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Propaganda fails in Afghanistan, report says

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U.S. propaganda efforts in Afghanistan have failed because of poorly designed programs by contractors who often propose expensive marketing solutions to U.S. commanders incapable of making informed choices, according to a study published by the Army's War College.

Examples of failed efforts, according to the paper, include a proposal to pay \$6,000 dowries to Afghan men to keep them off the battlefield — a scheme that could have cost \$4 billion. That project, ultimately rejected, fits into what the U.S. military calls Information Operations programs.

The dowry program and ineffective television ad campaigns "represent merely the tip of the iceberg: over the years, huge amounts of money have been spent on IO programs that are largely anchored in advertising and marketing style communication with little concurrent investment, it would appear, in detailed understanding of audiences and environments," the report concludes.

USA TODAY, in a series of reports since 2012, has found the Pentagon has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on poorly tracked propaganda programs. A government report obtained by the newspaper this spring showed the impact of the programs is unclear, and the military doesn't know whether it is targeting the right foreign audiences. These propaganda efforts include websites, leaflets and broadcasts intended to change foreigners' "attitudes and behaviors in support of U.S. Government" objectives, according to the report by the Government Accountability Office.

The author of the War College study, Steve Tatham, is the longest continuously serving officer in the British military's information activities. Tatham says contractors' attempt to influence attitudes "may work in convincing U.S. citizens to buy consumer products; it does not easily translate to the conflict- and crisis-riven societies to which it has been applied." It makes more sense, he says, to attempt to change problem behavior, for instance understanding why Afghan soldiers desert and addressing their concerns.

The military had no immediate comment on the report.

The dowry program dates to 2011 when a contractor persuaded a general inexperienced in IO campaigns that it "would take huge swaths of fighters off the battlefield by facilitating their marriages to eligible young Afghan women."

Tatham evaluated the plan for commanders and found it would "quickly exceed" \$4 billion per year. He found a number of other problems, including the false assumption that many fighters were unmarried and the effect on Afghan men who didn't receive the payment.

"There is no empirical research to suggest that this is a sensible solution to deterring young men of fighting age from joining the insurgency," Tatham wrote. "Even if there were, it would be cost prohibitive and open to such widespread and pernicious abuse as to render it unworkable."

The program was canceled because of cost, he wrote.

Tatham notes that USA TODAY has been a "long-standing critic" of IO efforts. Because of the "persistently critical coverage," its reporting is often dismissed by the Pentagon's IO community. However, Tatham says, some officially sponsored studies echo at least some of the criticism.

He points to a 2012 study by Rand, a Pentagon-affiliated think-tank, and what he called its most important conclusion:

"... if the overall Information Operation mission in Afghanistan is defined as convincing most residents of contested areas to side decisively with the Afghan government and its foreign allies against the Taliban insurgency, this has not been achieved."

