

The department of lies

As if the arms race and the space race were not enough, we are now facing the latest form of superpower rivalry — the lying race.

So far the Soviet Union, widely acknowledged as the world's biggest and most expert liar, is far ahead. A deeply worried U.S. has decided that it must catch up, and so the race is on.

Of course government officials don't call it lying. That is something done by private citizens. When governments lie, the proper term is disinformation — a combination of deception and misinformation aimed at confusing one's enemies and leading them to wrong decisions. It is an art in which the Soviets have long excelled.

According to some reports, the USSR has a huge super-bureaucracy wholly devoted to channeling false or misleading information about Russia's defences, economy, politics and even its geography to the credulous West. This powerful organization, say Soviet experts, has the ability to make groups as potent as the army, the KGB and the national government do its bidding.

Examples of Soviet disinformation cover such areas as hiding missiles from spy satellites; creating dummy weapons systems, spreading bogus stories about technological advances or misleading reports about the location of important mineral deposits.

Defence plants are disguised to look like civilian factories. False reports are circulated about Kremlin politics. Peace initiatives mask preparations for war.

All of this activity is extremely useful as it confuses NATO and hinders effective measures against growing Soviet military power. Thanks to Soviet disinformation, the U.S. may for years have been building defences against Russian weapons that do not really exist — or the U.S. may have failed to notice concealed weapons that are ready for a surprise attack.

Lately the U.S. has recognized the importance of confusing Soviet defence planners, a need made all the more acute by rapid advances in technology. In response, the CIA has been put in charge of co-ordinating America's first post-war deception campaign. Some 20 top-secret U.S. programs, such as Stealth aircraft and Star Wars, are to be wrapped in a cloak of disinformation by careful leaking of false reports and fake data to the media.

So far the American public remains unaware of Washington's disinformation campaign. But defence and security officials who know about the secret program are hotly debating the morality of institutionalized lying by the U.S. government.

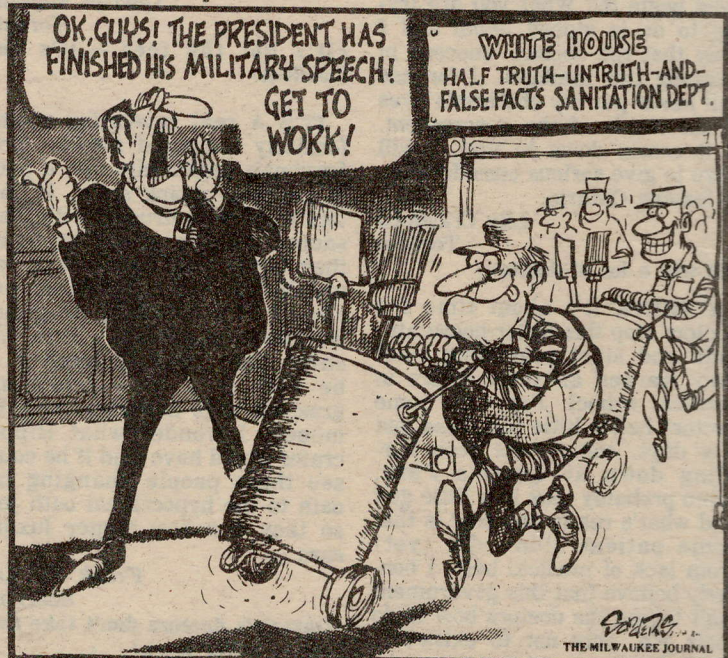
Almost everyone agrees that disinformation is useful and effective. Yet the prospect of seeing a bureaucracy devoted to lying and spreading false information through the free press may outweigh the value of deceiving the Soviet Union. There is a legitimate fear that once institutionalized lying is

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accepted as normal, its use will spread to other government departments.

Co-ordinated lying also endangers one of the key tenets of democratic government — accountability. Recent history has many times shown that bureaucrats rush to hide their mistakes, stupidities or dishonesty by raising the cry of "national security." Reformers in Congress who believe that the Department of Defence, the CIA and the NSA have become inefficient, muscle-bound bureaucracies are deeply concerned that disinformation will soon make oversight of such government agencies impossible.



Many other thinkers are troubled by the prospect of a democracy engaging in systematic lying. A super-bureaucracy devoted to disinformation could quickly turn into a sort of mini-Kremlin inside the U.S. government. We need only think back to Richard Nixon's "Plumbers" to see what damage such intra-governmental spooks could do.

Even worse, chances are that any U.S. disinformation campaign would delude the American public and Congress far more than the Soviets, who seem to have agents just about everywhere.

Misleading the Soviets on a tactical level, by feeding them false data through double agents for example, makes sense. Creating a secret super-agency to manufacture lies on a vast scale sounds uncomfortably like George Orwell's Ministry of Truth in 1984.