, one commercial showing the impact of an improvised explosive device on an Iraqi family cost only $15,000 to make. However, most coalition advertisements, perhaps one hundred times more costly, lack resonance and relevance among ordinary Iraqis, even as they saturate the airwaves.
Some coalition advertisements even do more harm than good. For example, in an attempt to "shock" Iraqi viewers into informing on the insurgents, the coalition has used, at great expense, international advertising agencies to produce commercials that use bullet-time cinematography reminiscent of the movie The Matrix that are meant to convey the horror of a suicide bombing. However, the firm, adhering to Western perceptions, sanitized its product to avoid any portrayal of the bloody and devastating realities of such an attack. The result may have looked cool to U.S. military officials and diplomats, but it had little if any impact upon ordinary Iraqis who are too acquainted with the realities of a bombing's immediate aftermath. Rather than serve its purpose, it became the subject of derision and evidence for Iraqis of the alienation of U.S. authorities.

Other media strategies have resulted in only limited success. The coalition sought to induce Iraqi journalists to provide balanced reporting and commentaries. Contrary to the assumption of some Western commentators, no planted stories were untruthful. Rather, in a media environment in which forces opposed to the new Iraqi government saturated media with cash, payments to journalists became necessary to even the playing field. Nevertheless, the program was poorly executed. The coalition also distributed millions of leaflets, displayed hundreds of billboards, and sent out hundreds of thousands of text messages. It has deployed loudspeakers on armored Humvees throughout Iraq and established radio stations, but saturation does not correlate to effectiveness.

The insurgents still maintain the information initiative. Part of the problem lies in deteriorating security and the failure of the coalition or Iraqi government to restore essential services and to provide a minimum acceptable level of security for ordinary Iraqis. Messaging about a better life loses effect when sewage remains in the streets, electricity is only available six or seven hours per day, and life is cheap. However, it would be irresponsible to exculpate coalition information operations simply because the situation makes their job difficult. They have neither won hearts and minds nor have they kept Iraqis on the side of the coalition and the Iraqi government. Shortcomings in the coalition influence strategy include a lack of central coordination; campaigns focused too much on abstract concepts without relevance for ordinary Iraqis; undue focus on generic audiences; a cumbersome approval process prior to product release; a shortage of qualified personnel; failure to utilize and manage private contractors; metrics focused on performance rather than effectiveness; failure to develop local spokesmen; and a failure to convince the U.S. public about the importance of information operations.

**Poor Process**

The failure to coordinate the information campaign has undercut the coalition's mission. There is an interagency process meant to coordinate the coalition's information campaign but, in reality, this becomes a forum for information sharing rather than a mechanism for command and control.

The key to a successful information campaign is to develop an overarching campaign theme with a limited number of culturally relevant messages projected to all contested audiences. A single command authority should guide and supervise all information and psychological operations and public affairs staff. In Iraq, however, competing organizations located in different headquarters and combatant commands and answering to different departments and agencies in the U.S. government each have a finger in the information operations pie. These organizations often failed to coordinate. In some cases, separate groups answering to various organizations and commands within the Defense Department and the
State Department each sought to contract the same firms, resulting in duplication of effort and waste. Often, these competing organizations would also saturate the airwaves and print media but confuse the Iraqi audience with conflicting messages and ever changing themes.

