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## USAID in Indonesia: Expecting Waves of Gratitude

*by Diane Farsetta*

In September 2005, long-time Bush confidante Karen Hughes started her new job as Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. Her first official week of work was admittedly ambitious—a “listening tour” of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

At each stop, carefully selected audiences comprised of students on U.S.-funded scholarships, women professionals, and others deemed “safe” nonetheless deviated from the intended script, asking Hughes challenging questions and openly criticizing her answers. Commentators panned Hughes’ performance as “blundering,” and a “preachy and culturally insensitive . . . superficial PR blitz.” The exception was one high-profile opinion piece praising Hughes, published by *USA Today*, which was written “at the State Department’s invitation” and followed Hughes’ special briefing of the author, Geoffrey Cowan, the dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California.

On her next major trip, to Indonesia in late October, Hughes didn’t fare much better. The students invited to talk with her at Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University in Jakarta called the United States “two-faced” and “unfair.” Referring to the U.S. war on Iraq, one student asked Hughes, “Who’s the terrorists?” Another challenged, “Why does

## Flack Attack

World perceptions of the United States are at an all time low. For the past four years, the Center for Media and Democracy has been tracking Bush administration efforts to address poor international opinion.

There has been a disturbing trend, however, for U.S. “hearts and minds” campaigns to do more harm than good. Part of the reason is U.S. officials have little credibility in the eyes of the world. No stockpiled weapons of mass destruction have been found. Iraq is more dangerous than ever. The possibility for a stable, democratic Iraqi government appears to be years down the road.

While evidence piles up that the Bush White House waged a deceptive campaign to sell the invasion of Iraq to the U.S. public, administration globetrotters

act as if the international community is unaware of the dubious nature of White House claims.

In this issue of *PR Watch*, CMD senior researcher Diane Farsetta examines U.S. image-shaping efforts in Indonesia. *PR Watch* editor Laura Miller looks at several U.S. campaigns to influence and create media in the Middle East. Both stories point to questions of whether U.S. taxpayer-funded propaganda and public diplomacy are effective and to the underlying issue of what America’s role in the world should be.

While U.S. foreign policy concerning the Middle East and Afghanistan draws international scorn, U.S. inaction on global environmental problems also gets jeered. In his story “Battle Tanks: How Think Tanks Shape the Public Agenda,” SourceWatch editor Bob Burton reports on industry funded activities concerning a popular think-tank target—global warming.

America always act as if they are the policeman of the world?" Again, Hughes' responses were deemed inadequate by both audience members and outside observers.

Hughes' credibility was further undermined when she told the Indonesian students (and, hours later, repeated to a group of journalists) that Saddam Hussein had gassed hundreds of thousands of people. State Department officials later clarified that Hughes had confused the estimated total number of Iraqi deaths during Hussein's 24-year rule—300,000—with the 5,000 civilians killed in the 1988 attack on the city of Halabja.

Given her record so far, it may be comforting to note that Karen Hughes' overseas junkets are just one facet of the U.S. government's non-military attempts to combat terrorism and bolster its image worldwide. But are other approaches—primarily through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), but also including the Peace Corps, foreign embassies and other State Department programs—any more effective? A review of U.S. outreach to Indonesia, the Southeast Asian island nation with the world's largest Muslim population, suggests mixed results at best.

## U.S. REPUTATION TAKES AN ASIAN VACATION

There's no doubt that the United States' image has tarnished greatly over the last few years. In April 2005, the Program on International Policy Attitudes released a 23 country poll that found the United States holds "the dubious distinction of having the largest number of countries rating it as having a negative influence." While 47 percent of all respondents called the United States a "mostly negative" force in the world, that fraction was significantly higher in majority Muslim countries like Turkey (62 percent) and Indonesia (51 percent).

At first glance, Indonesia seems like it should be an easy audience. U.S. administrations and businesses

have had close relations with the country's leaders since General Suharto took power in the bloody coup of 1965-1966. (When Suharto—who was Indonesia's president for 32 years—visited the United States in 1995, a senior Clinton administration official called the repressive dictator "our kind of guy.") Moreover, Indonesia has suffered greatly from non-state terrorism, including the tragic Bali bombings of October 2002. Lastly, the vast majority of the population follows moderate forms of Islam.

According to the State Department, Indonesia's ambivalence towards the United States isn't because



***Under Secretary Karen Hughes greets students from the State Islamic University in Jakarta, Indonesia. (U.S. Embassy Jakarta photo)***

U.S. officials don't recognize the country's strategic importance. The State Department's budget request justification to Congress for fiscal year 2003 (the first filed after September 2001) states, "Indonesia's cooperation is vital in the war against terrorism." The Department's 2004 budget justification further explains, "Since a major reordering of priorities after 9/11, we have increased our efforts on educational exchange and outreach to the Indonesian Islamic community."

In fact, increased U.S. support for moderate

Muslim groups post-9/11 is a worldwide phenomenon. According to a April 2005 *U.S. News & World Report* article, "From military psychological-operations teams and CIA covert operatives to openly funded media and think tanks, Washington is plowing tens of millions of dollars into a campaign to influence not only Muslim societies but Islam itself." The lead agency in the "Muslim World Outreach" effort, the article continued, is USAID. And "in no country is the effort more pronounced than Indonesia. . . . Working behind the scenes, USAID now helps fund more than 30 Muslim organizations in the country."

USAID/Indonesia's Islamic outreach includes "workshops for Islamic preachers," "curriculum reform for schools from rural academies to Islamic universities," a "talk show on Islam and tolerance," a syndicated newspaper column, and funding for Islamic think tanks conducting "scholarly research showing liberal Islam's

compatibility with democracy and human rights," wrote *U.S. News & World Report*.

USAID's Washington DC staff refused to provide *PR Watch* with further information about these programs. "What you are asking here is information, if we have it, that is the responsibility of the mission in Indonesia," USAID press officer Harry Edwards told *PR Watch*. Repeated requests for USAID/Indonesia staffers to respond to *PR Watch*'s written questions went unanswered.

