

Lincoln Group: Unethical weapon of mass deception

by *Bill Berkowitz*

Controversial public relations outfit awarded yet another Pentagon contract: up to \$20 million for monitoring the media

Since the inception of the Iraq war, and even during the run-up to the invasion, the Bush Administration aimed to control the news about, and from, Iraq. Early on, embedded reporters told moving, albeit questionable stories about the toppling of the statue of Saddam and the heroism of individual soldiers as the military quickly seized Baghdad. Over the course of the subsequent three-plus-year occupation, several hundred million dollars have been spent on an assortment of media projects that were specifically designed to sell "good" news about the occupation.

Perhaps the most notorious U.S. effort involved a U.S. public relations company that was contracted to pay for positive news stories -- written by U.S. military personnel -- to be placed in Iraqi publications.

In late-September, the Pentagon once again turned to the Lincoln Group, inking a two-year contract which "put together a unit of 12-18 communicators to support military PR efforts in Iraq and throughout the Middle East from media training to pitching stories and providing content for government-backed news sites," ODwyerspr.com reported.

According to ODwyerpr.com -- an information service produced by the highly respected industry publication O'Dwyers PR Daily -- the "contract with the Multi-National Force-Iraq is valued at more than \$6 million per year, although contracting documents indicated that additional efforts could be "ordered" from the Pennsylvania Avenue firm for up to \$20 million."

"Lincoln Group is proud to be trusted to assist the multi-national forces in Iraq with communicating news about their vital work," said Bill Dixon, a company representative.

According to its website, the Washington, D.C.-based Lincoln Group maintains that it is a "strategic communications and public relations firm providing insight and influence in challenging and hostile environments."

The company points out that its "employees and consultants have worked, and continue to work, around the world in such places as Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Colombia, Indonesia and elsewhere. While others may view these locations as 'inhospitable', we prefer to call them 'challenging.'"

A Fortune magazine story dated January 20, 2006, pointed out that Lincoln Group "says it has entered into more than 20 Defense Department contracts (the biggest of which could be worth as much as \$100 million) and a similar number of commercial and nonmilitary government deals. It has more than 40 employees in the U.S. and 200 overseas, mostly in Iraq, doing research, communications, and even some investing."

According to SourceWatch, a project of the Center for Media and Democracy, in March 2006, O'Dwyer's PR Daily reported that the Lincoln Group was "working to boost economic development in Pakistan. Lincoln is working with former U.S. diplomat Carol Fleming to increase 'investments in the country's textile, energy, technology and telecom' industries. The firm produced 'a documentary' of areas devastated by the October 2005 earthquake, 'to remind countries to honor their pledges to support the victims.'

"Lincoln has also 'expressed interest' in a contract to help the U.S. Army Reserve communicate its 'vision of the future.' The contract includes 'speech writing, research, development of a comprehensive ... communications plan,' support for 'national outreach programs,' and media outreach for Army Reserve Chief Lt. Gen. James Helmly."

In an interview posted at Pakistan Link, Fleming, Lincoln Group's Country Director, touted the investment opportunities in Pakistan and pointed out that her company "provides its clients access to cultures which have historically been difficult to reach through traditional Western communities."

"We provide analytical solutions and consultancy to deliver rapid, actionable insight to our clients in the areas of economics, defense, media and trade. We also develops comprehensive communications plans and uses a mix of advertising, public relations, marketing and specialty communications to influence the perceptions and behaviors of key audience," Fleming added.

While no stranger to garnering government contracts, the Lincoln Group is also no stranger to controversy. In November 2005, the Los Angeles Times revealed that the U.S. military was "secretly paying Iraqi newspapers to publish stories written by American troops in an effort to burnish the image of the U.S. mission in Iraq." The Times' Mark Mazzetti and Borzou Daragahi reported that the stories were authored by U.S. military "information operations' troops" and "translated into Arabic and covertly placed in Baghdad newspapers."

The Lincoln Group acted as an intermediary between the U.S. military and the media outlets; company staff and subcontractors wrote and translated stories, then paid local editors varying amounts to run them, pretending to be freelance reporters, for example, or advertising executives.

In their recently published book, "The Best War Ever: Lies, Damned Lies, and the Mess in Iraq" (Tarcher/Penguin, 2006), co-authors Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber document how Pentagon money was "thrown" at the Lincoln Group and other public relations outfits to promote the war in Iraq:

In September 2004, the U.S. military awarded a \$5.4 million contract to Iraqex -- which soon after changed its name to The Lincoln Group -- a "newly formed" Washington, DC-based company "set up specifically to provide services in Iraq." A year later, the New York Times' Jeff Gerth would report that Iraqex's winning of the contract was "something of a mystery" given the fact that the "two men who ran the small business [Christian Bailey, a young businessman from England and Paige Craig, a young former marine intelligence officer] had no background in public relations or the media."

According to Rampton and Stauber, "In its various [pre-war] incarnations, Iraqex/Lincoln dabbled in real estate, published a short-lived online business publication called the Iraq Business Journal, and tried its hand at exporting scrap metal, manufacturing construction materials, and providing logistics for U.S. forces before finally striking gold with the Pentagon PR contract."

