

The US propaganda machine: Oh, what a lovely war

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The Lincoln Group was tasked with presenting the US version of events in Iraq to counter adverse media coverage. Here we present examples of its work, and the reality behind its headlines.

This is the news from Iraq according to Donald Rumsfeld and the Bush administration.

A week after the US Defence Secretary criticised the media for "exaggerating" reports of violence in Iraq, The Independent has obtained examples of newspaper reports the Bush administration want Iraqis to read.

They were prepared by specially trained American "psy-ops" troops who paid thousands of dollars to Iraqi newspaper editors to run these unattributed reports in their publications. In order to hide its involvement, the Pentagon hired the Lincoln Group to act as a liaison between troops and journalists. The Lincoln Group was at the centre of controversy last year when it was revealed the company was being paid more than \$100m (£58m) for various contracts, including the planting of such stories.

The Pentagon – which recently announced that an internal investigation had cleared the Lincoln Group of breaching military rules by planting these stories – has claimed these new reports did not constitute propaganda because they were factually correct. But a military specialist has questioned some of the information contained within their reports while describing their rhetorical style as "comical". Furthermore, it has been alleged that quotations contained within these reports and others – attributed to anonymous Iraqi officials or citizens – were routinely made up by US troops who never went beyond the perimeter of the Green Zone.

What seems clear is that, taken by themselves, these reports would provide an unbalanced picture of the situation inside Iraq where ongoing violence wreaks daily chaos and horror. Three years since US and UK troops invaded, more than 2,500 coalition troops have been killed. How many Iraqi civilians have died is unclear. The Iraqi Body Count puts the minimum at 33,773, but this figure is based on media reports and the group admits "it is likely that many if not most civilian casualties will go unreported by the media". An extrapolation published in The Lancet 18 months ago said more than 100,000 had been killed.

A former employee of the Lincoln Group, who spent last summer in Baghdad acting as a link between US troops who were part of the Information Operations Task Force and Iraqis contracted by the company to establish contact with Iraqi journalists, said his job was to ensure "there were no finger-prints".

"The Iraqis did not know who was writing the stories and the US troops did not know who

the Iraqis were,” said the former employee, who declined to be named. It is not known whether the stories included here were ever printed or simply prepared for publication, but he said it was normal for around 10 stories a week to be printed. He said US troops routinely fabricated their quotations.

The former employee said the Lincoln Group paid up to \$2,000 for the publication of each article – a sum that had risen from when he started working, suggesting the Iraqi editors realised who was behind the articles and knew there was plenty of money. The Lincoln Group was paid \$80,000 a week by the military to plant these stories.

The former employee said the stories – which often feature phrases such as “ brave warriors” and “eager troops” – were designed to bolster the image and purported efficiency of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and their involvement in operations. The Bush administration says the ability of Iraqi security forces to deal with insurgents remains the key to a withdrawal of US troops.

In reality, while one article describes the ISF as a “potent fighting force”, the training of Iraqi forces has been a slow and troubled process. The Pentagon recently said the only Iraqi battalion judged capable of fighting without US support had been downgraded, requiring it to fight with American troops.

John Pike, the director of GlobalSecurity.org, a Washington-based defence think-tank, who reviewed some of the Lincoln Group stories, said he found them unconvincing. “Anybody who knows about propaganda knows the first rule of propaganda is that it should not look like propaganda,” he said. “It’s embarrassing enough that [the US military] got caught ... but then for their product to be so cheesy ... It’s just embarrassing.”

He added: “Some of the vignettes are cartoonish. The ISF? Many of them are surely brave. But a potent fighting force? I think that’s a little clearer than the truth. It’s propaganda.”

Another story mentions the Iraqi oil industry and calls it “unique in that it is the only sector in which every dollar invested, either directly or indirectly, provides direct revenue to Iraq for future reconstruction” .

Yet a report published last November by a group of aid agencies and NGOs claimed that production-sharing agreements (PSAs) proposed by the US State Department before the invasion and adopted by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), could see Iraqis lose \$200bn in revenue if the plan comes into effect.

Data collated by the Brookings Institution says oil production in Iraq remains below the estimated pre-invasion levels. At the moment, Iraq annually spends \$6bn to import oil.

The Lincoln Group is headed by Christian Bailey, a Briton with no experience in PR, and a former US Marine, Paige Craig. The company failed to respond to a call seeking comment yesterday. A spokesman for the US military in Iraq, Lieut-Col Barry Johnson, said last night: “The results of the investigation have not yet been made public while the report undergoes final review by Multinational Force leadership. I am unable to comment on unsubstantiated allegations.”

While the Lincoln Group has been cleared by one Pentagon inquiry, it remains the subject of a separate inquiry being conducted by the Pentagon’s Office of the Inspector General (OIG).

A spokesman, Gary Comerford, said that the OIG had been asked by the Democratic Senator Ted Kennedy to review how the company had won its contract.

Criticising the media last week, Mr Rumsfeld said: "Much of the reporting in the US and abroad has exaggerated the situation... Interestingly, all of the exaggerations seem to be on one side.... The steady stream of errors all seem to be of a nature to inflame the situation and to give heart to the terrorists."