### A HELPING HAND OR A HIDDEN FIST?

"There is a certain danger to providing assistance to friendly Muslim groups—defining friendly as anyone who will take our money—because that tends to corrupt these groups in the eyes of Indonesians," Ed McWilliams, former political counsel at the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta, Indonesia, told *PR Watch*. In contrast, "in the mid-1990's, USAID was doing a good job in Indonesia." While U.S. policy overall supported the Suharto dictatorship, "USAID was supporting small Indonesian NGOs [non-government organizations]—environmental, legal and human rights groups," he said.

Growing student and labor movements, coupled with the Asian financial crisis, weakened and then ended Suharto's rule in 1998. That year, "as democracy could start to flourish," USAID's NGO grantees "came forward with protections for journalists, supporting the democratic process," recounted McWilliams. "You can't say that anymore, though.

Now we're trying to bribe organizations, including Islamic organizations, to win them to our side. That undermines the role that NGOs can play in a society. It also cheapens our image in Indonesia."

Soraya Oktaviani, an activist with the Indonesian Student League for Democracy now living in the United States, used to work with refugees as a member of an Indonesian NGO that received USAID funding. Still, she told *PR Watch* that USAID is "the worst organization among international organizations in Indonesia." Oktaviani said that a number of "progressive, democratic" Indonesian groups, including the Indonesian Forum for the Environment (known by its acronym, WALHI) and the Indonesian National Front for Labor Struggle, have rejected USAID funding.

The main questions Indonesian activists have about USAID, according to Oktaviani, is where the money comes from and why USAID requires its grantees to file so many detailed reports. "USAID is part of the United States, and they still want to control Indonesia—not in the old, colonial way, but in a new, 'generous,' sneaky way," she said. The reports that Oktaviani's former NGO filed with USAID every six months helped the United States "know what happens in Indonesia," she said. "They want to keep Indonesia in their pockets."

Dr. John Roosa, an assistant professor at the University of British Columbia's history department and the author of the forthcoming book, *Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement and Suharto's*

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*Coup d'Etat in Indonesia*, said that funding Indonesian Islamic groups isn't as straightforward as USAID or the State Department lets on. "There is a problem for Muslim groups accepting U.S. aid," he told *PR Watch*. "It's really a badge of dishonor, more for the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan than Iraq." He added, "this whole idea of promoting moderate Islam is a double-edged sword. It suggests that Indonesians are really just Muslims. . . . It reaffirms Muslim, not Indonesian, identity."

plunged from a horrid 83 percent to 54 percent," according to *U.S. News & World Report*.

Yet, John Roosa pointed out, "The U.S. hasn't been giving that much money to Indonesia," even after the tsunami. USAID reports that the amount of "emergency food assistance, relief supplies, temporary shelter, water and sanitation, health, livelihoods and other support for affected communities" in Indonesia totals \$53.3 million to date. According to a report by the Australian-based organization AID/WATCH, U.S. pledges

for tsunami relief were only the fifth most generous worldwide, following those by Australia, Germany, Japan and Canada.

As any good PR person knows, perception—not reality—is king. And USAID is careful to document and emphasize their post-tsunami assistance to Indonesia, giving the perception that it is very generous. Indeed, USAID/Indonesia's homepage is subtitled "Tsunami Response." The agency has released frequent "Tsunami Updates" since January 12 and written Tsunami Newsletters on a near-weekly basis, since February 8.

USAID "is hoping to capitalize on the goodwill it built up in the hardest hit areas of the tsunami disaster," the trade publication *PR Week* reported in September. To do so, the agency is launching PR campaigns in Sri Lanka and Indonesia that tout its relief efforts. The Indonesian campaign was described by *PR Week* as a \$350,000 to \$370,000 "30-day media blitz," including public service announcements "highlighting its 55 years of foreign aid" in Indonesia and "personal accounts" about "how USAID has benefited Indonesians." The PR campaign, slated to run through February 1, 2006, "comes on the heels of findings from focus groups in May showing Indonesians were generally unaware of the 'scale and result' of U.S. aid efforts, and were suspicious of them," *PR Week* noted.

(For more on how the tsunami changed U.S.-Indonesian relations, see the article "Tsunami Washes Away Indonesian Human Rights," in the First Quarter



**USAID emergency relief supplies arriving in Medan, Indonesia, December 31, 2005. (State Department photo)**

Roosa, who used to live in Jakarta and interacted frequently with NGOs there, found their view of USAID to be more nuanced. "The activists in Indonesia—every one of them—has a critique of U.S. imperialism and sees the war in Iraq as a crime," he told *PR Watch*. Yet, these groups are "desperate for funding. . . . There is no feeling that USAID is the opening wedge of imperialism or a sort of Trojan horse" for U.S. interests, he said.

#### **SPINNING THEM WHEN THEY'RE DOWN**

An important factor in how Indonesians perceive USAID and the United States in general is the U.S. response to the December 2004 tsunami. A March 2005 Indonesian public opinion poll, conducted "after the tsunami relief efforts led by the U.S. military," found that "America's unfavorability rating had

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2005 issue of *PR Watch*, which details how the Indonesian government used the devastation of Aceh to lobby for a resumption of U.S. military support.)

## **FOLLOW THE MONEY**

Regardless of whether USAID is ultimately deemed effective in burnishing the United States' image among Indonesians, the Bush administration has proclaimed Indonesia an increasingly important ally post-9/11. USAID, in turn, has been identified as a major forum for U.S. influence in Indonesia. Yet, USAID/Indonesia's budget has remained remarkably constant—even modest—over the past five years.

In fiscal year 2000 (October 1999 through September 2000), USAID/Indonesia's budget was \$112.6 million. That increased by less than 20 percent, to \$134.7 million, for fiscal year 2002, and decreased to

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***“In assisting the military, we are aiding a rogue institution that is the greatest threat to democracy and human rights in Indonesia,” Ed McWilliams told PR Watch.***

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\$121.6 million for fiscal year 2004. As described above, USAID/Indonesia funds have been shifted more towards moderate Islamic groups. But there is another, more major change in U.S. aid to Indonesia post-9/11—restrictions on military assistance have been removed.

