

Pentagon sets sights on public opinion - US news - Military

WASHINGTON — As it fights two wars, the Pentagon is steadily and dramatically increasing the money it spends to win what it calls "the human terrain" of world public opinion. In the process, it is raising concerns of spreading propaganda at home in violation of federal law.

An Associated Press investigation found that over the past five years, the money the military spends on winning hearts and minds at home and abroad has grown by 63 percent, to at least \$4.7 billion this year, according to Department of Defense budgets and other documents. That's almost as much as it spent on body armor for troops in Iraq and Afghanistan between 2004 and 2006.

This year, the Pentagon will employ 27,000 people just for recruitment, advertising and public relations — almost as many as the total 30,000-person work force in the State Department.

"We have such a massive apparatus selling the military to us, it has become hard to ask questions about whether this is too much money or if it's bloated," says Sheldon Rampton, research director for the Committee on Media and Democracy, which tracks the military's media operations. "As the war has become less popular, they have felt they need to respond to that more."

Yet the money spent on media and outreach still comes to only 1 percent of the Pentagon budget, and the military argues it is well-spent on recruitment and the education of foreign and American audiences. Military leaders say that at a time when extremist groups run Web sites and distribute video, information is as important a weapon as tanks and guns.

"We have got to be involved in getting our case out there, telling our side of the story, because believe me, al-Qaida and all of those folks ... that's what they are doing on the Internet and everywhere else," says Rep. Adam Smith, D-Wash., who chairs the Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities Subcommittee. "Every time a bomb goes off, they have a story out almost before it explodes, saying that it killed 15 innocent civilians."

Pumping out press releases

On an abandoned Air Force base in San Antonio, Texas, editors for the Joint Hometown News Service point proudly to a dozen clippings on a table as examples of success in getting stories into newspapers.

What readers are not told: Each of these glowing stories was written by Pentagon staff. Under the free service, stories go out with authors' names but not their titles, and do not mention Hometown News anywhere. In 2009, Hometown News plans to put out 5,400 press releases, 3,000 television releases and 1,600 radio interviews, among other work — 50 percent more than in 2007.

The service is just a tiny piece of the Pentagon's rapidly expanding media empire, which is now bigger in size, money and power than many media companies.

In a yearlong investigation, The Associated Press interviewed more than 100 people and scoured more than 100,000 pages of documents in several budgets to tally the money spent to inform, educate and influence the public in the U.S. and abroad. The AP included contracts found through the private FedSources database and requests made under the Freedom of Information Act. Actual spending figures are higher because of money in classified budgets.

The biggest chunk of funds — about \$1.6 billion — goes into recruitment and advertising. Another \$547 million goes into public affairs, which reaches American audiences. And about \$489 million more goes into

what is known as psychological operations, which targets foreign audiences.

Staffing across all these areas costs about \$2.1 billion, as calculated by the number of full-time employees and the military's average cost per service member. That's double the staffing costs for 2003.

Recruitment and advertising are the only two areas where Congress has authorized the military to influence the American public. Far more controversial is public affairs, because of the prohibition on propaganda to the American public.

Pentagon can't sell policy

"It's not up to the Pentagon to sell policy to the American people," says Rep. Paul Hodes, D-N.H., who sponsored legislation in Congress last year reinforcing the ban.

Spending on public affairs has more than doubled since 2003. Robert Hastings, acting director of Pentagon public affairs, says the growth reflects changes in the information market, along with the fact that the U.S. is now fighting two wars.

"The role of public affairs is to provide you the information so that you can make an informed decision yourself," Hastings says. "There is no place for spin at the Department of Defense."

But on Dec. 12, the Pentagon's inspector general released an audit finding that the public affairs office may have crossed the line into propaganda. The audit found the Department of Defense "may appear to merge inappropriately" its public affairs with operations that try to influence audiences abroad. It also found that while only 89 positions were authorized for public affairs, 126 government employees and 31 contractors worked there.

In a written response, Hastings concurred and, without acknowledging wrongdoing, ordered a reorganization of the department by early 2009.

