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COMMENTARY

War in the Information Age

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 23, 2006 — Our nation is engaged in what promises to be a long struggle in the global war on terror. In this war, some of the most critical battles may not be in the mountains of Afghanistan or the streets of Iraq but in newsrooms in New York, London, Cairo and elsewhere.

Our enemies have skillfully adapted to fighting wars in today's media age, but for the most part we — our government, the media or our society in general — have not.

Consider that violent extremists have established "media relations committees" and have proved to be highly successful at manipulating opinion elites. They plan and design their headline-grabbing attacks using every means of communication to break the collective will of free people.

Our government is only beginning to adapt its operations for the 21st century. For the most part, it still functions as a five-and-dime store in an EBay world.

I have just returned from Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco. In Tunis, the largest newspaper has a circulation of roughly 50,000 — in a country of about 10 million people. But even in the poorest neighborhoods you can see satellite dishes on nearly every balcony or rooftop.

Regrettably, many of the TV news channels being watched using these dishes are extremely hostile to the West. The growing number of media outlets in many parts of the world still have relatively immature standards and practices that too often serve to inflame and distort rather than to explain and inform. Al Qaeda and other extremist movements have utilized these forums for many years, successfully adding more poison to the Muslim public's view of the West, but we have barely even begun to compete in reaching their audiences.

The standard U.S. government public affairs operation was designed primarily to respond to individual requests for information. It tends to be reactive, rather than proactive, and it operates for the most part on an eight-hour, five-days-a-week basis, while world events — and our enemies —

Let there be no doubt that the longer it takes to put a strategic communications framework into place, the more we can be certain that the vacuum will be filled by the enemy and by hostile news sources who most assuredly will not paint an accurate picture of what is actually taking place.

We have become somewhat more adept in these areas, but progress is slow.

In Iraq, for example, the U.S. military command, working closely with the Iraqi government and the U.S. Embassy, has sought nontraditional means to provide accurate information to the Iraqi people in the face of an aggressive campaign of disinformation.

Yet this has been portrayed as inappropriate: for example, the allegations of "buying news." The resulting explosion of critical media stories then causes all activity, all initiative, to stop. Even worse, it leads to a "chilling effect" among those who are asked to serve in the military public affairs field.

Improving our efforts will likely mean embracing new institutions to engage people around the world. During the Cold War, institutions such as the U.S. Information Agency and Radio Free Europe proved to be valuable instruments for the United States. We need to consider the possibility of new organizations and programs that can serve a similarly valuable role in the war on terror.

Although the enemy is increasingly skillful at manipulating the media and using the tools of communications to its advantage, it should be noted that we have an advantage as well. And that is, quite simply, that truth is on our side. Ultimately, the truth wins out.

I believe with every bone in my body that free people, exposed to sufficient information, will, over time, find their way to the right decisions.

We are fighting a battle in which the survival of our free way of life is at stake. It is a test of wills, and it will be won or lost with our public and the publics of free nations around the world. We need to do all we can to correct the lies being told, shatter the appeal of the enemy and attract supporters to our noble and necessary efforts to defeat violent

are operating 24/7 across every time zone. That is an unacceptably dangerous deficiency.

extremism around the globe.

In some cases, military public affairs officials have had little communications training and little, if any, grounding in the importance of timing, rapid response and the realities of digital and broadcast media.

<http://www.defendamerica.mil/articles/feb2006/a022306wm1.html>