Lessons on Public–Facing Information Operations in Current Conflicts

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To achieve success in the future security environment, the Joint Force must shift how it thinks about information from an afterthought and the sole purview of information professionals to a foundational consideration for all military activities. The Joint Force must design all activities and operations from the outset to account for the use and impact of information on relevant actors.

—Joint Concept for Operating in the Information Environment

Information operations seeking to influence public opinion have an increasingly important role in modern conflicts. By studying the impact of public-opinion shaping information operations on the Israel-Hamas and Russia-Ukraine conflicts, it is apparent that information environment dominance is increasingly important to a nation's ability to achieve its strategic objectives in modern warfare. America must apply lessons learned about cognitive warfare and information domain operations from current global conflicts to be fully prepared for modern large-scale combat operations (LSCO). The lesson for America in the Israeli-Hamas conflict is that a democratic nation with power overmatch that is achieving consistent tactical victories still risks strategic defeat when its enemy effectively uses cognitive warfare to undermine public support. In the Ukraine-Russia conflict, Ukraine's use of the information domain to secure popular support can be comparatively highlighted as an example of the successful application of cognitive warfare to secure vital international support toward its strategic objectives. America must prepare for the role that information domain dominance will play in future military conflicts.

This article will begin by defining relevant terms and briefly considering the significance of the information age in context of this article. Next, it will consider how cognitive warfare has been employed by Hamas to prevent Israel from achieving its strategic objectives. Hamas's exploitation of Israel's critical vulnerability in the information domain will then be contrasted with Ukraine's effective information domain operations that secured international support resisting the Russian invasion. It will then discuss U.S. focus on LSCO and identify information domain risks to America's military based on lessons learned in Gaza and Ukraine. Finally, this article will offer suggested courses of action to better incorporate cognitive warfare into America's military planning and address a counterargument.

Foundation

Civilization is in the latter stages of entering a new age defined by technology and large-scale, rapidly flowing information. As seen through the lens of current conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine, military tacticians are witnessing a revolution of military affairs about how information is gathered and used in real time. This is aptly timed to align with America's in-progress transition from twenty years of counterinsurgency (COIN) back to LSCO-focused preparation. However, while much of the attention focuses on how collected information is used to achieve tactical objectives, less attention is being paid to how information can be shaped and publicly distributed to achieve strategic objectives.

As part of the transition to LSCO-oriented combat, units are now applying lessons learned from Ukraine to further incorporate drone warfare into their tactical formations. These changes are fundamental to the U.S. military's ability to fight and win in future LSCO scenarios. On both sides of the Ukraine battlefield, drones have improved information, surveillance, and reconnaissance to achieve precision targeting; prevented units from gathering in conventional tactical formations; and made the element of surprise harder to achieve. Ukraine's drones have increased their range and the scale of their effects, enabling precision penetrative strikes deep within Russia's borders.[1] Indeed, the best characterization of the discussion about drones is not their relevance; it is whether they are revolutionary or merely evolutionary.[2] A point in favor of the merely evolutionary argument is that drone warfare has presently only changed the *tactical* battlefield.[3] Drones have not changed the operational and strategic echelons of battle.

Another use of information from the battlefield—targeted, public-facing messaging and use of internet-based media—has proven effective at shaping all echelons of conflict, from the tactical to the *strategic* level. This public-facing use of information from the battlefield is referred to as *cognitive warfare*.

NATO defines cognitive warfare as "activities conducted in synchronization with other Instruments of Power, to affect attitudes and behaviors, by influencing, protecting, or disrupting individual, group, or population level cognition, to gain an advantage over an adversary."[4] Cognitive warfare has become a widely recognized part and parcel of everyday life. Examples of this include the online use of troll farms, misinformation and disinformation, and propaganda to manipulate populations' collective perceptions on prominent issues. It has been used effectively to undermine trust in America's democratic institutions and to inflame tensions between political groups nationally and internationally.

In addition to cognitive warfare's outright effectiveness is its low barrier to entry. Cognitive warfare can be conducted online with low financial costs and virtually no consequences for the bad actors. Once a false narrative becomes ingrained or goes viral, it will continue to be spread by private citizens—often unwittingly—and may even become part of mainstream media narratives. By targeting public perception, every

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In response to the incessant rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip in November 2012, the Israel Defense Forces launched a widespread campaign against terror targets in Gaza. The operation, called Pillar of Defense, had two main goals: to protect Israeli civilians and to cripple the terrorist infrastructure in Gaza. (Graphic courtesy of the Israel Defense Forces)

