

The following text may be printed, copy/pasted, or downloaded and emailed.

Koran Story Highlights Pentagon-Media Problem

Al Pessin
Voice of America
May 20, 2005

The now-discredited Newsweek Magazine report about desecration of the Koran by U.S. interrogators at the Guantanamo detention center has sparked much discussion of the credibility of the media and the government's ability to get its side of stories heard. It is an issue that has been on the mind of U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld for a long time.

After Newsweek acknowledged early in the week that its source was no longer sure of his information, and that the magazine could not corroborate its story from other sources, the White House and the Defense Department were quick to claim vindication and criticize the magazine for publishing an inaccurate item. Officials said the damage done by the story, including 15 deaths in riots partly fueled by the report in Afghanistan, Pakistan and other countries, could not be "retracted," as the story was.

Secretary Rumsfeld joined in the criticism. "People lost their lives. People are dead. And that's unfortunate. And people need to be very careful about what they say, just as people need to be careful about what they do," he said.

The original Newsweek story said that a not-yet-published military investigation has found that interrogators at Guantanamo placed Korans on toilets, and in one instance placed a Koran in a toilet and flushed, to unnerve detainees under interrogation. Newsweek later issued a carefully worded statement saying it was retracting the story.

Earlier reports based on statements of former Guantanamo inmates have also alleged desecration of the Koran. The Pentagon says it long ago tightened its procedures on the handling of the Koran, in response to some incidents when Guantanamo was first opened more than three years ago.

When the controversy over the Newsweek report first broke last week, the Defense Department launched an investigation, but was slow to provide a definitive answer on whether the report was true. Even after the rioting had started in Afghanistan, the top U.S. military officer, General Richard Myers, made this cautious statement.

"They have looked through the logs, the interrogation logs, and they can not confirm yet that there was ever the case of the toilet incident, except for one case, a log entry which they still have to confirm, where a detainee was reported by a guard to be ripping pages out of a Koran and putting them in the toilet to stop it up as a protest, but not where the U.S. did it," he said.

That did nothing to slow the momentum of protest over the alleged incident, and the riots continued.

Media experts say it would be asking a lot for anyone speaking in the Pentagon's briefing room to instantly calm emotions on such a sensitive subject half way around the world. But they also criticize the Defense Department for being slow to respond to this and many other critical reports.

Secretary Rumsfeld spoke about the problem this week. "People have said, 'my goodness, why does it take so long for someone to come back and have the actual facts?' Well, it takes a long time to be truthful, to be responsible," he said.

The secretary also spoke about the issue of his department's problems responding to the media during a speech in February. He indicated that the Defense Department is a bureaucracy designed for a different era, trying to function effectively in this era, fighting a global war on terrorism with 24-hour news coverage, worldwide, in many languages. And he said the problem is compounded by today's U.S. enemies, who he said further their cause through lies, lies that his department is ill-equipped to expose quickly.

"In this new reality of ours, a lie travels across the globe in seconds, and, of course, the truth is still putting on its shoes, trying to get ready to figure out what the correct answer is because we have to be accurate. We can't just respond, we've got to go out and find the facts," he said.

But some communications experts say the Defense Department could do better. Among them is American University Professor Emeritus of Communications Laird Anderson, who says the Pentagon is often too cautious in its public statements. "It seems to me that he can make qualified statements that are more speedily given, with the proviso that 'this is what we have in the way of information' after 'x' number of hours or maybe a couple of days or something like that, 'but we're still pursuing this to see if there's more that we can come up with,'" he said.

Professor Anderson, a retired journalist and U.S. Army Colonel, says speed is a key element in countering inaccurate stories.

Researcher Craig Charney has just published the results of a study of U.S. government communications with Muslim countries. He agrees that an effective communications equivalent of a 24-hour, seven-day-a week 'Rapid Reaction Force' would help counter inaccurate news stories. But he says more importantly, the U.S. government needs to address the longer term problem of its credibility and image among Muslims around the world.

"Clearly that requires a media response that's also 24/7, in the right language, with spokespeople who are credible, and so on. However, what the Koran case also shows is how volatile the situation is, and it underlines for us that crisis management is not enough," he said. "What's needed beyond that is the sort of sustained communications effort we're talking about because these problems did not develop in one day, and they won't be resolved in one day either."

Meanwhile, the Defense Department and the media continue to clash over various news reports and allegations, a process Professor Anderson at American University says is not good for either one, or for society as a whole, or for the U.S. image in the world.

"There's a detrimental effect to both of these major institutions. The media credibility is fading, but that's not to say the government credibility hasn't faded," he said. "I don't think two negatives equal a balance. Credibility is something that's supposed to be foremost in the eyes of the media and the military. And, I don't think a negative in either respect is (in) any way a balancing factor."

Some government officials and media analysts have called for less use of anonymous sources, like the one that provided the inaccurate information for the Newsweek report. But reporters say they rely on such sources for important information they could not get in any other way. The result is the continuing series of globally transmitted rhetorical punches and counter-punches that Secretary Rumsfeld says make his job difficult, but not impossible.

"I have confidence we can live in this environment. But it isn't easy," he said.