At first the Lincoln Group worked with the Rendon Group, "a public relations firm that had already played a major role in leading the U.S. into war through its work for Ahmed Chalabi and his Iraqi National Congress." After Rendon left the project Lincoln "hired another Washington-based public relations firm as a subcontractor -- BKSH & Associates, headed by Republican political strategist Charles R. Black, Jr. BKSH is a subsidiary of Burson-Marszteller, a PR firm whose previous experience in Iraq also included work for Chalabi and the INC. Other Pentagon contracts for public relations work were awarded to SYColeman Inc. of Arlington, Virginia, and Science applications International Corporation. All totaled, the PR contracts added up to \$300 million over a five-year period."

All in all, as the New York Times reported, the Lincoln Group managed to place more than 1,000 stories in the Iraqi and Arab press.

Reckoning with Lincoln

In late-May of this year, bulldogreporter.com pointed out that "a Defense Department investigation of Pentagon-financed propaganda efforts in Iraq warn[ed] that paying Iraqi journalists to produce positive stories could damage American credibility and call[ed] for an end to military payments to a group of Iraqi journalists in Baghdad, according to a summary of the investigation."

The review, ordered after news reports last November disclosed "that the military had paid the Lincoln Group to plant articles written by American soldiers in Iraqi publications, without disclosing the source of the articles. The firm's work also included paying Iraqi journalists for favorable treatment."

Though the document prepared by Rear Adm. Scott Van Buskirk doesn't mention the Lincoln Group by

name, it nevertheless found that the military should scrutinize contractors involved in the propaganda effort more closely "to ensure proper oversight is in place," the New York Times' David S. Cloud reported. Van Buskirk also blamed the military for not investigating whether paying for placement for articles would "undermine the concept of a free press," in Iraq, according to the summary.

According to bulldogreporter.com, "Over all, the report conclude[d] that American commanders in Iraq did not violate military regulations when they undertook a multipronged propaganda campaign beginning in 2004 aimed at increasing support for the fledgling Iraqi government, the three-page summary says. That conclusion has been previously reported, but the portions of the report that raise questions about the effort or that are critical have not been previously disclosed."

"The most critical portion of the report concerns the military's creation in 2004 of an entity called the Baghdad Press Club, in which Iraqi journalists were paid if they covered and produced stories about American reconstruction efforts, such as openings of schools and sewage plants."

"The military's 'direct oversight of an apparently independent news organization and remuneration for articles that are published will undoubtedly raise questions focused on 'truth and credibility,' that will be difficult to deflect, regardless of the intensions and purpose of the remuneration,' the report says."

Psyops Journalism

"The war in Iraq has spawned a new industry in Washington that could be called Psy-ops Journalism," Alvin Snyder, a former Executive of the United States Information Agency (USIA) and a Senior Fellow at the USC Center for Public Diplomacy, recently wrote on the Center's website. "The new breed of journalists are following the money trail to the Pentagon."

Psyops is of course not a new phenomenon. An Air Force document published in 1994 titled "Air Force Intelligence and Security Doctrine: Psychological Operations (PSYOP)," pointed out that by necessity psychological operations aims to "convey and (or) deny selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, and objective reasoning ... In various ways, perception management combines truth projection, operations security, cover, and deception, and psyops."

In the information age, psyops, or the effective manipulating of information or spinning stories for political gain knows no borders. A Defense Department document titled "Information Operations Roundup," approved in 2003, acknowledged that "information intended for foreign audiences, including public diplomacy and PSYOP, increasingly is consumed by our domestic audience and vice-versa. PSYOP messages disseminated to any audience ... will often be replayed by the news media for much larger audiences, including the American public."

"Some \$400 million in media consulting contracts has been awarded during the past few years by the Pentagon, for the purpose of helping 'to effectively communicate Iraqi government and Coalition goals with strategic audiences,'" Alvin Snyder pointed out. "Thus far both the Pentagon and its contract psy-op journalists have experienced a painful learning curve, but the most recent contract award will show how much each has learned. The outlook is not promising."

"A practical question is whether psy-ops journalism can work at all. It is a cross between what is accepted as the mainstream journalism of print and TV (and many journalists now blog) and what is known as psy-ops, or psychological operations, those engaged in mind control warfare, to gain military advantage by fooling the enemy."

Over the past three-plus years, the Pentagon has initiated an endless stream of public relations efforts aimed at stemming the tide of negative news from Iraq. As "The Best War Ever" points out, "much of the U.S. propaganda effort" -- from manipulating events, such as the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein after the U.S. marched into Baghdad, creating heroic stories for domestic consumption, sitting on negative information as evidenced by the slow initial response to torture at Abu Ghraib prison -- "is aimed not at tactical deception of enemy combatants but at influencing morale and support for the war in the United States."

Many observers appear to agree with Alvin Snyder's assertion that the millions spent by the Pentagon have basically come to naught. It hasn't won the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people, it has failed to win support abroad for the Bush Administration's Iraq policy, and it has ultimately failed to convince the American public that the war in Iraq is winnable.

Despite the chaos enveloping Iraq, business for The Lincoln Group is thriving. Its D.C. offices, once located on K Street, moved to larger quarters in the Pennsylvania Avenue building that housed Jack Abramoff's famous restaurant, Signatures.

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