One of the many posters disseminated by Hamas in August 2024 following a failed suicide attack in Tel Aviv, vowing to blow up Israeli buses. (Graphic via Telegram)

act of cognitive warfare is creating effects that can impact the *strategic* echelon of decision-making. For this reason, cognitive warfare is now "an essential component of modern strategy" requiring "tailoring messages to diverse global audiences" and "timing counternarratives for key points in conflicts."[5]

During the Global War on Terrorism, cognitive warfare turned friendly populations away from working with and supporting U.S. troops and helped terrorist organizations effectively recruit more individuals to their cause. The Army is slowly learning to appreciate the role of the information domain in the era of social media and the internet. It now acknowledges that allowing the information domain to be dominated by misinformation or disinformation poses a risk to mission when timely, accurate, and credible information is not provided early and throughout.[6] For these reasons, the Army has developed doctrine on how commands should employ coordinated responses to public affairs crises.[7]

Hamas's Cognitive Warfare Campaign

Maintaining public support has long been recognized as a key element of a nation-state's ability to conduct combat operations.[8] This is particularly true today in democratic nations where leaders must maintain popular support to stay in power. Despite the brutality of Hamas's 7 October 2023 terrorist attack and the continuing national security threat it poses to Israel, Hamas has effectively shaped the public narrative in such a way that Israel may be prevented from achieving its strategic objectives despite power overmatch. This was not a fortunate byproduct of circumstances but rather an asymmetric advantage that Hamas exploited from the outset of the conflict.

The 7 October terrorist attack was distinctly brutal. Hamas terrorists killed over 1,200 Israeli citizens and committed rape, torture, and corpse desecration against civilian victims. Further, Hamas took over two hundred hostages who have been tortured and many killed. Many of the hostages (or their remains) remain in Hamas's possession at the time of writing this article. Hamas has expressed intent to conduct future similar attacks against Israel.[9]

The attack was quickly labeled "Israel's 9/11," and Israel had initial international support for enacting a military retribution campaign with the stated objectives

of eradicating Hamas and recovering the hostages.[10] The beginning of this campaign displayed strong parallels to the American authorization for the use of force after 9/11.[11] However, after twenty years of America's War on Terrorism, nations have learned how to fight Western democracies who have power overmatch.

Hamas's cognitive warfare campaign was ready. During Israel's previous campaigns against Hamas in Gaza, Israel initially had public support but lost that support due to the media's portrayal of their aggressive tactics. After 7 October, Hamas was waiting to do it again through effective use of video and still images along with statistics of questionable veracity.[12] The media was blanketed with stories of Israel causing starving Palestinian refugees and high civilian casualty numbers, targeting protected buildings, and other wartime tragedies designed to undermine public support.[13]

Through cognitive warfare, Hamas is exposing one of Israel's critical vulnerabilities: its vulnerability to being influenced by allies who are concerned with public opinion. Undoubtedly, Israel may share some blame in its conduct where it exercises insufficient regard to collateral damage. However, what Israel has been unable to adequately inject into the narrative is that Hamas is forcing many of these incidents not out of necessity but by design and exaggerating the effects with false or misleading statistics. Hamas chooses to place its headquarters and weapons caches in highly populated and protected locations such as hospital basements. Hamas controls the offices of Palestinian government that are reporting the inaccurate civilian casualty numbers. Through official channels of Palestinian government, Hamas continues to publish unsubstantiated, inaccurate civilian casualty numbers that media outlets are reporting as fact.[14]

Leveraging cognitive warfare and the public's receptiveness to a sympathetic narrative driven by the ugly realities of LSCO, Hamas has positioned itself to fully exploit its asymmetric advantage: its ability to affect international pressure on Israel. Despite the unthinkable situation that Hamas created on 7 October, Israel has been cast as the aggressor in this conflict and is quickly losing public support for its strategic objectives. Israel is playing into it.[15]

Protests across the world, including in the United States, quickly sprang up after Israel began its military operation and have been pressuring political leaders to withhold support and compel Israel into seeking a ceasefire. Simultaneously, according to U.S. officials, Hamas continues to make "unreasonable" demands during ceasefire negotiations and has not released its hostages, thus forcing the conflict to continue.[16] Due to Hamas's effective use of cognitive warfare, Israel is at risk of being compelled through international pressure to accept a ceasefire agreement that is inconsistent with its strategic objectives despite having power overmatch and consistent tactical victories. Israel may be pressured to agree while knowing that the few concessions Hamas makes will not be honored, and that Hamas will continue attacking Israel in the future.[17] Even if Israel does not fully give in to international pressure for a ceasefire before it achieves its objectives, it will be forced to make tactical decisions and place additional restrictions on its rules of engagement (ROE). These limits may put its own troops at additional risk or limit its options for most efficiently achieving its objectives.

