

12-6-1996

The Need for a United States Government Capacity to Analyze and Counter Foreign Perception Management Operations: Part I

Todd Levanthal

United States Information Agency, tleventh@usia.gov

Editor

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp>

 Part of the [International Relations Commons](#), [Other Political Science Commons](#), [Other Psychology Commons](#), and the [Social Influence and Political Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Levanthal, Todd and Editor (1996) "The Need for a United States Government Capacity to Analyze and Counter Foreign Perception Management Operations: Part I," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 5 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol1/iss5/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Bulletin of Political Psychology by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact commons@erau.edu.

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: The Need for a United States Government Capacity to Analyze and Counter Foreign Perception Management Operations: Part I

Author: Todd Levanthal

Volume: 1

Issue: 5

Date: 1996-12-06

Keywords: Perception management

(IBPP Note: This begins a three-part series by Mr. Todd Levanthal who from January 1987 to May 1996 was Program Officer for Countering Disinformation at the United States Information Agency (USIA.) The series reflects only his personal opinions, not those of USIA or the United States Government (USG.) It is presented with only the most minor editing, but with extensive commentary by IBPP. The series also reflects IBPP's deep commitment to foster deliberation and--when appropriate-- change in science, policy, programs, and informed opinion.)

The premise of this paper is that the USG needs to reconstitute its interagency capability to track, analyze, and counter perception management (PM) operations conducted by foreign governments and groups. After the end of the Cold War, the USG apparatus for countering foreign PM operations was disbanded in all but name. (The process was completed in June 1996, when the last remnant of the formal USG capability, the interagency Perception Management Working Group, was dissolved.) But it now is clear that foreign PM operations have not ceased, that they can cause serious damage to USG interests if they go unnoticed or unopposed, and that they need to be tracked, analyzed, and countered in a systematic way.

(IBPP Commentary: Psychological factors which may be implicated in the dissolution of a formal interagency working group include (1) organizational turf battles; (2) organizational interoperability because of differences in language, culture, mission; (3) inadequate will and/or ability to change when warranted; (4) sabotage by individuals in the service of their own careers, to act out unconscious intrapsychic conflict, or for the intrinsic pleasure of sabotage; and (5)--sometimes-- completion, obsolescence, or adaptive transfer of the working group's mission. (See The Psychology of Conspiracy, IBPP, November 8, 1996, V. 1(1).))

Current and recent examples of foreign PM operations include: PM operations conducted by all sides in the conflict in Bosnia; PM operations undertaken by Libya; actions taken to influence perceptions by General Mohammed Farah Aideed of Somalia in the summer of 1993; Saddam Hussein's massive propaganda and disinformation campaign during the 1991 Gulf War and afterwards; and continued PM operations conducted by the Russian government's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) and Federal Security Service (FSB.)

(IBPP Commentary: Note that these examples include Europe, Eurasia, the Mideast, and Africa. Mr. Levanthal has emphasized in transmitting this series that his examples (1) are meant to be suggestive and illustrative, not exhaustive, comprehensive or definitive; (2) cover political influence but not economic or military influence; and (3) are based solely on political influence and unclassified information. He implies--and we concur--that with more time and resources a huge compendium from all over the world could have been developed. We also have noted that PM operations have transcended any particular time, place, or culture; have been exemplarily elucidated by ancient writers from China, India, and Greece among others; and are best conceived and implemented throughout the

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

world through a wise and shrewd observation of daily life events throughout the world. (See Editorial: An Ethological Approach to Information Warfare, IBPP, November 22/29 1996, V. 1(4).)

Bosnia

Several of the successor states to former Yugoslavia appear to have inherited the former communist state's penchant for PM operations. The Serbs have earned a deserved reputation for the most heavy-handed attempts to influence perceptions by manufacturing false information. But some close observers of the Bosnian scene credit the Bosnian Muslims, or Bosniacs (as they call themselves) with the capability to orchestrate more subtle and effective PM operations. There are credible reports, for example, that in an attempt to influence Western media, Bosniac government forces have engaged in deliberate sniping attacks against Bosnian civilians and were responsible for mortar attacks on the Sarajevo market that were blamed on Serb forces. (For an exposition on these issues by an observer who finds much at fault with the Bosniacs, see "Selling the Bosnian Myth to America: Buyer Beware" by Lieutenant Colonel John E. Sray at <http://leav.www.army.mil/fmso/geo/bosnia.txt>)

I lack the in-depth knowledge necessary to elucidate these complex arguments but simply call attention to their existence, not in an attempt to seem to heap calumny on any side, but to point out that knowledgeable observers believe that all sides in the Bosnian conflict employ manipulative PM operations. This is an issue which behooves close study by the USG.

(IBPP Commentary: Assuming the USG is the only contemporary superpower, it follows from many models of international relations that it is and will be the target of PM operations in any conflict in which the various sides are seeking political, economic, or military support. Given that USG personnel may die in providing support--and already have regarding Bosnia--it may not be an exaggeration to ascribe a life or death import to Mr. Leventhal's advocacy.)