'AL-QA'IDA THREATENS ALL IRAQIS' 24 October 2005

The Lincoln version

The chief murderer of al-Qa'ida in Iraq has declared war against all Iraqis. They have also lamely attempted to justify the murder of civilians. Some websites featured the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's praise of his heathen deeds. The people of Iraq have had enough.

"These thugs clearly hate us; they do not share in our national pride or our belief in a unified Iraq," said one Iraqi. "They only wish to kill our women, our children, our future. We must not and will not let them."

Horror stories are told in homes and shops of friends and family members casually murdered while going about their daily business. These ... are simple folk trying to make the best of their lives. How many more suicide bombs have to go off before al-Qa'ida realises that there is no room for them in the land of the two rivers? In one particular attack, terrorists murdered a young boy and stuffed his body full of explosives in an attempt to lure security forces into an ambush. Is this the only future terrorism has to offer?

The reality check

At least 20 people were killed and 42 others injured when three suicide bombers targeted Baghdad's Palestine Hotel, used by media and contractors. A dozen construction labourers were killed in an attack on Al-Musayyab, south of Baghdad. Muhammad Ali Nu'aymi, secretary of the director-general of al-Mansur municipality, was killed by gunmen. Bodies of six Iraqi citizens were found in al-Mahmudiyah, southern Baghdad.

'IRAQI ARMY DEFEATS TERRORISM' 26 October 2005

The Lincoln version

With the people's approval of the constitution, Iraq is well on its way to forming a permanent government. Meanwhile, the underhanded forces of al-Qa'ida remain bent on halting progress and inciting civil war. The honest citizens of Iraq, however, need not fear these criminals and terrorists. The brave warriors of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) are hard at work stopping al-Qa'ida's attacks before they occur.

On 24 October, soldiers near Taji received a report that terrorists were stockpiling dangerous weapons. The soldiers found over 150 tank and artillery rounds. These munitions are similar to the ones that al-Qa'ida bomb-makers often use to construct their deadly bombs. The troops destroyed every last round, ensuring they will never be used against the Iraqi people.

Three al-Qa'ida mercenaries in Baqubah were planning to conduct a suicide vest attack.

Officers of the Iraqi Police Service (IPS) spotted them as they drove towards their target. But then something happened. The would-be murderer lost his faith and leapt from the moving vehicle. One of the other suicide bombers panicked and detonated his vest while still inside the car, instantly killing himself and another accomplice.

The reality check

At least five Iraqis killed by suicide bomber on bus in Baqubah, north-east of Baghdad. Bodies of nine Iraqi border guards, who were shot dead, found previous day. Joint US-Iraqi convoy targeted by car bomb in al-Ma'mun area of Baghdad.

'QUICK REACTION CAPTURES BOMBER' 12 November 2005

The Lincoln version

In conjunction with operation El-Sitar Elfulathi in Husaybah and Karabilah, Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) are sweeping across Iraq in a series of continuous operations aimed at disrupting insurgent activity. Through diligent patrols, organised raids and searches, vehicle checkpoints and interaction with the Iraqi people, Iraqi Army (IA) units have taken down terror cells and removed dangerous criminals from Iraq's streets.

In Baghdad, a quick response to a terror attack led to the arrest of the culprit. On 10 November, terrorists detonated a car bomb in eastern Baghdad wounding three Iraqi women. Immediately the ISF responded, securing the area and treating and evacuating the injured. The soldiers quickly examined the site of the bombing, discovering evidence that led them to the arrest of the suspected bomber. Because of their quick reaction, there was no loss of innocent life and another terrorist is in prison and awaiting his trial.

The ISF has quickly developed into a viable fighting force capable of defending the people of Iraq against the cowards who launch their attacks on innocent people.

The reality check

Ten people were killed when a car bomb exploded at a market in Baghdad. Bodies of three men tortured to death discovered in Shula. Coalition troops killed four alleged insurgents in "safe house" near Ramadi. On November 10, 7 Iraqis killed 30 wounded by car bomb near Al-Shuruqi Mosque, north of Baghdad.

'TRAINING PREPARES IRAQI MARINES' 13 November 2005

The Lincoln version

Terrorist attacks often result in damage to Iraq's infrastructure, but the Ministry of Defence is determined to keep that from continuing. The brave men of the Iraqi Marines are one step closer to taking charge of the security mission at the Al Basrah and Khawr Al Amaya Oil Terminals.

Recently, soldiers from the 6th Platoon Iraqi Marines completed the oil platform defence training at the Al Basrah Oil Terminal.

Their main focus was to acquire the necessary skills to effectively protect the oil terminals. The students trained up to three to four times a day, working closely with the instructors.

The intense training they received included how to stand a proper watch, how to work and fight as a team, and how to defend against terrorist attacks on the terminals. When these soldiers assume control of security on the terminal, they will ensure the safety and stability of the maritime environment.

These operations complement counter-terrorism and security efforts as well as deny international terrorists use of the waterways as an avenue of attack.

The reality check

Deputy health minister, Jalil al-Shammari, and his bodyguards are killed north of Baghdad. Amir Al-Saldi, Baghdad municipal official, is killed in Ghazaliya. Clashes in al-Qadiyah district of Samarra leave three dead. An Iraqi soldier is killed and six others wounded, three seriously, in a roadside bomb explosion in Kirkuk.

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