Here, the coalition handicaps itself with its own approval process. Senior officials take days if not weeks to clear information operations products, even excellent products developed by Iraqis for their own ethnic groups. To approve an advertisement aimed at the readers of a newspaper with a circulation of less than 50,000—a smaller circulation, for comparison, than the local newspapers in U.S. cities like Lubbock, Texas, and Fargo, North Dakota—numerous information and psychological operation staffs, lawyers, and senior officers up to the rank of three-star generals must approve the text. Imagery of critical events filmed by the coalition's electronic news gathering agents and sent to coalition headquarters in close to real time—which could be used to highlight insurgent atrocities more effectively than a million dollar commercial—take days to win approval, by which time, the window of opportunity is lost. Unless the approval process is overhauled so that release approval takes only hours or, better yet, minutes, the coalition will lose the battle for the hearts and minds of Iraqis. The insurgents do not encumber themselves in the same way. Here, the model of major U.S. satellite networks might be adopted. In these 24-hour media operations, reporters, editors, and producers follow agreed upon operating procedures pre-approved by their own internal legal counsel in order to clear material for immediate release. Where some doubt exists regarding, for example, the veracity of a report, the sensitivity of an issue, or a potentially libelous statement, specialist lawyers are on call to give immediate guidance. The system works, and breaking news is aired rapidly. If the coalition adopted similar procedures, it could direct messaging and the debate, rather than only respond to insurgent and terrorist narratives.

The coalition also handicaps itself by failing to gauge the competency of those tasked to execute the coalition's information operations campaign. While psychological operations officers tend to be well trained, many information operations and public affairs officers are seconded from other branches of service and have not received much if anything beyond the military's basic introductory courses. Shortfalls of qualified personnel are compounded by the constant rotation of key personnel, often removing those experienced through "on the job" training with a new group of officers forced to reinvent the wheel.

Coalition efforts to utilize the private sector have faired little better. The U.S. government often allows contractors to provide inadequate services. The government's requests for proposals (RFPs), the basic job descriptions which private companies bid to fill, are often poorly written and reflect a lack of understanding of the operational requirements of commanders, the complexities of the information operation mission, and the abilities of the private sector. Government personnel adjudicating the selection process often lack the technical knowledge and business experience necessary to determine if a contractor's proposal is achievable and whether its claims regarding capabilities are genuine. No commercial organization would award a contract worth tens of millions of dollar without basic due diligence, but the coalition does.

The lowest bid selection process compounds the problem. Companies underbid their competitors to secure new contracts even though they have neither the resources nor competencies to implement their programs. This either leads to cost cutting or failure to complete, in either case, resulting in substandard work or failure. In wartime, one of the worst crimes a commercial enterprise can commit is...
to attempt to secure profit above declared margin by shortchanging funds or personnel committed to the execution of the conflict. Under the present system, however, these companies still remain at a competitive advantage. Many contractors fail to provide promised services or to achieve desired impact, but their poor performance is rarely challenged or recorded. As a result, because the government requires evidence of past performance in the bidding contract, poorly performing outfits continue to trump new companies that may have fresh ideas and experienced personnel but have yet to work for the government or military.

If the coalition is to reverse its failing information operations, it should prioritize effectiveness over performance. Too often, the U.S. military measures contractor performance in ways irrelevant to the mission: for example, counting the number of commercials aired on Iraqi television or billboards erected rather than gauging the effectiveness of such advertisements. Performance-based indicators confirm only that a message has been seen or heard, not its impact. There has been some success, but this is most often achieved at the battalion level by psychological operations and information operations subunits. These units have undertaken grassroots campaigns using loudspeakers, meetings, leaflets, billboards, comics, and newspaper placements promoting issues that matter to the people in their area of operation.

Abstract Messaging

Democracy promotion, or at least its rhetorical support, is the cornerstone of the Bush doctrine. Too often, the coalition has used democracy promotion, citizenship, legitimacy of the Iraqi security forces, or demonization of the insurgents as their major themes. None of these, however, have direct relevance for most Iraqis. They are, therefore, unlikely to change their attitudes, let alone behavior. On an individual level, Iraqis care about personal security, jobs, and utilities. More broadly, they are influenced by the political positions of their ethnic groups, tribes, or clans and become engaged in discussions of the actions or inactions—rather than the legitimacy—of the Iraqi government, coalition, or insurgents. Public campaigns promoting a utopian vision have little resonance when Iraqis face the reality of a divided country on the verge of civil war, if not collapse.