Libya

Libya's attempts at influencing foreign governments and publics have typically been viewed as almost comic in nature, not without some reason. But Libya has recently hit upon what may be a disturbingly effective way for it to increase the effectiveness of its PM operations.

In the past year or two, a worrisome pattern has emerged in which Libyan oil money is being married to con artists, charlatans, and demagogues with a genius for manipulating American and Western audiences. This pattern first emerged with the release of *The Maltese Double Cross*, a film funded by Libyan cut-outs and produced by United States (U.S.) expatriate Allan Francovich, a former close colleague of Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) renegade Philip Agee, a congenital critic of the U.S., especially the activities of the U.S. intelligence community. *The Maltese Double Cross* is, essentially, Libya's answer to the U.S. and British indictments of its intelligence operatives for complicity in the terrorist bombing of Pan Am 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland in December 1988.

The film features the fabrications of several professional con artists, weaving them in with responsible statements made by former senior CIA, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and National Security Council officials-- several of whom were interviewed under false pretenses-- and with other footage taken from network television broadcasts. The film's thesis is that a renegade CIA group in league with Syria, Iran, and Palestinian terrorists organized the Pan Am 103 bombing. Although this is ridiculous to anyone with knowledge of actual USG operations, it nevertheless has a certain appeal to substantial segments of the

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

population. The Maltese Double Cross has enjoyed significant success during the past year, being broadcast by reputable television networks in Britain, France, Germany, Australia, and, quite likely, other countries as well.

The announcement earlier this year by the official Libyan news agency JANA that it intended to provide one billion dollars to Louis Farrakhan in an attempt to influence U.S. elections and foreign policy indicates that Libya may realize that it has hit upon a winning combination by using its oil money to fund those who are familiar with the American idiom but share Libya's staunchly anti-USG stance. (The Libyan offer of money was subsequently denied by JANA but then reconfirmed by Farrakhan.) This is a development that bears close watching in the years ahead.

(IBPP Commentary: Unfortunately, some USG-authorized covert and clandestine, classified, and other official actions through the years--often towards its own citizens--work in the favor of the disinformation specialist hostile to USG interests. Declassified and other desensitized documentation suggest USG representatives authorized (1) the nuclear irradiation of unsuspecting subjects, (2) subjects' unknowing ingestion of and exposure to lysergic acid diethylamide-25 (LSD-25,) (3) sloppy, superficial, incompetent, or insensitive management of some Gulf War veterans' medical data and analyses pertinent to possible exposure to chemical and biological warfare agents, and (4) murder attempts against foreign leaders. This documentation and accounts of it have facilitated a suspension of disbelief and the development of an ambivalent mindset, if not outright receptivity, towards all sorts of allegations. (A case in point is the differential response to the recent series of articles in the San Jose (California) Mercury News suggesting that the CIA joined with cocaine traffickers in California to help finance the Nicaraguan contras during the 1980s. Future issues of IBPP will elaborate on the many conscious and unconscious psychological processes at play among PM operatives and those who seek to counter them.)

Actions taken by General Mohammed Farah Aideed of Somalia in the Summer of 1993

During the 1993 United Nations (UN) intervention in Somalia, General Aideed proved himself to be adroit and unscrupulous at manipulating perceptions. According to USG embassy reporting, some alleged Somali victims of fighting between Aideed and UN forces got up and walked away after news cameras had stopped filming. Aideed also repeatedly placed women and children at the head of columns of his demonstrators, with gunmen behind them. This ensured that Somali women and children would be among the casualties after Aideed's gunmen provoked an attack.

Aideed also directed disinformation at Somalis. In early September 1993, Nigerian peacekeeping forces were due to replace Italian forces at a pasta factory. The night before this was to occur, Aideed's "foreign minister," Isse Mohammed Said, was in the neighborhood near the pasta factory with a bullhorn warning residents that black US soldiers "disguised" as Nigerians would invade the area the next morning. He urged residents to attack them, which subsequently occurred.

Aideed's PM operations demonstrated that even relatively minor political actors with meager resources--compared to the US--can significantly influence perceptions. This is especially true when the glare of worldwide publicity gives them the opportunity to present a skewed version of reality to an audience that is unfamiliar with the intricacies of the crisis du jour.

(IBPP Commentary: The US variant of representative democracy--its constitution which favors individual over collective rights more than most other governments in history, and its adversarial political system--can turn even the death of one person into a political football. Add to this (1) psychologies of

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

personalization, identification, projection, and reaction formation; (2) group dynamics such as deindividuation and the risky shift; and (3) a host of organizational inevitabilities, and the most minor of political actors may possess a great advantage over the USG in PM operations.

***Part II will cover PM operations of Saddam Hussein and of the Russian government. Readers interested in the psychological substrates of PM may wish to consult Petty, R. E. (1986.) *Communication and persuasion: Central and peripheral routes to change*. NY: Springer Verlag. Finally, Mr. Leventhal welcomes your comments, criticisms, and inquiries and can be reached at tleventh@usia.gov (Keyword: Perception management.)