In early November 2005, a U.S. Senate/House of Representatives conference committee agreed to maintain restrictions on Foreign Military Financing for and the export of lethal military equipment to Indonesia, until military reform and human rights conditions were met. But just weeks later, on November 22, the State Department “determined it is in the national security interests of the United States” to waive all such restrictions. This move, taken by Under Secretary R. Nicholas Burns, “under authority delegated by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice” while she was traveling overseas, is a pivotal policy change. U.S. military assistance to Indonesia has been restricted since the Indonesian military massacred nearly 300 peaceful protesters in then-occupied East Timor in 1991.

Based on his experience at the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta, Ed McWilliams thinks resuming military assistance is exactly the wrong thing to do. “In assisting the military, we are aiding a rogue institution that is the

greatest threat to democracy and human rights in Indonesia,” he told *PR Watch*. “In the past, military assistance has been withheld or given in very small amounts and this has helped to restrain abuses. Now that all restraints have been removed, we have abandoned all leverage. . . . Moreover, the State Department's move ignores that the Indonesian military has helped organize, funded and otherwise supported Islamic terror groups such as Laskar Jihad.”

John Roosa further points out that it's been the Indonesian police, not the military, who have contributed to Indonesia's counter-terror efforts. “The Bali bombs, the Marriott [Hotel] bombs [in Jakarta in August 2003]—all of these cases are being solved by the police. The military has had no role,” he told *PR Watch*. “This whole idea of backing the military to deal with terrorists is bogus. It's not necessary.”

Many observers have pointed out that no amount of U.S. outreach can overcome opposition to U.S. policies in the Middle East. “To be sure,” former Foreign Service officer John Brown wrote, “some of public diplomacy's long-term programs—such as educational exchanges—can keep the dialogue between America and the world open to some extent and sow the seeds of better mutual understanding in the future. But policies perceived as unilateral and militaristic . . . will be seen in a world where access to information is increasing by the day as the application of brute, illegitimate force.”

Far from learning these difficult lessons, the Bush administration seems determined to repeat the same mistakes in Southeast Asia. Instead of engaging in real dialogue, the United States is relying on paid Muslim endorsers, PR campaigns, limited humanitarian assistance and growing support for one of the world's most brutal militaries to endear itself to Indonesians. Don't be surprised if the results are dismal. ■

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# Victory of Spin

by Laura Miller

More examples of the Bush administration's manipulation of news are spilling out into U.S. newspapers, raising further questions about how the White House continues to spin its "War on Terror." The *Los Angeles Times* reported on November 30 the U.S. military "is 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 articles, written by U.S. military 'information operations' troops, are translated into Arabic and placed in Baghdad newspapers." The stories promoted the efforts of U.S. and Iraqi troops and denounced terrorists.

The *Times'* Mark Mazzetti and Borzou Daragahi wrote, "Records and interviews indicate that the U.S. has paid Iraqi newspapers to run dozens of such articles, with headlines such as 'Iraqis Insist on Living Despite Terrorism,' since the effort began this year." The Pentagon hired the Lincoln Group to translate and place the stories, in an effort "to mask any connection with the U.S. military," the *Times* wrote. The *Times* article got the attention of reporters in Washington, who brought it up at press briefings at the White House, State Department and Pentagon, where official spokesmen insisted that they needed more facts before they could respond to journalists' questions.

On December 1, *Knight-Ridder* reported the military's priorities in Iraq had skewed away from truth telling and towards propagandizing. "[P]ublic affairs staff at the American-run multinational headquarters in Baghdad have been combined with information operations experts in an organization known as the Information Operations Task Force. The unit's public affairs officers are subservient to the information operations experts, military and defense officials said. The result is a 'fuzzing up' of what's supposed to be a strict division between public affairs, which provides factual information about U.S. military operations, and infor-

mation operations, which can use propaganda and doctored or false information to influence enemy actions, perceptions and behavior," Jonathan S. Landay wrote.

Concerns about covert propaganda efforts in Iraq and possible blowback were raised by journalists and by politicians from both the Republican and Democratic parties. Two days after the *LA Times* story broke, the Pentagon provided a briefing to Senator John Warner (R-Va.), the chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee. "Well, seriously, there's so many questions

that are unanswered," he told reporters after the meeting. "So much more has got to be brought forth and assessed by myself, as just one member of Congress, and others, until we can reach any conclusions as to what the serious problem is and so forth." Other than saying that the Pentagon intended to investigate further, Warner offered few details about the Pentagon's classified public affairs contracts:

QUESTION: Senator, if the work of the Lincoln Group is to get out this information, get out the facts, why was the operation classified? Or is there a . . .

WARNER: Because of some of the material that they have to deal with.

QUESTION: What kind of material?

WARNER: We did not get into those specifics. I will eventually get into it and try and

ascertain the reason for classification, but much of the work is classified. And I have to sort of skip around between what was briefed classified and unclassified.

QUESTION: Senator, it's a little hard for journalists to understand why getting out truthful facts is a classified mission that you can't tell us about.

WARNER: And that's the ultimate question you've got to answer. And at this moment I can't give you any facts to help you on that.

## A PR FIRM FOR 'HOSTILE ENVIRONMENTS'

Founded in 1999, the Lincoln Group is a relative newcomer to the world of defense contractors. In Octo-



*U.S. Army PSYOPS poster.*

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ber 2004 under the name of Iraqex, the firm won a \$6 million PR contract from the U.S.-led Multi-National Corps-Iraq to design and execute an “aggressive advertising and public relations campaign that will accurately inform the Iraqi people of the coalition’s goals and gain their support,” journalist Jason Vest reported. In

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***“To some, PSYOPS is a backwater military discipline of leaflet dropping and radio propaganda. To a growing group of information war technologists, it is the nexus of fantasy and reality,” William Arkin wrote for the Washington Post.***

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November, the trade publication *O’Dwyer’s PR Daily* reported that Iraqex was seeking interns to go to Iraq. Their duties would include “monitoring of Iraqi media, development of press releases and media material, interaction with Iraqi media for information requests and to pitch stories, and support for media events.” Iraqex, however, was reluctant to talk to the media about itself or its work in Iraq, turning away journalists’ questions.

In June 2005, the *Washington Post* reported that the Pentagon had just awarded three contracts, worth up to \$300 million over five years, to three companies—the Lincoln Group and long-time defense contractors SYColeman, Inc. and Science Applications International Corporation. The companies were to “inject more creativity into its psychological operations efforts to improve foreign public opinion about the United States, particularly the military,” according to the *Post*.

