

War of the Words

By Donald H. Rumsfeld

Every conflict in history has seen its share of rumor, propaganda and misinformation. The "yellow journalism" that helped launch the Spanish-American War and the infamous radio broadcasts of "Tokyo Rose" during World War II come to mind. But the information technology of the 21st century has made waging an ideological global struggle against extremism particularly complex. Decision makers, the media and the public at large will need to come to terms with the effect of these new realities. The old adage that "A lie can be half-way around the world before truth has its boots on" becomes doubly true with today's technology.

But, it must be noted, the availability of new communications media can inform and illuminate as well as lead to new challenges. I think of how much has changed just in my lifetime. In earlier wars, Americans, for the most part, were limited to a few definitive news sources—Edward R. Murrow during World War II, for example, or Walter Cronkite during Vietnam—to get information that had been packaged and approved for presentation to the public.

Think of all the new doors that since have been opened. Today we have multiple global-satellite-television networks; 24-hour news coverage; dozens of domestic and international television channels devoted to news, commentary and analysis; talk radio; bloggers and the Internet; and live coverage of terrorist attacks, disasters and combat operations.

Consider a few of the other changes we are experiencing today. In previous wars, right up through Operation Desert Storm in 1991, families and loved ones communicated with the troops using what is now dismissively referred to as "snail mail." Letters often took weeks to reach their destination. Today, email, cell phones and digital cameras give every citizen and soldier global reach near instantaneously. Something that is happening, or that a person may think is happening, in one location is instantaneously transmitted to multiple addresses halfway around the world across digital networks.

The Department of Defense is working to find ways to adapt to these new realities, as we must, and to try to better inform the public of our many and varied activities on their behalf. And like other large unwieldy bureaucracies, we are doing this through a process of trial and error, and, therefore, imperfectly.

At the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the Department of Defense decided to "embed" hundreds of reporters in U.S. military units, with few restrictions on what they could broadcast or

publish. This was a risk, but it has been judged by most accounts a great success—indeed a breakthrough. As a result, journalists—and because of them, many more Americans—received a greater understanding of the realities of the conflict, as well as of the sacrifices undertaken daily by America's men and women in uniform. This added considerable texture to the nuance and perspective of the overall news coverage.

We have also posted increasing amounts of information—including transcripts of interviews and speeches—on the Department's Web page (www.Defenselink.mil) to enable the public to inform themselves directly about the military's activities. Following the publicity of allegations

*The free flow of information
is often our strongest ally.*

of detainee abuse, the Pentagon even declassified and published memoranda pertaining to interrogation techniques and detainee policies.

I have long believed in the importance of granting the public greater access to information about their government—the good and the bad. Almost four decades ago, while serving as a member of Congress, I was a co-sponsor of the legislation later called the "Freedom of Information Act" that allows individual citizens and the press to obtain access to public documents, absent a showing by the government of a need to keep certain information confidential.

That law has opened up a flood of new information, but it has also added new challenges to policy makers attempting to comply with those requests. Last year alone, for example, the federal government received nearly three million requests for documents. And though many of the documents released have been informative, the release and subsequent news coverage of others have actually had the opposite effect of fully informing the public when presented selectively without relevant context.

The challenge of conveying accurate and complete information is multiplied when it comes to the battle of perceptions beyond our borders. In the Middle East we have an enemy that is using the various types of media to try to poison the minds of people in that region about the intentions and actions of the United States and other countries. We see this in Web sites that propagandize hate and despair and that have turned the gruesome murder of innocents into grist for terrorists. We see it in purposely misleading broadcasts that say, for example, that U.S. forces target civilians.

Yet even in the region, where information

historically has been tightly controlled, the advance of technology is forcing a greater information flow. Internet blogs are appearing in countries where the press is still controlled by the government. Pro-democracy forces are communicating by email, pagers and blackberries. As more citizens gain access to new forms of information, to new ways of learning of the outside world, it will be that much more difficult for governments to cement their rule by holding monopolies on news and commentary.

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As America adjusts to this new Information Age, I suggest the following notions as part of the discussion:

- First, government officials will need to communicate clearly and often. When a government official is found to have put out information that is not exactly correct or fully complete—even in good faith—it plays into the hands of our enemies, who seize on any fault to try to harm the American system.

- Second, a healthy culture of communication and transparency between government and the public needs to be established. Due to the ubiquitous sources of information and access, most things—controversial or not—become known eventually. But they become known unhelpfully when they dribble out piecemeal or in highly selective excerpts—as opposed to being presented early, in full and with appropriate context.

This openness, however, does not obviate the necessity of protecting the secrecy of confidential information that, if revealed, could harm the security of the United States. While I have long believed that too much material is classified across the federal government as a general rule, an increasingly cavalier attitude towards sensitive information in various quarters can put the lives of our troops at correspondingly increasing risk.

- Lastly, government officials must find new and better ways to communicate America's mission abroad. This will mean embracing new ways of engaging people across the world, as the U.S. Information Agency and Radio Free Europe did during the Cold War. We will need to find ways to use the capabilities offered by the Information Age to counter the toxic images and lies that target the United States and to better inform the world about our nation's efforts.

I have no doubt that free and well-informed people can and will sift through the increasing volumes of information and over time develop a balanced view of our government, our Armed Forces, and our values and principles. The American system of openness works and I know our country will ultimately benefit, as we always have, from being on the side of freedom.

Mr. Rumsfeld is secretary of defense.