

RESEARCH NOTE

Psychological Operations in the 1990s

by *Philip M. Taylor*

A NEW "MAGIC (ELECTRONIC) BULLET"?

Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) have become an increasingly significant feature of military activity in the 1990s, especially in Operations Other Than War involving US forces. However, other NATO nations such as the UK and Germany are also increasing their PSYOPS capability. The reasons for this are as follows:

First, the PSYOPS campaign during the Gulf War was a success. OPERATION BURNING HAWK saw almost 30 million leaflets dropped, together with radio and television deployment of messages from such platforms as the EC130 Volant (now Commando) Solo. More than 60,000 Iraqi soldiers surrendered. It is therefore likely that PSYOPS, which cost around 1 percent of the entire military effort, was responsible for removing more Iraqis from the Kuwaiti Theatre of Operations than weapons of physical destruction.[1](#)

Second, this looked good on television. With military and political authorities increasingly sensitive to televised images of casualties civilian and military -- the use of PSYOPS resonated with increasing interest in non-lethal weapons and the Revolution in Military Affairs. "Our motto is electrons, not bullets."[2](#)

Third, the changing nature of conflict since the Gulf War -- i.e., the switch from inter-state to intra-state conflicts -- has meant greater military interface with civilians during humanitarian interventions. Whereas psychological warfare in the past was largely considered a tactical military weapon in times of combat (except, of course, during the Cold War) directed against enemy combatants, now troops have to engage in organized persuasions with refugees, survivors of famine and genocide and so on. In such situations, especially where the societal infrastructure has collapsed (eg. Somalia, Bosnia), military-civilian communications becomes an essential instrument of the mission's success or failure.[3](#)

Fourth, it thus constitutes an increasing part of Command and Control. With emerging concepts such as C2W (Command and Control Warfare), C4I (Command, Control, Communications, Computers and Intelligence), IW (Information Warfare), and IO (Information Operations), PSYOPS moves out of the shadows -- or at least it's "white" or overt deployment does. "Black" or covert PSYOPS remain the domain of the secret intelligence services.

Finally, in light of the above, the traditional "battlefield" has become more of a "battle space" in which information flows are increasingly harder for the military to control (thanks to new communications technologies such as fax machines, mobile phones and the Internet). The porous nature of information now means that armed forces must compete with other actors (eg. NGOs or armed factions) to seize and maintain the informational initiative -- and thus the psychological and

perceptual climate -- of and surrounding international crises. This requires a multi-media campaign ranging from press conferences at one end of the informational spectrum to direct military-civilian communication by print, broadcasting and even face-to-face contact at the other.

Definitions

The current US definition of PSYOPS is: "Planned operations to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups and individuals. The purpose of psychological operations is to induce or reinforce foreign attitudes and behavior favorable to the originator's objectives."⁴ The current NATO definition is: "planned psychological activities in peace and war directed at enemy, friendly and neutral audiences in order to influence attitudes and behaviour affecting the achievement of political and military objectives."⁵

Operational Principles

Because of traditional popular suspicion stemming from historical association of Psychological Warfare with "the art of lying," Nazi and Soviet propaganda, and "disinformation," the democratic deployment of PSYOPS always operates nervously and cautiously. Democracies deploy Sun Tzu's cliché, that "to subdue the enemy without having to resort to force is the acme of skill,"⁶ as a moral justification to publics which have become increasingly anti-war or where the involvement of national forces is not immediately perceived to be in "the national interest."

Moreover, military interventions -- especially if they are US-led -- have to dispel images, such as "imperialistic invaders," promulgated by competing factions on the ground. PSYOPS,⁷ it is argued, is a tool which can "significantly enhance our ability to maintain peace, expand dialogue and understanding, encourage the process of democratisation, lessen tensions, inhibit proliferation, contain conflict, end it as rapidly as possible and with the minimum loss of life, and accelerate the reestablishment of stability and peace."⁸

Hence great care has to be taken to stay within the democratic tradition of propaganda as the "Strategy of Truth." This does not mean the "whole truth," of course, but it does mean a "positive information campaign" in which deliberate falsehoods are eschewed and the approach is news or information-based.

Selected Examples

An American PSYOPS team supported the UN and the Cambodian Mine Action Centre by producing "an extensive variety of mine awareness products such as leaflets, posters, bulletins, banners and cards . . . to educate the people about the dangers of unexpended munitions."⁹ In March 1993, when the US Coast Guard towed a refugee ship with over 500 Chinese aboard to Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands, as part of OPERATION PROVIDE REFUGE, PSYOPS personnel were dispatched to liaise with the refugees and to produce newsletters and information boards for them.

