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

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

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(IBPP Note: This is the final part of a three-part series by Mr. Todd Leventhal, who from January 1987 to May 1996 was Program Officer for Countering Disinformation at the United States Information Agency (USIA.) The first two parts have contained examples of perception management operations, often against USG interests. The series has reflected his personal opinion, not those of USIA or the US Government (USG.) It has been presented with only the most minor editing.)

Lessons for USG Policymakers

A number of state and non-state actors have a professional disinformation/perception management (PM) apparatus, which they employ as an integral part of their foreign and national security policies. These states include (1) communist regimes such as China, North Korea, Cuba, and Vietnam; (2) former communist regimes such as Russia, some entities of the Commonwealth of Independent States, and many of the successor states of former Yugoslavia; (3) fringe group extremists and conspiracy theorists in the West, such as the Lyndon LaRouche organization.

A common denominator for many of these groups is that they use Soviet-style methods, often having been trained by the Soviets. Somalia's General Aideed received military training in Italy and the Soviet Union and may have learned PM techniques from the Soviets. The historically close Soviet-Iraqi relationship extended to cooperation in the area of intelligence and may well have included training in PM techniques. Successor states to communist regimes have inherited bureaucracies schooled in these techniques.

Indeed, there is no indication that the Russian government's intelligence services have abandoned their commitment to PM techniques. On the contrary, they appear to be devoting roughly as much resources as the KGB did to this mission.

Russia is not likely to engage in any significant amount of overtly anti-American disinformation in the near future, however. This would not help achieve Russian goals. But it is a virtual certainty that the Russians, who are the world's most accomplished professionals in PM operations, will use every tool at their disposal to influence the perceptions of Americans and others in a way that will serve to enhance Russian national interests.

During the Gorbachev era, the Soviets developed a sophisticated series of conciliatory and alarmist PM techniques that--despite their conciliatory nature--were designed to work to the detriment of the USG. The continued publication of "Intelligence Newsletter" and the Kazakh nuclear weapons campaign (IBPP, V.1, No. 6) are indications that these techniques are continuing--a subject that needs to be analyzed carefully in the West.

Organizing to Analyze and Counter the Threat

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In retrospect, the Achilles heel of the Active Measures Working Group (AMWG)--the USG apparatus for tracking, analyzing, and countering foreign PM techniques during the 1980s--was its too narrow focus on the Soviet Union. At one point, during the late 1980s, one of the member agencies of the AMWG began to develop substantial expertise on PM techniques employed by other regimes, such as Libya and China. But the unit that had begun to accumulate this knowledge and expertise was completely reoriented in 1990 and ceased to monitor PM operations. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the AMWG's activities atrophied dramatically shortly afterwards because its seemingly sole *raison d'etre* had disappeared.

The AMWG survived as a bureaucratic entity and in 1995 changed its name to the Perception Management Working Group (PMWG.) It played a minimally useful role, but remained severely hampered because no agency in the national security, foreign affairs, defense, or intelligence communities--with the sole exception of USIA, which was necessarily only a bit player in this arena--any longer employed individuals who devoted themselves full-time to the task of countering foreign PM operations. Finally, in June 1996, even the vestigial PMWG was abolished, leaving the USG with no institutional capability to track, analyze, and counter foreign PM activities.

This remains a serious oversight that poses a significant threat to US interests. As the information age expands and the world implodes, the opportunities for unscrupulous regimes and actors to manipulate information in an attempt to distort perceptions and skew policy will only increase. The USG needs a capability to deal with this threat, and that capability will only materialize when the agencies in the national security, foreign affairs, defense, and intelligence communities devote significant resources to it.

The USG bureaucratic structure for dealing with post-Cold War PM threats must differ from what was appropriate for the Cold War if it is to accomplish its purposes. Prior to 1992, the Soviet disinformation apparatus was the 800-pound gorilla in this business. Its steady stream of anti-American invective made it possible, in many cases, to simply wait for the inevitable onslaught of untruths. Then one simply needed to be well-schooled in Soviet techniques and ready to react quickly to the latest variations on usually predictable themes. Such a situation placed a premium on Soviet area specialization.

In the post-Cold War era, the PM threats are more varied, obscure, and subtle. They require roving analysts with functional expertise willing to plunge into different, unfamiliar situations on a serial, ad hoc basis, bringing the added value of their functional knowledge to a succession of initially bewilderingly detailed, different, and difficult puzzles. This is challenge must be met if current PM threats to the USG are to be effectively tracked, analyzed, and countered.

(IBPP Commentary: Even newer opportunities for PM operations exist via the globalization of security, advances in information technology, the alleged reconfiguration of international politics along cultural lines (Huntington, 1996,) and the ever more pervasiveness of television and other multimedia depictions of alternate and altered realities (cf. Bloom, 1997; Gerbner, 1986.) PM will be perceived as even more important by those who seek power. However, the PM challenge for the 21st century will be to adapt to new technologies and new political, sociocultural, and psychological phenomena with the same timeless concepts (cf. Liu Hsiang 1996/c. 20; Thucydides, 1954/c.401 B.C.) IBPP and its readership applaud Todd Leventhal's analysis and clarion call.) (See Author. (Undated.) Cornerstones of information warfare. Washington, D.C.: Department of the Air Force; Bloom, R. W. (1997.) Psychiatric applications of virtual reality technology: Eden, Armageddon, or Bedlam? Paper to be presented at the International Conference on Technology and the 21st Century. Cameron University, Lawton, OK; Gerbner, G., Gross,

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L., Morgan, M., & Signorelli, N. (1986.) Living with television: The dynamics of the cultivation process. In J. Bryant & D. Zillman (Eds.) Perspectives on media effects. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum; Huntington, S. (1996.) The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order. NY: Simon & Schuster.) (Keywords: Perception management, information warfare.)