The Lincoln Group, which claims 250 employees worldwide, describes itself as a “strategic communications and public relations firm providing insight and influence in challenging and hostile environments.” In response to the *LA Times* story, the firm issued a press release stressing “truthful reporting.” The brief statement explains:

“Our priority has always been, and continues to be, accuracy and timeliness. Our clients, our employees and the Iraqis who support this effort have maintained a commitment to battle terror with a powerful weapon—the truth.

“We counter the lies, intimidation, and pure evil of terror with factual stories that highlight the heroism and sacrifice of the Iraqi people and their struggle for free-

dom and security. We are encouraged by their sacrifice and proud to help them tell their side of the story.”

Reporting for *Government Executive* in early December 2005, Vest examined the Pentagon’s use of outside contractors. He talked to Professor Philip M. Taylor of England’s University of Leeds, an expert on psychological operations and propaganda and a consultant to the American and British governments, about the private PR contracts. Taylor said, “Outsourcing is either a sign of recognition that the military is not terribly good at certain types of persuasion, or a way of distancing the U.S. government from the messages. If that company then does something which is controversial, the government can say, ‘Sorry, it wasn’t us, but we’ll fire the company that did this supposedly in our name.’”

## MILITARY PSYOPS

“PSYOPS, as the military calls it, seek to exploit human vulnerabilities in enemy governments, militaries and populations to pursue national and battlefield objectives,” William Arkin wrote for the *Washington Post* in 1999. “To some, PSYOPS is a backwater military discipline of leaflet dropping and radio propaganda. To a growing group of information war technologists, it is the nexus of fantasy and reality. Being able to manufacture convincing audio or video, they say, might be the difference in a successful military operation or coup.”

Military accounts of recent PYSOPS work in Iraq have fallen mostly on the benign side of the scale. A recent video news release produced by the Army & Air Force Hometown News Service explained PYSOPS work in Baghdad in simple cheerleader terms: “These U.S. troops are preparing for a different kind of mission. They’re getting ready to arm Iraqis with information. Using different media formats, psychological operations spreads messages about everything from safety issues to coalition activity.” The story focuses on the distribution of the PYSOPS-produced free newspaper *Baghdad Now*.

*Baghdad Now* has been the subject of a handful of military “news” stories, but descriptions of the paper



vary. It was published either monthly or bi-monthly, with a circulation reported in one story as 70,000, and in another as 750,000. A February 2004 *DefendAmerica News* report described the paper as “written in Arabic and English by Iraqi journalists and also [containing] news from the neighborhoods’ military leaders.”

A *DefendAmerica News* story from March 2004 reported that the 1st Brigade, 1st Armored Division Fire Support Element unit was responsible for delivering “*Baghdad Now*, a community newspaper produced for the residents of Baghdad, working with the Division Public Affairs Section to determine public reaction to the media and assisting reporters.” The story explained that the unit goes “into the community with civil affairs teams, analyze[s] data with counterintelligence spe-

uting the paper creates an effective medium for communication, opening many doors previously closed to the soldiers, [361st Psychological Operations Company] members said. According to [Staff Sgt. Richard K.] Wilson, handing out newspapers gives the soldiers ‘instant access’ to the community,” *DefenseLINK News* reported in their December 2003 story titled, “Psychological Operations Team Makes Friends Through Newspaper.”

When it comes to cloak-and-dagger information warfare, others pale before the Washington-D.C. based Rendon Group. Going back to at least 9/11, the secretive strategic communications firm headed by former Democratic operative John Rendon has been the Pentagon’s top choice for its juiciest classified operations. In a rare interview, Rendon “openly boasted” to journal-

ist James Bamford of “the sweep and importance of his firm’s efforts as a for-profit spy.” Rendon is at the shadow center of the Iraq war, marketing a “clandestine operation—part espionage, part PR campaign—that had been set up and funded by the CIA and the Pentagon for the express purpose of selling the world a war,” Bamford wrote for *Rolling Stone*.

Little is known about Rendon’s current work for the Pentagon. The Center for Media and Democracy has written several articles on other campaigns by Rendon, most associated with U.S. military activities going back to the 1989 invasion of Panama. However, Rendon’s role in the current invasion of

Iraq, although little noted, cannot be understated. As the dust settled following 1991’s Operation Desert Storm, the Rendon Group—working on the CIA’s tab—created the Iraqi National Congress and paved the road to Capitol Hill and the White House for its leader Ahmed Chalabi. The INC and Chalabi are now recognized as the source of much of the faulty intelligence used by the Bush administration to justify the March 2003 Iraq invasion. Congress has never investigated Rendon’s role in the manufacturing of false intelligence on Iraq.



***U.S. soldiers distribute the Arabic-English newspaper Baghdad Now. (DefenseLINK News photo by Sgt. Mark S. Rickert)***

cialists to determine a community’s mood and provide[s] force protection for the forward operating base and for convoys. ‘We’ve added a whole new level to our arsenal,’ said Sgt. 1st Class Darrin M. Domko, brigade fire support sergeant. Instead of their traditional weapons, these artillerymen use word processors and fight on the information battlefield. ‘Now we can write articles for the local papers,’ Domko said.”

According to the military stories written about *Baghdad Now*, distribution of the paper by PSYOPS forces was an important aspect of the paper. “Distrib-



Bamford's *Rolling Stone* exposé, like the *LA Times*' reporting on the Lincoln Group, has pulled pieces of White House and Defense Department deception out of darkness, illustrating the scope of the Bush administration's duplicity on Iraq and the "War on Terror" and filling the void of Congressional oversight.

### 'VICTORY' FOR THE WHITE HOUSE

As the *LA Times* was reporting on the Lincoln Group's media manipulation, George W. Bush was announcing to cadets at the U.S. Naval Academy the latest repackaging of the bloody mess in Iraq—the pollster-vetted "Strategy for Victory in Iraq."

Using the now-familiar White House rhetorical technique of simple repetition to get its message across, The *New York Times* reported Bush "used the word victory 15 times in the address; 'Plan for Victory' signs crowded the podium he spoke on; and the word heavily peppered the accompanying 35-page National Security Council document titled, 'Our National Strategy for Victory in Iraq.'" According to the *Times*, the speech's "relentless focus on the theme of victory strongly reflected a new voice in the administration: Peter D. Feaver, a Duke University political scientist who joined the N.S.C. staff as a special adviser in June and has closely studied public opinion on the war."