During the conflict in the Balkans, the US deployed a fifteen-member PSYOPS Task Force to Bosnia. They were responsible for dropping almost a million leaflets on the night before the first American

airdrops of relief supplies. The leaflets explained that the aid was impartial and humanitarian in nature, and included safety instructions to keep away from the parachuted food pallets until after they had landed. More recently, NATO's Implementation Force in Bosnia commissioned Superman comics and coloring books for children in support of mine awareness campaigns.

In Ethiopia, a PSYOPS unit produced ordnance awareness and first aid handbooks for a joint mine clearance operation with the local forces. In a joint-combined medical readiness training exercise in Senegal (MEDFLAG), PSYOPS personnel supplied the American Special Forces teams with "military information and electronic news gathering support as well as materials on Senegalese cultural norms" to assist in the 100,000 "informational booklets, posters and pamphlets providing information on personal hygiene, health and sanitation."[10](#)

PSYOPS Military Information Support Teams (MISTs) were deployed to Barbados, St. Lucia and Grenada to work with local committees to develop drug awareness campaigns; media ranging from bumper stickers to television commercials were used as part of the fight against narco-terrorism. In Bolivia, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala and Jamaica, other MISTs were deployed to work alongside anti-drugs campaigners directed at schoolchildren using coloring books, videos and other media. In Bolivia, they were said to have helped to decrease the numbers of hectares that were used to cultivate coca. In Belize, cholera prevention materials were supplied, and in Venezuela, PSYOPS personnel developed information campaigns supporting "democratisation, professionalization of the military, civil-military relations, and counterdrug operations."[11](#)

From the Tactical to the Strategic? C5I

To date, PSYOPS has been deployed mainly as a "combat force multiplier" or as a tactical tool to aid communication between intervention forces and the local population they are attempting to help. Intra-state conflicts are extremely dangerous places in which the normal restricted access of journalists in conventional conflicts do not apply. Free to report from both (or more) sides, the media become caught up in local propaganda campaigns -- including in any PSYOPS activity being conducted by intervening forces. Real-time television and other new communications technologies take this activity well beyond the theatre of operations to a watching global audience. Therefore, tactical PSYOPS is now inevitably strategic and has to embrace another new concept, namely C5I Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence -- and CNN.

Closing Thoughts

PSYOPS is not a magic bullet, as the recent Kosovo crisis demonstrated. There is an emerging consensus that the 120 million leaflets dropped over former Yugoslavia failed to have anything like the impact of the 29 million used against Iraq. Quantity is no substitute for quality, and once again -- like Britain in 1940, Germany in 1945 and Hanoi in 1969 -- the truism that bombing of cities consolidates rather than shatters morale was reinforced. The Kosovo crisis also presented a new challenge for PSYOPS. This was the first internet war and preliminary judgments are that the Serbs completely outwitted NATO on this new communications technology. They not only used e-mail containing macro-viruses to disrupt NATO computers as part of their information warfare,[12](#) but they also used the internet to refute NATO propaganda themes and to get their own arguments

across when these were not being covered by Western media. This will be the real challenge for PSYOPS in the new millennium.

Endnotes

1. United States, Department of Defense, Conduct of the Persian Gulf War. Final Report to Congress (Washington, DC, 1992), Appendix J, pp. 20-22; Brig. Gen Robert H. Scales, Jr., Certain Victory: The U.S. Army in the Gulf War (McLean, VA: Brassey's, 1994), pp. 196-97.
2. Cited in Capt. Janice M. Morrow, "Never Seen, Always Heard," Airman (February 1993), p. 4.
3. Andrei Raevsky, Managing Arms in Peace Processes: Aspects of Psychological Operations and Intelligence (Geneva: United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 1996).
4. US Department of the Army, Field Manual 33-1: Psychological Operations (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1992), p. 12. See also US Department of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff, DoD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms and Abbreviations (JCS Publication 1-02, republished by Greenhill Books, 1990), p. 291.
5. Ibid. Emphasis added.
6. Quote from Sun Tzu, The Art of War, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford, 1963).
7. "US PSYOPS themes should emphasize that US actions are in accordance with international law and US/allied forces are in the country only to protect the evacuation of US/allied citizens and not to occupy the host nation or take sides with any faction." 4th Psychological Group (A), Psychological Operations support to Noncombatant Evacuation Operations (Fort Bragg, NC, 1995).
8. Colonel Jeffrey B. Jones, "The Third Wave and the Fourth Dimension." I am grateful to Col. Jones for supplying a draft of this paper in 1995.
9. US Special Operations Forces, Posture Statement 1994. In author's possession.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Robert Uhlig, "Cyber Attack," The Daily Telegraph, 1 April 1999.