

Another Runaway General: Army Deploys Psy-Ops on U.S. Senators



Sen. John McCain walks with Lt. Gen. William Caldwell at Camp Eggers in Kabul, Afghanistan on January 6, 2009. *Credit:* Senior Airman Brian Ybarbo/U.S.

The U.S. Army illegally ordered a team of soldiers specializing in "psychological operations" to manipulate visiting American senators into providing more troops and funding for the war, *Rolling Stone* has learned – and when an officer tried to stop the operation, he was railroaded by military investigators.

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The orders came from the command of Lt. Gen. William Caldwell, a three-star general in charge of training Afghan troops – the linchpin of U.S. strategy in the war. Over a four-month period last year, a military cell devoted to what is known as "information operations" at Camp Eggers in Kabul was repeatedly pressured to target visiting senators and other VIPs who met with Caldwell. When the unit resisted the order, arguing that it violated U.S. laws prohibiting the use of propaganda against American citizens, it was subjected to a campaign of retaliation.

"My job in psy-ops is to play with people's heads, to get the enemy to behave the way we want them to behave," says Lt. Colonel Michael Holmes, the leader of the IO unit, who received an official reprimand after bucking orders. "I'm prohibited from doing that to our own people. When you ask me to try to use these skills on senators and congressman, you're crossing a line."

[Photos: Psy-Ops and the General](#)

The list of targeted visitors was long, according to interviews with members of the IO team and internal documents obtained by *Rolling Stone*. Those singled out in the campaign included senators John McCain, Joe Lieberman, Jack Reed, Al Franken and Carl Levin; Rep. Steve Israel of the House Appropriations Committee; Adm. Mike Mullen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; the Czech ambassador to Afghanistan; the German interior minister, and a host of influential think-tank analysts.

The incident offers an indication of just how desperate the U.S. command in Afghanistan is to spin American civilian leaders into supporting an increasingly unpopular war. According to the Defense Department's own definition, psy-ops – the use of propaganda and psychological tactics to influence emotions and behaviors – are supposed to be used exclusively on "hostile foreign groups." Federal law forbids the military from practicing psy-ops on Americans, and each defense authorization bill comes with a "propaganda rider" that also prohibits such manipulation. "Everyone in the psy-ops, intel, and IO community knows you're not supposed to target Americans," says a veteran member of another psy-ops team who has run operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. "It's what you learn on day one."

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When Holmes and his four-man team arrived in Afghanistan in November 2009, their mission was to assess the effects of U.S. propaganda on the Taliban and the local Afghan population. But the following month, Holmes began receiving orders from Caldwell's staff to direct his expertise on a new target: visiting Americans. At first, the orders were administered verbally. According to Holmes, who attended at least a dozen meetings with Caldwell to discuss the operation, the general wanted the IO unit to do the kind of seemingly innocuous work usually delegated to the two dozen members of his public affairs staff: compiling detailed profiles of the VIPs, including their voting records, their likes and dislikes, and their "hot-button issues." In one email to Holmes, Caldwell's staff also wanted to know how to shape the general's presentations to the visiting dignitaries, and how best to "refine our messaging."

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Congressional delegations – known in military jargon as CODELs – are no strangers to spin. U.S. lawmakers routinely take trips to the frontlines in Iraq and Afghanistan, where they receive carefully orchestrated briefings and visit local markets before posing for souvenir photos in helmets and flak jackets. Informally, the trips are a way for generals to lobby congressmen and provide first-hand updates on the war. But what Caldwell was looking for was more than the usual background briefings on senators. According to Holmes, the general wanted the IO team to provide a "deeper analysis of pressure points we could use to leverage the delegation for more funds." The general's chief of staff also asked Holmes how Caldwell could secretly manipulate the U.S. lawmakers without their knowledge. "How do we get these guys to give us more people?" he demanded. "What do I have to plant inside their heads?"

According to experts on intelligence policy, asking a psy-ops team to direct its expertise against visiting dignitaries would be like the president asking the CIA to put together background dossiers on congressional opponents. Holmes was even expected to sit in on Caldwell's meetings with the senators and take notes, without divulging his background. "Putting your propaganda people in a room with senators doesn't look good," says John Pike, a leading military analyst. "It doesn't pass the smell test. Any decent propaganda operator would tell you that."

At a minimum, the use of the IO team against U.S. senators was a misuse of vital resources designed to combat the enemy; it cost American taxpayers roughly \$6 million to deploy Holmes and his team in Afghanistan for a year. But Caldwell seemed more eager to advance his own career than to defeat the Taliban. "We called it Operation Fourth Star," says Holmes. "Caldwell seemed far more focused on the Americans and the funding stream than he was on the Afghans. We were there to teach and train the Afghans. But for the first four months it was all about the U.S. Later he even started talking about targeting the NATO populations." At one point, according to Holmes, Caldwell wanted to break up the IO team and give each general on his staff their own personal spokesperson with psy-ops training.

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It wasn't the first time that Caldwell had tried to tear down the wall that has historically separated public affairs and psy-ops – the distinction the military is supposed to maintain between "informing" and "influencing." After a stint as the top U.S. spokesperson in Iraq, the general pushed aggressively to expand the military's use of information operations. During his time as a commander at Ft. Leavenworth, Caldwell argued for exploiting new technologies like blogging and Wikipedia – a move that would widen the military's ability to influence the public, both foreign and

domestic. According to sources close to the general, he also tried to rewrite the official doctrine on information operations, though that effort ultimately failed. (In recent months, the Pentagon has quietly dropped the nefarious-sounding moniker "psy-ops" in favor of the more neutral "MISO" – short for Military Information Support Operations.)