The Israel-Hamas conflict represents a potential turning point in the role of the information domain in LSCO. Although information domain operations have played a role dating back millennia, this represents something new. A distinctly weaker entity started a war with a stronger neighbor with no hope of conventional tactical victories but fully prepared to achieve strategic victory through information operations. Thus, cognitive warfare became Hamas's center of gravity because it is necessary for Hamas to achieve its strategic objectives and prevent Israel from achieving its own.

Although it is unclear at the time of writing this article how the conflict will be resolved, Hamas's exploitation of Israel's critical vulnerability to cognitive warfare is allowing a weaker opponent to potentially defeat a conventionally stronger enemy. Hamas's information domain dominance can be compared to the early days of the Ukraine conflict, where international support combined with Ukraine's resolve allowed it to resist the initial onslaught of the Russian invasion.

Dominating the Public Narrative: Ukraine's Resistance to Russia

The earliest days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine through present are a story of successful information operations enabling Ukraine to continue receiving vital international assistance. Without this assistance, Ukraine cannot continue resisting

the more powerful Russian military. Ukraine's early information operations rallied its people, built support for international sanctions against Russia, and maintained momentum convincing countries to contribute hundreds of billions of dollars in equipment and support to Ukraine's military.

When Russia invaded Ukraine, it initially pursued a strategy of rapid overthrow. Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy went on an overt, conscious public relations campaign to win support through rousing speeches and use of his talented showmanship. Zelenskyy's messaging inspired Ukraine's population, providing popular support to the resistance and inspiring a willingness to continue to fight at great personal risk and cost rather than giving in to Russian control.[18] This allowed Ukraine to survive that initial onslaught against a foe with substantial power overmatch. Although Russia's artillery onslaught targeting civilian population centers continues, its progress for land control has largely stalled, resulting in a drawn-out war of attrition.

In addition to maintaining the domestic population's will to fight, Zelenskyy's charismatic leadership gained overwhelming international support. Zelenskyy has toured the world giving countless speeches about Ukraine's plight and Russia's war crimes. This created rapid, early momentum from the international community, who was all too prepared to embrace a narrative of resisting Russian aggression. Early public narratives highlighted Ukraine's heroic resistance, Russia's flagrant violations of the law of armed conflict (LOAC), and even contemplated Russian President Vladimir Putin's psyche, suggesting he may be suffering from a terminal illness causing him to lose rational thought.[19]

The Ukraine conflict has continued to inflame people's emotions with a continuous flow of real-time photographs, video evidence, statistics, and compelling narratives being distributed through mainstream and social media. Social media websites such as Reddit have maintained continuous posts discussing the conflict in real-time and have accrued millions of individual posts and responses. In such conversations, pro-Russia comments are targeted by regular users for ridicule and fact-checking, often being downvoted into the nether regions of the post hierarchy, where casual readers are unlikely to ever see them. Pro-Ukraine narratives are the accepted dialogue of the majority population.[20]

This is particularly significant given that 86 percent of Americans now get their news from digital platforms with more than half of U.S. adults getting their news from social media at least sometimes.[21]

Nations across the world have responded to the tremendous international public support for Ukraine. Russia has faced aggressive sanctions targeting its national resources, its money, and even the private property of its oligarchs.[22] Countries cut economic ties with Russia, and private companies faced public pressure to withdraw their businesses. These sanctions forced Russia to restructure its economy and increased domestic tension between its people and their leaders. Although the international sanctions have met with admittedly limited enforcement success due to some nations bypassing them, they have increased Russia's everyday cost of doing business and isolated Russia from several international markets.

Perhaps most significantly, Ukraine has been directly supplied with advanced weapons systems, access to technology and intelligence, training, and billions of dollars of munitions. Zelenskyy has continued his role as national fundraiser, traveling the world and giving daily statements about Ukraine's needs. He is channeling support and pressuring nations to keep Ukraine at the center of public attention so the public will keep pressuring their leaders to support Ukraine. It is working. Ukraine continues to receive more funding, progressively more advanced weapons systems, and more leeway to use them offensively inside Russia's borders. It is able to continue resisting Russia while also slowly improving its ability to strike deeper into Russian territory to bring the consequences to the Russian people's doorsteps.

Like the Gaza conflict, a weaker opponent is preventing a stronger force from achieving its strategic objectives by leveraging public opinion to influence international support. Ukraine's resistance combined with international support has turned what Russia expected to be a three-day operation into a multiyear, drawn-out conflict that has weakened Russia's international standing. While the outcome of the conflict is uncertain, it cannot be understated that Ukraine's stubborn resistance against a more powerful enemy is largely attributable to Zelenskyy's talent for influencing the international public narrative.