But unlike earlier media campaigns, the attempt to spin away Americans' sinking feelings towards the President and the war may not bear fruit. White House propagandists appear increasingly blinded by their own delusions, so out of touch with the grim realities in Iraq and Afghanistan—not to mention U.S. communities—that their ability to construct new propaganda is weakened.

White House spokesman Scott McClellan appeared uncomfortable when presented with a description of the Iraq situation that fell outside his own well-rehearsed spin, even though it was written into the President's "Victory" address:

QUESTION: —when you guys frame this, as you just did, it's always about the war on terror. But by the President's own account in his speech on Wednesday, the jihadists are the smallest of the three elements which are fighting U.S. forces in Iraq.

MR. McCLELLAN: What did he say about the jihadists?

QUESTION: You know what he said about the jihadists.

MR. McCLELLAN: He said, the smallest, but most lethal.



**President Bush at the U.S. Naval Academy on Nov. 30, 2005. (White House photo)**

QUESTION: Well, yes, but you frame it as a war on terror, and it's about much more than that, as he, himself, said.

MR. McCLELLAN: It is about the war on terrorism. It's about much more than Iraq.

QUESTION: It's about the rejection of the power that was held by the Sunni minority, it's about rejection of foreign presence in the country. It's about a lot of things in addition to the jihadists.

MR. McCLELLAN: It's about the broader war on terrorism, is what it's about, Bill. And maybe you have a different understanding about it, but the President understands clearly the stakes that are involved in this broader war on terrorism. That's why he takes a comprehensive view of how we succeed in this war on terrorism. And that's why he's taken the fight to the enemy. That's why he's supporting efforts to expand freedom and democracy in the heart of a dangerous region of the world. And we will continue to act. We will continue to support those who want to live in freedom. And Iraq will inspire the rest of the Middle East and help us lay the foundations of peace that I've been talking about.

### TOMLINSON'S BROADCASTING BOARD OF GOVERNORS

"In a perfect world, there would be no need for Alhurra in the countries we serve because they would have a free press and media that served the cause of advancing a positive, modern vision for democracy, peace, and prosperity in the region. But indigenous media in the Middle East, regardless of their popularity, are not now uniformly and consistently serving



**Alhurra's logo.** (<http://www.alhurra.com>)

these purposes. Alhurra and [Radio] Sawa do," Alhurra head Moucafac Harb explained to the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations of the U.S. House Committee on International Relations, which was looking into questions regarding the U.S.-funded TV network's procurement and hiring practices.

The most public of U.S. created media currently beamed into Iraq and the larger Arabic speaking region are Alhurra, an Arabic language satellite TV network, and Radio Sawa, a 24-hour radio service that broadcasts Arabic and Western pop music and news headlines. Both are projects of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, which also oversees Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, Radio and TV Martí, and Radio Farda. The BBG is the independent federal agency in charge of "U.S. government and government sponsored, non-military, international broadcasting."

However, BBG's independence is now being called into question. The agency is headed by none other than Kenneth Tomlinson, the controversial former head of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, who has been charged with injecting his strong Republican bias into the federally funded agencies that he chaired. The CPB was created to insulate public broadcasting from political interference. Tomlinson was recently cited for using "political tests" as a criteria for recruiting a new President/CEO for CPB. *The Nation's* Eric Alterman credits CPB's inspector general with exposing Tomlinson for "receiving advice and possibly instructions directly from the top—(acting President) Karl Rove."

Questions are piling up concerning the BBG under Tomlinson's leadership. The public broadcasting trade publication *Current* reported in November 2005, "Tomlinson is also under investigation by the State

Department Inspector General's Office for what he's done as chairman of the Broadcasting Board of Governors. Meanwhile, two other agencies overseen by the BBG are embroiled in controversies both public and private. The fledgling Arab-language TV channel Alhurra is the subject of three separate government investigations (by the State Department, a House International Relations subcommittee and the Government Accountability Office). And journalists at Voice of America are assailing their BBG-appointed boss for trying to tilt news stories more favorably toward the Bush administration."

Can Alhurra and Voice of America employees confidently report negative stories on the Bush administration under Tomlinson's partisan watch? When does "news" become "public affairs" and when does that become "deceptive propaganda"? The fog of influence and impropriety that swirls around Tomlinson and the BBG runs contrary to what Tomlinson describes as the agency's mission—"to ensure and safeguard the integrity, quality, and effectiveness of our international broadcasters."

At the November 10 House International Relations subcommittee hearing, Tomlinson told an Alhurra success story. "And here's how one Arabic-language newspaper—Al Quds Al Arabi, by no means friendly to the United States—described Alhurra's coverage of the elections in Egypt: 'Alhurra television emerged like a black stallion in this satellite competition, since it was able to attract normal viewers and activists alike thanks to its wide range of guests from the opposition who are not fearful of criticizing the Mubarak regime, as well as Mubarak and his family specifically, while viewers showed disinterest in Aljazeera's coverage.' The article's headline: 'Admiring Alhurra's Egyptian Elections Coverage; Their newscasts have become like family in the Egyptian news environment,'" Tomlinson testified.

Given what is being revealed now about information operations in Iraq, Tomlinson's quoting of an Arabic news story invites further questions: Who wrote that story? Did the author have a relationship with the U.S. government or military?

The potential for propaganda blowback in this information age is a given. But if reported successes in the Middle East are themselves the products of U.S. psychological operations in the region, the "victories" the American public sees may be nothing more than the victory of spin. U.S. citizens need to face these critical questions: What kind of democracy exists in a manipulated media environment? And where does it leave U.S. credibility in the eyes of the world? ■

# Battle Tanks: How Think Tanks Shape the Public Agenda

by Bob Burton

If you were the least bit nervous about all the worrying reports—from leading scientists, insurance companies and even the Pentagon—about human-induced climate change, don't worry: the Frontiers of Freedom (FF), a right-leaning think tank, is here to reassure you.

