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Media in Iraq: The fallacy of psy-ops

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WASHINGTON Some top Pentagon officials say they are justified in planting positive stories in the Iraqi media about U.S. actions in order to present a more positive image. Whether the policy is ethically correct misses the larger point. Pushing PR or propaganda simply doesn't work.

Showing the world the values on which American society is based and abiding by these values in our foreign policy is the best way to conduct effective public diplomacy. It's also the best way to spread democracy.

That's how the United States conducted public diplomacy during the administrations of George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton. Since 1991, \$350 million has been spent to develop independent media in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, areas that have seen dramatic transitions.

To the administration's credit, Usaid's budget for democracy and governance activities in Iraq was \$380 million in 2004, with \$5 million of that going to independent media development. In the 2005 fiscal year, spending on these activities fell to \$169 million, and for 2006 it will fall again, to \$130 million, of which media is a small component.

In contrast, the Pentagon has awarded three known contracts to the Lincoln Group, SYColeman Inc. and Science Applications International Corp., totaling a potential \$300 million over five years. The purpose, quoting from the Lincoln Group's Web site (www.lincolngroup.com), is to "inject more creativity into its psychological operations efforts to

improve foreign public opinion about the United States, particularly the military."

What is unknown is how much intelligence agencies are spending for similar psy-ops operations. In addition, the administration has requested \$93.1 million in 2006 for Al-Hurrah TV and Radio Sawa, whose missions include spreading the U.S. message, but which are seen as non-indigenous, non-independent stations in the Arab world, with little credibility.

Granted, building independent media may take more time than Washington policy-makers would like, especially in places such as the former Soviet Union. But the work spreads a valuable lesson: Free speech matters. When it works, it can change the entire political landscape, as was seen recently in Lebanon, and before that in Serbia, Indonesia, Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan.

Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili told the Washington Post's David Ignatius that the money spent in his country on building independent media was worth "more than 5,000 marines." And no American lives were put at risk during that operation.

Planting or paying for positive stories in the Iraqi press is a quick and easy way for companies like the Lincoln Group to fulfill their \$100 million contract. But does America's image truly benefit from such PR efforts? A better strategy would be to empower local, indigenous journalists, media managers, owners and government officials to develop truly free and independent public and private media that are balanced, objective, fact-

based and centered upon the basic value of free speech.

U.S. government funding for local, independent media has helped establish thousands of new television and radio broadcasters around the world. It has trained tens of thousands of journalists and media managers and has provided hundreds of millions of people with a professional style of journalism that they can rely on.

The Bush administration should be applauded for the money it is spending in the Middle East through Usaid, the Middle East Partnership Initiative and other State Department initiatives to develop a vibrant, independent media. But paying journalists to print stories and spending hundreds of millions of dollars on PR campaigns negates the good work that has gone into developing truly independent media.

American principles, and not propaganda, are what resonate with citizens in the Middle East. If the United States seriously intends to develop democracies, it should learn from what it has done in Europe and Eurasia since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

It should stop funding blatant propaganda and use that money to fully fund democracy and governance programs, including those that develop objective, independent media.

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