Compounding this shortcoming is coalition political correctness. Terms deemed proper in Western capitals are often the subject of derision, delude the coalition’s own troops, and hand propaganda victories to our adversaries. The coalition, for example, labels insurgents as anti-Iraqi forces. But, most Iraqis do not consider the insurgents to be anti-Iraq; indeed, many Iraqis consider the coalition itself to be anti-Iraqi. Terminology matters. Until 2006, the coalition referred to Iraqi men as MAMs, military aged males, a category of suspicion. This both angered Iraqis and desensitized coalition troops to the fact that not all young Iraqi men are insurgents. Both coalition officials and the troops still refer to the insurgents as jihadists or the muj (short for mujahideen). Both terms backfire for, while negative in the Western context, many religious Iraqis consider the terms to bestow a dignity and religious legitimacy. Alternatively, reference to all Iraqis as hajjis—as U.S. troops once referred to Vietnamese as gooks—backfires by treating an important religious term in a derogatory way. Even if some Iraqis did not once care, insurgents point to such examples to build a wedge between the coalition and local society.

The key to success with Iraqis is similar to the maxim of Western political campaign managers: Think strategically but act locally. Instead, the coalition undercuts its information campaigns by relying overly on a generic Iraqi audience that does not
exist outside the coalition imagination. The assumption that all Iraqis are broadly similar is incorrect. There are no messages or emotional appeals that resonate across society. Overarching, national-level campaigns are ineffective except when executed for informational purposes, for example, in advance of an election.

For the same reasons, campaigns targeting each of the three main ethnic or sectarian groups will fail to resonate with all their members. There are too many intra-group divisions, whether tribal, political, or ideological. Shi'i supporters of the Badr Organization, the armed wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, do not internalize the same messages as members of Shi'i demagogue Muqtada al-Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi (Mahdi Army). Even in the relative peace and stability of Iraqi Kurdistan, the unity between the two dominant parties—Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan—is ephemeral.

The challenge of developing focused "grass roots" campaigns is a difficult one. The dominance of national television and international satellite stations makes it difficult to direct precise messages to specific audiences. For example, developing an information campaign intended to undermine Sunni support for Al-Qaeda must vary among tribes and locales because the level of support among the Sunni main tribes varies from active involvement to violent opposition. No single theme will appeal to or resonate with all Sunnis. National television advertising, consequently, is not an ideal medium to convey nuanced messaging to multiple audiences.

To develop effective programming, the coalition's cultural comprehension must also include awareness of audience preferences. Such knowledge mandates extensive social science and attitudinal research not available consistently to coalition planners. The coalition should refocus its efforts to develop nuanced "grass roots" campaigns, reinforced by regional and only limited national messaging. Unfortunately, the Multi-National Forces-Iraq, the major contracting authority for information operations, appears unwilling to adjust. In June 2007, it re-awarded a $199 million per year contract to Bell Pottinger, an international advertising company that for three years has been unable to show traction in the war of ideas. The company will pay over $100 million to Arab satellite TV stations to air 30- and 60-second commercials, most of which fail to resonate with Iraqis. Such paid advertisements will air on the same stations that air for free the messages and images of the enemies of the Iraqi government and the coalition.

Lack of Iraqi spokesmen undercuts the effectiveness of coalition information operations as well. Efforts to recruit, train, and support Iraqi spokesmen have been an abject failure. As a result, U.S. military public affairs officers continue to be the public face of the coalition in Iraq, speaking in English and hoping that Iraqis understand and are not influenced by misleading Arabic translations of their messages. There is no substitute for Iraqis thinking and speaking in Arabic and using terminology and narratives understood by Iraqis.

Nor should the U.S. military limit Iraqi spokesmen to the Iraqi audience. While senior military officers focus their briefings on the U.S. and international media, Iraqis see these briefings, translated and rebroadcast by such outlets as Al-Jazeera or the Lebanon Broadcasting Corporation. Sometimes, Arabic satellite stations edit and clip with hostile intent.

Making the Case for Information Operations

The final failure in the war of ideas is the U.S. government's inability to win domestic support to use information as a weapon. The November 2005 press
controversy over payment to Iraqi journalists[d] demonstrated the failure to make a compelling case to engage in counter-propaganda in Iraq and elsewhere. It is ironic that the largely left-leaning American press and some politicians are more comfortable advocating the use of violence than reasoned arguments and inducements to defeat an adversary.