FF has established the Center for Science and Public Policy (CSPP) to alert "policy makers, the media, and the public to unreliable scientific claims and unjustified alarmism which often lead to public harm." If you are so inclined, you can subscribe to the "non-profit, non-partisan" *Climate & Environment Weekly*, CSPP's email bulletin that keeps track of why climate change is not the problem many make it out to be.

But if you want to find out who funds FF's climate change program, you won't find out by checking their website or annual report. However, over at ExxonMobil's website you'll discover that the CSPP was established in 2002 with a \$100,000 grant from the world's biggest oil company.

ExxonMobil is so supportive of FF that in the last five years it has invested another \$617,000 of shareholder cash to promote "informed discussion" on climate change issues.

Establishing the impact of an industry front organization like FF is not straightforward. However, it is beyond dispute that ExxonMobil's largesse towards a network of think tanks, skeptics and advocacy groups has had a substantial impact in stalling, and may yet fatally wound, the Kyoto treaty aimed at limiting human-induced climate change. In 2004 alone ExxonMobil invested \$6.4 million from its "public information and policy research" program in a range of institutions, including many think tanks like FF with a focus on climate change. With a budget of just over \$790,000 in 2003, FF is a minnow amongst the over 1000 think tanks in the U.S. beavering away to influence public opinion. FF and its ilk are keen to ensure that the Kyoto treaty, which came into force earlier this year, doesn't get extended beyond 2012, when it is currently set to expire.

In late July, President George W. Bush announced a deal with the governments of Australia, China, India, Japan and South Korea to emphasize certain technical policies that the energy industry loves: "clean" coal, nukes, and the Holy Grail of them all, pumping cap-

tured greenhouse gases underground. "We are taking action on climate change in a broad, pro-growth context," Bush said reassuringly. The unstated hope of the block of six countries is that by 2012 their voluntary, corporate-friendly measures will supersede mandatory targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

While companies like ExxonMobil were discreetly quiet, traditional opponents of Kyoto, such as James K. Glassman, were ecstatic. It was, he wrote in a column for Tech Central Station, "a refreshing and effective alternative route to tackling the problem of climate change." TCS is "supported by sponsoring corporations that share [its] faith in technology and free markets" such as AT&T, McDonald's, General Motors, Merck, Microsoft, and yes, ExxonMobil, which sluiced \$95,000 their way in 2003. The site is published by DCI Group, an international "strategic public affairs services" firm. Glassman is the site's founder and a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), a conservative think tank that employs, among others, Second Lady Lynne Cheney, Contract with America architect Newt Gingrich, Reagan cabinet member Jeanne Kirkpatrick and *Bell Curve* author Charles Murray.

While FF concentrates primarily on countering the environmental movement, the largest conservative think tanks—such as the American Enterprise Institute—extol the virtues of everything from privatizing Social Security to the



**World War II U.S. tanks, "helping in the development of a formidable Australian mechanized army." (Australian Commonwealth photo, U.S. Library of Congress archive)**

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desirability of school vouchers and a muscular foreign policy.

## TOO NOISY TO THINK

While the term “think tanks” conjures up an image of quiet studied reflection on weighty topics, the reality could hardly be further from the truth.

Think tanks are the intellectual equivalent of battle tanks, which rely on a combination of speed, defensive armor and offensive firepower to overwhelm opposition forces. The goal of conservative think tanks, in combination with air cover provided by conservative commentators, is to clear the way for supporting politicians and officials to implement policies once deemed too toxic for even conservatives to touch.

In 1993, the former senior vice president of the Heritage Foundation, Burton Yale Pines, himself adopted the military analogy, describing think tanks as “the shock troops of the conservative revolution.”

Battle tanks are noisy beasts, too. The media watchdog group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) calculated that, trawled through the Nexis database of media stories, think tanks defined as “conservative” or “center-right” received over 15,000 media citations, representing 50 percent of all think tank references in U.S. news in 2004. Including “centrist” groups brings that total up to 83 percent. The top 10 think tanks scored more than 1,000 mentions each, with the top five accounting for just over half of the total. Leading the charge were the centrist Brookings Institution, the conservative Heritage Foundation, the AEI, the centrist Council on Foreign Relations and the conservative/libertarian Cato Institute.

The enthusiasm of corporations and conservative philanthropists for funding think tanks is based on what is known in the PR trade as the third-party technique—finding a more credible organization to articulate what might otherwise be seen as a self-interested policy.

To be effective, think tanks don’t need to appear in peer-reviewed academic publications. Indeed, much of their effectiveness comes from their willingness to eschew the cautiousness and caveats of traditional academic work. Instead of balancing pro and cons and recommending further research like an academic enterprise, a think tanker will deliver a snappy policy prescription. Certainty sells.

For politicians, think tanks provide access to a pool of researchers capable of reducing a complex policy area to a set of conservative proposals and a sound-bite. For the media, the allure of think tankers is their accessibility, sound-bite savvy and a level of specialist knowl-

edge greater than that of the reporter. So much the better if they were a former administration official or have an expansive publications list enabling them to be packaged as “experts.”

In short, think tanks are a way in which media outlets and politicians can outsource the time consuming business of research and independent thinking.

And lots of arms-length noise is just what the deep-pocketed funders of the think tanks are looking for. Major conservative donor Roger Hertog told a 2002 Philanthropy Roundtable conference that by funding think tanks “you get huge leverage for your dollars.” Much of the big money behind the conservative and libertarian think tanks can be traced back to foundations created by a handful of very wealthy individuals: Charles G. Koch and his brother David H. Koch, Richard Mellon Scaife, Adolph Coors, Lynde and Harry Bradley and John M. Olin.

While individually they would be unlikely to attract a receptive audience if they stood on a street corner with a megaphone, think tanks enable their funders to project their preferred political views to a much broader audience. Critical to their success has been a willingness to provide large unrestricted grants over the long haul to popularize what were initially seen as radical ideas and policies. Corporations, on the other hand, tend to send shareholder funds to conservative think tanks to fund campaigns that match their more immediate needs.

For instance, internal tobacco industry documents reveal that on one occasion in 1996, Malcolm Wallop, the chairman of FF and a former Republican senator from Wyoming, contacted Phillip Morris and railed against a Food and Drug Administration (FDA) rule aimed at restricting tobacco industry marketing targeting youth as “an assault on the First Amendment.” He noted his upcoming gig as guest host of “The Right Side,” Armstrong Williams’ syndicated radio program.

