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'Disinformation' use in U.S. ploys denied

By Bill Gertz
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A Washington Post report of a Reagan administration "disinformation program" to scare off Libyan terrorist attacks was dismissed as misleading yesterday by intelligence analysts, who said standard strategic deception apparently was used to counter terrorist threats.

Intelligence specialist Arnold Beichman said he believes National Security Adviser Adm. John Poindexter may have erred in using the term "disinformation" to describe strategic deception — a combination of foreign policy tools, including the use of false or misleading information planted overseas.

"There's nothing new in governments, democratic or otherwise, using strategic deception," said Mr. Beichman, a scholar at Hoover Institution in Stanford, Calif. "That's the name of the game."

The Washington Post reported yesterday that Adm. Poindexter recommended a "disinformation program" last August as part of U.S. plans to scare Libyan leader Col. Muammar Qaddafi into calling off a new wave of terrorist attacks.

The Post, citing a White House memo from Adm. Poindexter, said the administration leaked a misleading intelligence report on the Libyan terrorist threats to The Wall Street

Journal as part of the program. White House officials yesterday denied that the Journal report was inaccurate.

The Post article also stated that the plan did not call for planting stories in the U.S. media, a covert action that is prohibited by an executive order signed by Mr. Reagan in 1981.

In addition, the Post reported that the disinformation program involved "foreign media outlets."

Analysts said propaganda may have been one aspect of a larger diplomatic and military plan to intimidate Col. Qaddafi.

In mid-August, when the plan was approved, U.S. military forces began joint maneuvers with Egypt and U.N. envoy Vernon Walters visited European leaders.

The maneuvers with Egypt had been planned several months earlier.

The administration was justified in using strategic deception to defend against the perceived Libyan threat, especially in light of intelligence information at the time that indicated newly planned-Libyan terrorists attacks, analysts said.

"One could try to create the impression in the minds of Qaddafi's intelligence services, allowing them to pick up information from their sources in Europe or Libya, that the United States was in fact intent on bombing Libya again," said Georgetown University Professor

Roy Godson, who specializes in the study of disinformation and intelligence.

Mr. Beichman said, "There isn't anything more stupid than for Poindexter to have used the term 'disinformation.' By doing that, he equated the meager U.S. capabilities with the massive disinformation apparatus of the Soviet Union. Admirals should stay at sea where they belong."

Michael Ledeen, a counterterrorism specialist with Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies, said he believes the threat of Libyan terrorism justified the administration plan.

"It appears that if there was any attempt to deceive, it was aimed at Qaddafi, which is fine with me," said Mr. Ledeen.

"As far as the accuracy of the [administration] statements in August and September regarding Libyan plans to pursue terrorist activities, they are correct," he said.

The strategic deception program appeared to have been timed to support administration sabre-rattling against Libya last summer. At that time, two U.S. aircraft carriers were ordered to pass close to Libya with the idea of alerting Soviet intelligence stations, who were expected to relay the information to the Libyans, said one U.S. official who declined to be named.

Officials also ordered U.S. bombers to fly to a NATO base in Italy so Libyan agents would detect their presence, the official said.

"The idea was that Qaddafi would see these things and it would put the fear of God into him," and possibly deter him from another terrorist strike, the official said.