Under duress, Holmes and his team provided Caldwell with background assessments on the visiting senators, and helped prep the general for his high-profile encounters. But according to members of his unit, Holmes did his best to resist the orders. Holmes believed that using his team to target American civilians violated the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948, which was passed by Congress to prevent the State Department from using Soviet-style propaganda techniques on U.S. citizens. But when Holmes brought his concerns to Col. Gregory Breazile, the spokesperson for the Afghan training mission run by Caldwell, the discussion ended in a screaming match. "It's not illegal if I say it isn't!" Holmes recalls Breazile shouting.

In March 2010, Breazile issued a written order that "directly tasked" Holmes to conduct an IO campaign against "all DV visits" – short for "distinguished visitor." The team was also instructed to "prepare the context and develop the prep package for each visit." In case the order wasn't clear enough, Breazile added that the new instructions were to "take priority over all other duties." Instead of fighting the Taliban, Holmes and his team were now responsible for using their training to win the hearts and minds of John McCain and Al Franken.

On March 23rd, Holmes emailed the JAG lawyer who handled information operations, saying that the order made him "nervous." The lawyer, Capt. John Scott, agreed with Holmes. "The short answer is that IO doesn't do that," Scott replied in an email. "[Public affairs] works on the hearts and minds of our own citizens and IO works on the hearts and minds of the citizens of other nations. While the twain do occasionally intersect, such intersections, like violent contact during a soccer game, should be unintentional."

In another email, Scott advised Holmes to seek his own defense counsel. "Using IO to influence our own folks is a bad idea," the lawyer wrote, "and contrary to IO policy."

In a statement to *Rolling Stone*, a spokesman for Caldwell "categorically denies the assertion that the command used an Information Operations Cell to influence Distinguished Visitors." But after Scott offered his legal opinion, the order was rewritten to stipulate that the IO unit should only use publicly available records to create profiles of U.S. visitors. Based on the narrower definition of the order, Holmes and his team believed the incident was behind them.

Three weeks after the exchange, however, Holmes learned that he was the subject of an investigation, called an AR 15-6. The investigation had been ordered by Col. Joe Buche, Caldwell's chief of staff. The 22-page report, obtained by *Rolling Stone*, reads like something put together by Kenneth Starr. The investigator accuses Holmes of going off base in civilian clothes without permission, improperly using his position to start a private business, consuming alcohol, using Facebook too much, and having an "inappropriate" relationship with one of his subordinates, Maj. Laural Levine. The investigator also noted a joking comment that Holmes made on his Facebook wall, in response to a jibe about Afghan men wanting to hold his hand. "Hey! I've been here almost five months now!" Holmes wrote. "Gimme a break a man has needs you know."

"LTC Holmes' comments about his sexual needs," the report concluded, "are even more distasteful in light of his status as a married man."

Both Holmes and Levine maintain that there was nothing inappropriate about their relationship, and said they were waiting until after they left Afghanistan to start their own business. They and other members of the team also say that they had been given permission to go off post in civilian clothes. As for Facebook, Caldwell's command had aggressively encouraged its officers to use the site as part of a social-networking initiative – and Holmes ranked only 15th among the biggest users.

Nor was Holmes the only one who wrote silly things online. Col. Breazile's Facebook page, for example, is spotted with similar kinds of nonsense, including multiple references to drinking alcohol, and a photo of a warning inside a Port-o-John mocking Afghans – "In case any of you forgot that you are supposed to sit on the toilet and not stand on it and squat. It's a safety issue. We don't want you to fall in or miss your target." Breazile now serves at the Joint Chiefs of Staff, where he works in the office dedicated to waging a global information war for the Pentagon.

Following the investigation, both Holmes and Levine were formally reprimanded. Holmes, believing that he was being targeted for questioning the legality of waging an IO campaign against U.S. visitors, complained to the Defense

Department's inspector general. Three months later, he was informed that he was not entitled to protection as a whistleblower, because the JAG lawyer he consulted was not "designated to receive such communications."

Levine, who has a spotless record and 19 service awards after 16 years in the military, including a tour of duty in Kuwait and Iraq, fears that she has become "the collateral damage" in the military's effort to retaliate against Holmes. "It will probably end my career," she says. "My father was an officer, and I believed officers would never act like this. I was devastated. I've lost my faith in the military, and I couldn't in good conscience recommend anyone joining right now."

After being reprimanded, Holmes and his team were essentially ignored for the rest of their tours in Afghanistan. But on June 15th, the entire Afghan training mission received a surprising memo from Col. Buche, Caldwell's chief of staff. "Effective immediately," the memo read, "the engagement in information operations by personnel assigned to the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan and Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan is strictly prohibited." From now on, the memo added, the "information operation cell" would be referred to as the "Information Engagement cell." The IE's mission? "This cell will engage in activities for the sole purpose of informing and educating U.S., Afghan and international audiences...." The memo declared, in short, that those who had trained in psy-ops and other forms of propaganda would now officially be working as public relations experts – targeting a worldwide audience.

As for the operation targeting U.S. senators, there is no way to tell what, if any, influence it had on American policy. What is clear is that in January 2011, Caldwell's command asked the Obama administration for another \$2 billion to train an additional 70,000 Afghan troops – an initiative that will already cost U.S. taxpayers more than \$11 billion this year. Among the biggest boosters in Washington to give Caldwell the additional money? Sen. Carl Levin, one of the senators whom Holmes had been ordered to target.