Accompanying the letter was a funding pitch. Wallop spent one hour of the three-hour program attacking the FDA rule. The following year, Wallop sent a funding request for \$15,000 to Loews Corporation, the parent company of Lorillard Tobacco, citing his work with Armstrong Williams as one of his group’s successes. “Like any professional public policy group, we try to match up our contributors with specific issue areas,” he explained.

## MIXING IT WITH THE MEDIA

The effectiveness of many think tanks owes much to a simple set of principles: obscure the funding source

behind the advocacy, court journalists with impressive-looking, easy-to-use, masticated research and ready-to-roll talking heads, and dovetail advocacy in with allies to develop an “echo chamber” effect.

The Heritage Foundation, established in 1973 by conservative activist Paul Weyrich, had a budget of \$37 million in 2004—which is larger than that of the combined funding of the largest “progressive” think tanks. It also arguably has the best media massaging operation.

For those hunting for story leads, Heritage offers an e-mail bulletin on the “hottest topics” with contact details of approved experts. “Broadcast live from Capitol Hill? To reserve a fully-equipped Heritage studio, call the Media Hotline,” the foundation states on its website. On a separate Policy Experts website, a reporter can find hundreds of Heritage-approved experts, classified into 160 areas of expertise. For editors looking for free content to fill opinion pages, many of Heritage’s 200 staff are ready to help. In 2004, Heritage boasts that it provided over 900 free op-eds and commentary pieces to newspapers and online services with “more than 90 of them in Top 10 papers.”

Heritage’s Center for Media and Public Policy has also forged a role for itself in training reporters. In 2004 alone, its director, Mark Tapscott, conducted 13 special sessions in “computer-assisted research and reporting” (CARR) that “trained 186 editors, producers and reporters.” Heritage’s work on CARR projects even goes as far as becoming “partners with journalists,” with a preference for assisting on projects “concerning healthcare, homeland security, defense, Social Security and federal spending issues.” The foundation not only provides access to its economic modeling capacity, but also offers to “build computer models for specific news projects, as we did for Cox Newspapers’ Washington Bureau.”

The Heritage strategy is seductively simple: to provide a service that media companies are unwilling to pay for themselves, thereby building a relationship with reporters and establishing the foundation as a source of information for future stories. And once on the think tanks’ free drip-feed, journalists are likely to go back for more.

The foundation is also a player in the online media world, having founded the conservative news portal Townhall.com and providing a weekly internet radio



**World War I recruitment poster by artist August William Hutf. (Library of Congress archive image)**

program, “The Insider.” (Based on March 2004 data, the conservative direct mail pioneer Richard A. Vigeurie dubbed Townhall.com as the fifth highest ranking conservative news site, rating a few places higher than a mainstream Time.com).

Heritage also caters to up-and-coming conservatives by running a training program to “instruct” junior congressional staffers in “the key ideas . . . necessary for them to address current legislative issues and grapple with contemporary politics and policy.”

How does its media work actually play out? While corporations contribute only a small percentage of Heritage’s income, some of these sponsors have significant interests in the foundation’s output. There’s defense contractor Lockheed Martin, finance companies

*continued on page 16*

## CMD in the News

The Center for Media and Democracy is at the forefront of identifying manipulative PR and propaganda. Here are just a few examples of recent media appearances of the Center and its staff:

- Benjamin Duncan talked to the Center's Laura Miller for his September 23 article "Marketing America, take two," for *Aljazeera.Net*. "[Under Secretary Karen Hughes] has no credibility in the eyes of the world because she was so key to selling the war in Iraq," Miller said. "It signals that they're seeing [the war on terrorism] not just as a military conflict. . . . At this point everyone seems to agree that anti-American sentiment is something we need to address."
- Donald G. McNeil, Jr. wrote in his October 4 article "U.S. Offers New Animal Feed Rules, but Critics Assail Them" in the *New York Times*, "'The F.D.A. and the meat industry is totally committed to continuing the practice of feeding slaughterhouse waste to cows,' said John Stauber, the author of *Mad Cow, U.S.A.*, who has repeatedly called for a ban on feeding all animal protein to livestock. Meat processors like Cargill and Tyson Foods, he argued, also own rendering plants, want to keep exporting cheap protein or feeding it to their own animals and have lobbied hard to keep the right to do so."
- The *Capital Times*' (Madison, WI) Rob Zaleski, talked to the Center's Diane Farsetta for his October 7 article "Bush takes heat over propaganda." "This was an incredibly strong ruling by the [Government Accountability Office]. And the concern is that the GAO does not in and of itself have any sort of enforcement capabilities. So what we need is to have people be active and contact members of Congress to voice their opinions about this," Farsetta told Zaleski, referring to the GAO ruling on the Education Department's PR contracts, including Armstrong Williams and the Ketchum PR firm.
- The *Washington Times*' Cheryl Wetzstein, talked to the Center's Sheldon Rampton for her October 16 article "'Help! Mom!' casts liberals as villains." Rampton "voiced concern about marketing the



***CMD's John Stauber (right) and Sheldon Rampton (second from right) with Andrew Rohn and Catherine Capellaro, the creators of Walmartopia, a musical comedy running in Madison, Wisc. Stauber and Rampton did a post-show talk in Decemeber on corporate PR.***

book to children. 'If this were a parody for adult entertainment, I would see it as that. But if this is a book that is actually intended for kids to read, then I think there's a problem with it,' Mr. Rampton said. Children aren't necessarily sophisticated enough to understand these kinds of policies, and 'liberals under the bed' sounds like 'monsters under the bed,' Mr. Rampton said. 'Kids have enough real things that their parents need to teach them to stay away from.'