Another audit, also in December, concluded that a public affairs program called "America Supports You" was conducted "in a questionable and unregulated manner" with funds meant for the military's Stars and Stripes newspaper.

The program was set up to keep U.S. troops informed about volunteer donations to the military. But the military awarded \$11.8 million in contracts to a public relations firm to raise donations for the troops and then advertise those donations to the public. So the program became a way to drum up support for the military at a time when public opinion was turning against the Iraq war.

The audit also found that the offer to place corporate logos on the Pentagon Web site in return for donations was against regulations. A military spokesman said the program has been completely overhauled to meet Pentagon regulations.

"They very explicitly identify American public opinion as an important battlefield," says Marc Lynch, a professor at George Washington University. "In today's information environment, even if they were well-intentioned and didn't want to influence American public opinion, they couldn't help it."

In 2003, for example, initial accounts from the military about the rescue of Pvt. Jessica Lynch from Iraqi forces were faked to rally public support. And in 2005, a Marine Corps spokesman during the siege of the Iraqi city of Fallujah told the U.S. news media that U.S. troops were attacking. In fact, the information was a ruse by U.S. commanders to fool insurgents into revealing their positions.

'Psychological' spending doubles

The fastest-growing part of the military media is "psychological operations," where spending has doubled since 2003.

Psychological operations aim at foreign audiences, and spin is welcome. The only caveats are that

messages must be truthful and must never try to influence an American audience.

In Afghanistan, for example, a video of a soldier joining the national army shown on Afghan television is not attributed to the U.S. And in Iraq, American teams built and equipped media outlets and trained Iraqis to staff them without making public the connection to the military.

Rear Adm. Gregory Smith, director of strategic communications for the U.S. Central Command, says psychological operations must be secret to be effective. He says that in the 21st century, it is probably not possible to win the information battle with insurgents without exposing American citizens to secret U.S. propaganda.

"We have to be pragmatic and realistic about the game that we play in terms of information, and that game is very complex," he says.

The danger of psychological operations reaching a U.S. audience became clear when an American TV anchor asked Gen. David Petraeus about the mood in Iraq. The general held up a glossy photo of the Iraqi national soccer team to show the country united in victory.

Behind the camera, his staff was cringing. It was U.S. psychological operations that had quietly distributed tens of thousands of the soccer posters in July 2007 to encourage Iraqi nationalism.

With a new administration in power, it is not clear what changes may be made. Obama administration officials have said they intend to go through the Department of Defense budget closely to trim bloated spending.

Rumsfeld's Office of Strategic Influence

The emphasis on influence operations started with former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. In 2002, Rumsfeld established an Office of Strategic Influence that brought together public affairs and psychological operations. Critics accused him of setting up a propaganda arm, and Congress demanded that the office be shut down.

Rumsfeld has declined to speak to the press since leaving office, but while defense secretary he spoke bluntly about his desire to revamp the Pentagon's media operations.

"I went down that next day and said, 'Fine, if you want to savage this thing, fine, I'll give you the corpse,'" Rumsfeld said on Nov. 18, 2002, according to Defense Department transcripts of a speech he delivered. "There's the name. You can have the name, but I'm gonna keep doing every single thing that needs to be done and I have."

In 2003, Rumsfeld issued a secret Information Operations Roadmap setting out a plan for public affairs and psychological operations to work together. It noted that with a global media, the military should expect and accept that psychological operations will reach the U.S. public.

"I can tell you there wouldn't be a single American disappointed with anything that we've done that might be out there, that they don't know about," says Col. Curtis Boyd, commander of the 4th PSYOP Group, the largest unit of its kind. "Frankly, they probably wouldn't care because maybe they are safer as a result of it."

In January 2008, a new report by the Defense Science Board recommended resurrecting the Office of Strategic Influence as the Office of Strategic Communications. But Congress refused to fund the program.

In February, the Army released a new eight-chapter field manual that puts information warfare on par with traditional warfare.

The title of an entire chapter, Chapter 7: "Information Superiority."

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