Washington should make a compelling case to the American public that information operations are indispensable tools. Whether the public agrees or disagrees with the Iraq war, winning the hearts and minds of the Iraqi public is vital to achieving peace. A successful strategy will not only counter enemy propaganda but also seize and hold the information initiative. First, the U.S. administration and all its component departments and agencies should recognize that coalition forces are engaged in an influence war in which Washington should deploy in a coordinated manner all available levers of soft and hard power. These include coercive force and a combined military and civilian effort to restore stability and essential services, leading to a perceptible rise in standards of living. While the establishment of an effective and representative government, even at the expense of democratic ideals, will have far greater impact on Iraqi attitudes than any information campaign, this cannot occur without the establishment of information dominance.

Coalition counterpropaganda can be used to explain motives and actions, set expectations and, when necessary, apologize for missteps. It can be used to restore and bolster morale, hope, and pride. And most importantly, it must be used to denigrate adversaries and counter their words and deeds.

To restore coalition dominance, the U.S. military must create a single command authority to command and control the information operations effort at the strategic level and to provide the direction and command guidance to all subordinate levels. This requires cessation of the needless infighting between the State Department, CIA, and Pentagon; there must also be an end to the corollary squabbling between the military's information operations, psychological operations, and public affairs officers.

The coalition should begin a comprehensive propaganda monitoring and collection effort to capture all enemy propaganda, whether DVDs, leaflets, sermons, or gossip. Without such a single, integrated database, psychological and information specialists cannot determine the intended audience, the propagandists' desired effect, or their success in reaching it. They need such a database to establish the audiences reached; insights into the adversaries' perceptions, capabilities, vulnerabilities, and intent; the intentional or unintentional inaccuracies, inconsistencies, and deceits in adversary messaging, and effective counterarguments.

Insurgent and terrorist attacks should be assessed through a similar prism to determine the desired psychological effects and impact. Such analysis is vital because the physical target of attack is not always the actual target. For example, the two attacks on the Samarra mosque[e] were not aimed at the building or the worshippers who use it but rather at inflaming sectarian conflict. Only with this knowledge and a detailed understanding of the human terrain is it possible to develop a counter-propaganda campaign effective in both message and timing.

Such a dialogue should extol the virtues of the Iraqi government and the coalition and bolster morale shaken by three years of violence while also highlighting the insurgency's vices. It should also challenge enemy propaganda. The coalition has
yet to assemble the capabilities, skills, and resources to execute such a campaign, nor has it prepared the political and public will to do so. The army's new counterinsurgency doctrine issued by General David Petraeus, the U.S. Army senior commander in Iraq, states that, "The IO [Information Operations] Logical Line of Operation (LLO) may often be the decisive LLO. By shaping the information environment, IO also makes significant contributions to setting conditions for the success of all other LLOs."[13] And yet, information operations still do not have the full support of many senior officials and commanders. While the political and military officials struggle to overcome these critical challenges, insurgents, militias, and terrorists continue to erode Iraqi support for a new order. The initiative in the information war in Iraq has already been lost. The same problems now replicate in Afghanistan and other battlefields in the global war on terrorism. Whether the United States, NATO, and other coalition countries will learn lessons from Iraq remains an open question.

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[8] This figure is based on U.S government contracts awarded since January 2007, including a $199 million contract to the British public relations company Bell Pottinger and one for $26 million to Leone Industries for information operations services.
[9] In 2006, the coalition awarded contracts to various U.S. and British strategic communications and public relations companies including Bell Pottinger, Lincoln Group, SY Coleman, and SOSi. The awards which totaled several hundred million dollars varied in size from $5-7 million to Lincoln Group for information operations and polling management services to well over $15 million for national advertising campaigns executed by Bell Pottinger to promote coalition themes including the concept of Iraqi citizenship.
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