- Writing for *Forbes*, Michael Freedman interviewed Rampton for his October 31 article "From Red to Green: Paul Gilding once ran Greenpeace and fought Big Business. Now he works for some of the biggest companies in the world." Freedman wrote, "Greenpeaceniks who defect to the corporate world often 'trade on their reputation. That's definitely been the case with some of Paul Gilding's actions,' says Sheldon Rampton."
- On December 9, 2005, Miller appeared on "Afternoon Edition" with Danuta Pfeiffer on Eugene, Oregon's "Progressive Talk" radio. "We are living in a world run by spin doctors, and it's worse than you think," the show's website stated. "We talk with Laura Miller from the Center for Media and Democracy about the war, PR, propaganda, the men in charge and the effect on America." ■

# Support the Center for Media & Democracy

The Center is a non-profit, public interest organization that strengthens participatory democracy by investigating and exposing spin and propaganda, and by promoting media literacy and citizen journalism.

The Center for Media and Democracy serves social change activists, journalists, researchers, policymakers and the public at large in the following ways:

- Countering propaganda by investigating and reporting on behind-the-scenes public relations campaigns by corporations, industries, governments and other powerful institutions.
- Informing and assisting grassroots citizen activism that promotes public health, economic justice, ecological sustainability and human rights.
- Promoting media literacy to help the public recognize the forces shaping the information they receive about issues that affect their lives.
- Sponsoring "open content" media that enable citizens from all walks of life to "be the media" and to participate in creating media content.

The Center for Media and Democracy is a 501(c)3 non-profit. Donations are tax-deductable as allowed by law.

*Banana Republicans: How the Right Wing Is Turning America Into a One-Party State*  
Tarcher/Penguin  
2004

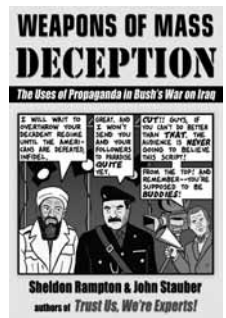


*Trust Us, We're Experts: How Industry Manipulates Science and Gambles With Your Future*  
Tarcher/  
Putnam 2001

*Toxic Sludge Is Good For You: Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry*  
Common  
Courage  
Press 1995



*Weapons of Mass Deception: The Uses of Propaganda in Bush's War on Iraq*  
Tarcher/Penguin  
2003



*Mad Cow USA*  
Common  
Courage Press  
1997, 2004

Books can be ordered from the Center on the form below.

<p>Name _____</p> <p>Address _____</p> <p>City, State &amp; Zip _____</p> <p>Phone _____</p> <p>Email _____</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Send me the free <i>Weekly Spin</i> email newsletter.</p> <p>I am ordering: (price includes shipping &amp; handling)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <i>Banana Republicans</i> \$15</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <i>Weapons of Mass Deception</i> \$15</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <i>Trust Us, We're Experts</i> \$20</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <i>Mad Cow USA</i> \$20</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <i>Toxic Sludge Is Good For You</i> \$15</p>	<p>I am contributing:</p> <table style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> \$1,000</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> \$500</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> \$250</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> \$125</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> \$50</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> other</td> </tr> </table> <p>(Contributions of \$35 or more include a one-year subscription to PR Watch.)</p> <p>I would like to become a Sustaining Member, donating \$_____ each month.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> My check is enclosed.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Please charge my credit card:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>Credit Card Brand, Number _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>Expiration Date, Security Code _____</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Please return to:  <b>CMD, 520 University Ave, Suite 227          Madison WI 53703</b></p>	<input type="checkbox"/> \$1,000	<input type="checkbox"/> \$500	<input type="checkbox"/> \$250	<input type="checkbox"/> \$125	<input type="checkbox"/> \$50	<input type="checkbox"/> other
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Here's what you can do to help move our *No Fake News!* campaign forward:

- **Call your members of Congress** to raise the issue with your elected representatives! Tell your two Senators that the Prepackaged News Story Announcement Act (S 967) should be strengthened to require "conspicuous" disclosure for all broadcast material produced or funded by the government, including continuous, on-screen disclosure for VNRs. The Congressional switchboard number, which can be used to reach all Senate and House offices, is 202-224-3121.
- **Sign the letter** to Congress and Attorney General Gonzales, demanding that the Education Department's misappropriation of taxpayer dollars be prosecuted. On September 30, the Government Accountability Office ruled that public relations work done for the Department of Education by the PR firm Ketchum violated federal law, in putting taxpayer dollars towards "covert propaganda" and "purely partisan activities."
- **Sign the petition** from the Center for Media and Democracy and Free Press, protesting the government's use of VNRs. The petition demands "that the Bush administration stop using our tax dollars to create fake news reports."
- **Support the work of the Center for Media and Democracy** by subscribing to PR Watch, making a donation, or throwing a house party to raise funds for our "No Fake News!" campaign. Email [judith@prwatch.org](mailto:judith@prwatch.org) for more information.

For more information on any of these items and links to the letter and petition, visit <http://www.prwatch.org/nofakenews>.



## Battle Tanks *continued from page 13*

Mortgage Insurance Companies of America and Merrill Lynch, auto companies Honda and Ford, drug and medical companies Johnson & Johnson, Glaxo-SmithKline, America's Health Insurance Plans, Bristol Myers-Squibb, Pfizer and PhRMA, the oil company ChevronTexaco, UPS and Microsoft.

Between 1998 and 2003, ExxonMobil was a generous funder of the Heritage Foundation, shoveling \$528,000 into its trough (though it got nothing in 2004). Not surprisingly, on its website Heritage lambastes the Kyoto treaty on climate change as "fatally flawed." Its Policy Experts lists the foundation's Vice President of External Relations, Becky Norton Dunlop, as one possible climate change contact. Dunlop's biographical information on the foundation's website notes that "her responsibilities include the departments engaged in strategic outreach and communication to . . . business leaders."

In 2002—a year in which ExxonMobil gave the foundation \$75,000—Dunlop was interviewed by reporters from the *Houston Chronicle* and Cox News Service, which syndicated the resulting article to the *Palm Beach Post* and the *Austin American-Statesman*. While Dunlop expressed her scorn for the idea that human-induced climate change was underway, neither article mentioned ExxonMobil's funding or indicated that she had even been asked about who funded the foundation.

As with any serious modern attempt to understand power, critical inquiries should start with the old journalistic maxim "follow the money." Tanks, after all, aren't much use without heavy armor for sponsors to hide behind. ■

This article originally appeared in *LiP* magazine's Winter 2006 issue. For more information about *LiP*, visit <http://www.lipmagazine.org>.