



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on March 3, 2011

Did Military Use Psych Warfare Against Senators Visiting Afghanistan?

U.S. military officials are firmly denying allegations published in *Rolling Stone* magazine that a top Army officer in Afghanistan, Lieutenant General William Caldwell (picture, left), ordered experts in psychological warfare to conduct psychological operations (psy-ops) on visiting U.S. senators and others in hopes that they would help increase funding and troops for the combat effort. Furthermore, the officer in charge of the psy-ops said that when he objected to the operation as illegal, he was placed under investigation and reprimanded.



According to *Rolling Stone* writer Michael Hastings, “Over a four-month period last year, a military cell devoted to what is known as ‘information operations’ [IO] at Camp Eggers in Kabul was repeatedly pressured to target visiting senators and other VIPs who met with Caldwell.” Among those targeted in the campaign, according to Hastings, were “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.”

When the psy-ops unit “resisted the order, arguing that it violated U.S. laws prohibiting the use of propaganda against American citizens,” reported Hastings, “it was subjected to a campaign of retaliation.”

Lieutenant Colonel Michael Holmes, the IO officer in charge of the operation, told Hastings that his role in psy-ops “is to play with people’s heads, to get the enemy to behave the way we want them to behave. 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.” The article offered no examples of how Holmes or his IO personnel supposedly manipulated senators or other high-level individuals visiting Caldwell’s training operation.

According to Holmes, Caldwell had asked the “IO team to provide a ‘deeper analysis of pressure points we could use to leverage the delegation for more funds,’” wrote Hastings. “The general’s chief of staff also asked Holmes how Caldwell could secretly manipulate the U.S. lawmakers without their knowledge.”

Hastings noted that 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.”



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While Holmes and his psy-ops team were supposedly pressured to provide Caldwell and his underlings with background on visiting senators and prepare the general for meetings with the VIPs, Holmes insisted that he did his best to buck the orders, and eventually consulted with a JAG lawyer, who advised him against continuing the operation.

Several weeks after consulting with the lawyer, the *Rolling Stone* article recounted, Holmes found himself the subject of an investigation, with accusations against him as diverse as “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,” a female officer Holmes worked with.

That investigation turned into reprimands and ruined careers for both Holmes and Levine. Noted Levine afterward, “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.”

So how successful were the alleged psy-ops project against the senators and other VIP visitors hosted by Caldwell? Hastings wrote that “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.”

In response to the *Rolling Stone* article, military officials insisted that neither Caldwell nor his staff did anything wrong, with a spokesman for the general categorically denying “the assertion that the command used an Information Operations Cell to influence Distinguished Visitors.” Even so, Hastings related in his article, following the legal opinion offered by the JAG lawyer, the orders for Holmes and his IO staff were rewritten to stipulate that all they were to do was use publicly available records to create profiles on U.S. visitors for Caldwell.

In the wake of the article, Lieutenant Colonel Shawn Stroud, communications head for the Afghan training mission (NTM-A) under Caldwell’s command, emphasized that Holmes and other IO operatives were not pressured to engage in psychological manipulation of visiting senators or other VIPs. “Personnel with backgrounds in IO were utilized only because of their availability,” Stroud said in a prepared statement. “They were never directed to use their specific IO skills while preparing background information for the command in advance of distinguished guest visits.”

While Holmes continued to stick to his story a week after the *Rolling Stone* article was published, one senior U.S. military official involved in the Afghan training mission told [Fox News](#) he believed that the genesis of the article was Holmes’ dissatisfaction “because his original assignment to influence Afghans was no longer needed when Caldwell took up the training command.” FOX reported that “Holmes apparently thought he was supposed to use ‘psychological operations’ to find the Taliban and ‘turn them,’ according to the officer. But that wasn’t what Caldwell’s command wanted of him.”

Another military official told Fox that Caldwell’s instructions to Holmes were “to do homework on the visitors and provide prep material for the general.” The officer added that Holmes’ own statements demonstrated “that is not the mission he wanted to do and he became disgruntled. Here is an analogy: I am a combat engineer trained to deal with mines and demolition. I like to do that, but for the past few years I am assigned to do staff work which is boring and not what I think I should be doing.”



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Following publication of the article, a group of retired military officers and civilians who had worked with Caldwell [published an open letter](#) in defense of the general, insisting that he is “beyond reproach, humble to a fault, unfailingly supportive of civilian leadership and the military chain of command, and a skeptic of anyone who suggests an officer in the United States is anything less.” The group added that the “accusations of a disgruntled officer do not reflect the person or leader we know and are totally disconnected with the reality we have experienced.”

Nonetheless, on February 24 the U.S. command in Afghanistan issued a statement saying that General David H. Petraeus was “preparing to order an investigation to determine the facts and circumstances surrounding the issue.”



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