US plans to 'fight the net' revealed

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A newly declassified document gives a fascinating glimpse into the US military's plans for "information operations" - from psychological operations, to attacks on hostile computer networks.

Bloggers beware.

As the world turns networked, the Pentagon is calculating the military opportunities that computer networks, wireless technologies and the modern media offer.

The document says information is "critical to military success"

From influencing public opinion through new media to designing "computer network attack" weapons, the US military is learning to fight an electronic war.

The declassified document is called "Information Operations Roadmap". It was obtained by the National Security Archive at George Washington University using the Freedom of Information Act.

Officials in the Pentagon wrote it in 2003. The Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, signed it.

The "roadmap" calls for a far-reaching overhaul of the military's ability to conduct information operations and electronic warfare. And, in some detail, it makes recommendations for how the US armed forces should think about this new, virtual warfare.

The document says that information is "critical to military success". Computer and telecommunications networks are of vital operational importance.

Propaganda

The operations described in the document include a surprising range of military activities: public affairs officers who brief journalists, psychological operations troops who try to manipulate the thoughts and beliefs of an enemy, computer network attack specialists who seek to destroy enemy networks.

All these are engaged in information operations.

Perhaps the most startling

aspect of the roadmap is its acknowledgement that information put out as part of the military's psychological operations, or Psyops, is finding its way onto the computer and television screens of ordinary Americans.

The wide-reaching document was signed off by Donald Rumsfeld

"Information intended for foreign audiences, including public diplomacy and Psyops, is increasingly consumed by our domestic audience," it reads.

"Psyops messages will often be replayed by the news media for much larger audiences, including the American public," it goes on.

The document's authors acknowledge that American news media should not unwittingly broadcast military propaganda. "Specific boundaries should be established," they write. But they don't seem to explain how.

"In this day and age it is impossible to prevent stories that are fed abroad as part of psychological operations propaganda from blowing back into the United States - even though they were directed abroad," says Kristin Adair of the National Security Archive.

Credibility problem

Public awareness of the US military's information operations is low, but it's growing - thanks to some operational clumsiness.

> **When it describes plans for electronic warfare, or EW, the document takes on an extraordinary tone. It seems to see the internet as being equivalent to an enemy weapons system**

Late last year, it emerged that the Pentagon had paid a private company, the Lincoln Group, to plant hundreds of stories in Iraqi newspapers. The stories - all supportive of US policy - were written by military personnel and then placed in Iraqi publications.

And websites that appeared to be information sites on the politics of Africa and the Balkans were found to be run by the Pentagon.

But the true extent of the Pentagon's information operations, how they work, who they're aimed at, and at what point they turn from informing the public to influencing populations, is far from clear.

The roadmap, however, gives a flavour of what the US military is up to - and the grand scale on which it's thinking.

It reveals that Psyops personnel "support" the American government's international broadcasting. It singles out TV Marti - a station which broadcasts to Cuba - as receiving such support.

It recommends that a global website be established that supports America's strategic objectives. But no American diplomats here, thank you. The website would use content from "third parties with greater credibility to foreign audiences than US officials".

It also recommends that Psyops personnel should consider a range of technologies to disseminate propaganda in enemy territory: unmanned aerial vehicles, "miniaturized, scatterable public address

systems", wireless devices, cellular phones and the internet.

'Fight the net'

When it describes plans for electronic warfare, or EW, the document takes on an extraordinary tone.

It seems to see the internet as being equivalent to an enemy weapons system.

"Strategy should be based on the premise that the Department [of Defense] will 'fight the net' as it would an enemy weapons system," it reads.

The slogan "fight the net" appears several times throughout the roadmap.

The authors warn that US networks are very vulnerable to attack by hackers, enemies seeking to disable them, or spies looking for intelligence.

"Networks are growing faster than we can defend them... Attack sophistication is increasing... Number of events is increasing."

US digital ambition

And, in a grand finale, the document recommends that the United States should seek the ability to "provide maximum control of the entire electromagnetic spectrum".

US forces should be able to "disrupt or destroy the full spectrum of globally emerging communications systems, sensors, and weapons systems dependent on the electromagnetic spectrum".

Consider that for a moment.

The US military seeks the capability to knock out every telephone, every networked computer, every radar system on the planet.

Are these plans the pipe dreams of self-aggrandising bureaucrats? Or are they real?

The fact that the "Information Operations Roadmap" is approved by the Secretary of Defense suggests that these plans are taken very seriously indeed in the Pentagon.

And that the scale and grandeur of the digital revolution is matched only by the US military's ambitions for it.