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Public DiploMovies: Hollywood goes to war, DC contemplates more ^[1]

Although there's no hint of it in the President's budget to the U.S. Congress, Hollywood has come to the Potomac, and bearing gifts, no less. This may be another example of how numbers can be misleading.

President Bush is asking Congress for about \$1 billion for fiscal year 2006 spending on media-related public diplomacy in the war of ideas. But what might be called a matching grant may be on its way from Hollywood. Everyone from Indiana Jones' Harrison Ford to the man behind "NYPD Blue" may be getting into the act, to spread the message of the U.S. abroad, the way Hollywood sees it, with no strings attached -- and at no cost to the American taxpayer.

No fewer than four feature films are in the works about the U.S. military, including "No True Glory: The battle of Fallujah," possibly starring Harrison Ford, and "Jarhead," starring Jamie Foxx, Jake Gyllenhaal and Chris Cooper, already scheduled to open this fall on November 11, Veterans Day. All in all, Hollywood could spend a bundle on the four features.

"It costs about \$100 million to make and market an average movie," said Martin Kaplan, Associate Dean of USC's Annenberg School for Communication, "let alone the even bigger bucks it costs to put stars and special effects into them."

And these four Hollywood movies may well match about half the money President Bush wants from Congress, for public diplomacy films and television programs.

But even this total doesn't include the many additional made-for-TV projects on the drawing boards. The FX cable channel has ordered a pilot for a weekly series from the producer-writer of "Hill Street Blues" and "NYPD Blue." And the writer of "The Golden Girls" wants to produce "Spirit of America," a weekly sitcom set in Iraq for the Fox TV network. There's also at least one soap opera, with still more comedies and specials in the pipeline.

This all adds up to what USA Today reported is the biggest wartime production of military movies and television in over sixty years. But Professor Kaplan cautions the motivation for this is strictly business, not flag-waving.

"The desire to spread the message about America doesn't get the light lit," he said. "Foreign grosses these days contribute to about half a film's box office, and studios carefully assess the prospects for non-U.S. audiences to flock to a film. So my guess is that Hollywood is banking that the appeal of stars and traditional themes like heroism will outweigh the potential downside of tackling a politically divisive topic."

And this tally doesn't include two commercial TV channels, Discovery's Military channel and A&E's new Military History Channel, both featuring hour after hour of original programming

about the military.

Now, the U.S. military has gotten into the act with its own channel, The Pentagon Channel, originally programmed for American troops around the world, but now also available to civilian viewers in the U.S. via the Dish TV satellite service -- at no cost to the government. In addition to its live coverage of Pentagon news briefings, the Pentagon Channel might become an outlet for original documentaries produced with overseas partners on military issues, which would be very informative for U.S. TV audiences, not only for viewers overseas. The Pentagon also has vast communication resources, and a cooperative effort could be established between DOD and other U.S. government agencies to explore the sharing of DOD's technical capabilities to provide a strengthened information service for audiences in the U.S. and abroad.

This is new territory: For years, government-produced news and information was supposed to be broadcast only to audiences outside the U.S., but that became moot a decade ago, when the Voice of America moved its news and information to the Internet, where anyone anywhere in the world - including the U.S. - could hear and read VOA News.

And there's still more: The U.S. State Department runs Foreign Press Centers in Washington, New York and Los Angeles, where U.S.-based foreign correspondents from the most prestigious media organizations abroad interact. The first FPC was established in New York after World War II to help reporters from around the world cover the United Nations, among other institutions, and the State Department now says over 2,000 reporters use its three Centers. These Press Centers are effective precisely because Washington doesn't control the content of the dispatches filed by the international press.

"A neutral source scores higher in the credibility dimension," says Dr. Arie W. Kruglanski, Distinguished Professor at University of Maryland's Psychology Department. "The expertise of the source -- whether the source knows what he or she is talking about -- and its trustworthiness," are the two most important aspects. "Communication with sources perceived to be suspect are discounted," added Professor Kruglanski.

But for all of these government efforts, the vast talents of the private sector remain the most creative resource for American communications. And what difference it makes when the creativity of independent producers is focused on developing credible news and information, where believability is paramount. But here, too, Washington may need to step back from controlling content, all in the interest of credibility.

However, now there is a gray area: independent productions can be funded by foundations, such as the new Foundation for International Understanding, organized by David Abshire. These funders get some of their money from the government. With partial government funding, who calls the shots?

"To make the programs work they should not smack of propaganda," said award-winning TV producer Lee Fulkerson. "The question is, how much oversight will there be from government? If there's too much, the right kind of people will not be attracted. There should be very few strings attached."

Like a worrisome parent who hesitates to let the adult offspring go, it may now be time for Washington to let at least some public diplomacy to move out of the house, while keeping an

eye on it -- and sending money for rent.