Without continuing international support, Russia will quickly achieve its strategic objectives against

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy makes a speech to the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea during the Russo-Ukrainian War on 11 April 2022. (Photo courtesy of the Presidential Office of Ukraine)

Ukraine. Thus, controlling the public-facing information domain is vital to Ukraine's achieving its strategic objectives. The role of public support in the Gaza and Ukraine conflicts carries a powerful lesson for America: international public support can allow a weaker opponent to resist a nation that has substantial power overmatch. This can happen either through the international support the weaker nation receives (Ukraine) or the limits that international pressure place on the stronger force's actions (Israel). America must pay attention to the role of the information domain and its ability to shape a conflict at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels.

U.S. Cognitive Warfare Considerations in Multidomain Operations

America is sensitive to its international reputation and vulnerable to the effects of losing public support when engaging in prolonged combat operations. The Army is rapidly transforming into a division-centric fighting force designed for technologically modern, total LSCO, and some subject-matter experts (SME) are being reassigned from brigade staffs to the division or

higher. America must acknowledge it is susceptible to public pressure and prepare all echelons for their role defending against cognitive warfare attacks. Failure to do so will allow America's adversaries to outmaneuver it at all echelons in the public-facing information domain.

As the transition to LSCO preparedness progresses, many information operation SMEs are being centralized at higher echelons than the brigade. These include civil affairs and public affairs personnel. This decreases information operation considerations in tactical planning at a time when it should be increasing.

Cognitive warfare is effective against democratic nations that are concerned with public opinion, but not equally effective against authoritarian regimes that are not concerned with public opinion (except insofar as it is being used to increase support for the authoritarian regime's adversaries). Thus, authoritarian regimes have an asymmetric advantage when using cognitive warfare against democratic nations. For example, during the

War on Terrorism, America imposed tactical guidance that limited the military's available courses of action in response to negative public opinion while its adversaries did not concern themselves with even basic LOAC standards. This overly restrictive COIN-era ROE has been identified as something that could present a risk to mission and risk to personnel in a LSCO conflict.

During the COIN era, America spent twenty years fighting the Taliban to a stalemate in Afghanistan despite power overmatch. Due to concerns of public opinion, America placed an overly restrictive ROE upon itself without legal requirement to do so. Simultaneously, the Taliban, who did not adhere to any ROE, was being given material support by America's enemies, and America did not publicly confront those countries that were providing this support. Ultimately, America did not achieve its strategic objectives in Afghanistan because the Taliban endured. In a future LSCO conflict, America will not have the luxury of allowing these conditions to be repeated.

When the Army identified what was necessary to transition from COIN back to LSCO, Lt. Gen. Charles Pede, then the Army's judge advocate general, identified a cognitive gap: during the COIN era, the Army's overly strict application of ROE was limiting commanders' legal maneuver space.[23] Pede described this as a policy-driven, public-perception-cognizant application of ROE that resulted in self-imposed limitations on the use of force. He highlighted policy-driven commentators who were providing inaccurate descriptions of what LOAC requires and accusing America of violating their erroneous standards, when America was in fact meeting the legal standards. The result was a chorus of individuals (some well-intended, some not) erroneously accusing America of ROE and LOAC violations, with predictable impact on public opinion and international support.[24] At times, this caused America to further restrict its ROE, increasing risk to personnel.

Pede's article is (in part) an effort at countering misinformation: it is publishing accurate information to help inform the conversation. This is a countereffort in the information domain pushing back against false narratives about the lawfulness and legitimacy of American actions. This is a cognitive realm information operation.

Like Israel, America is susceptible to asymmetric cognitive warfare and must prepare to defend itself against such tactics. As Pede observed, LOAC allows for significantly broader use of force than became the norm in COIN. A total LSCO scenario will necessitate broad legal maneuver space for commanders. If America finds itself in a true LSCO scenario, it should consider how different its tactics will be than those used by Israel. America's enemies—who do not respect LOAC—will use the same illegal tactics that Hamas is using against Israel.

America faced damaging, erroneous allegations of LOAC violations even when it was exercising the overly stringent COIN-era ROE standards. In LSCO, how will America's military minimize risks to civilians to differentiate itself from the tactics the public is condemning in Gaza? What will America do to inform the public narrative about the harsh realities of war?

In future conflicts, America must anticipate that its adversaries will conduct cognitive warfare campaigns to prevent it from achieving its strategic objectives. America must be prepared to offer a timely, accurate counternarrative to prevent losing international and domestic support when the enemy conducts cognitive warfare that well-intending media and other public institutions will repeat to a potentially receptive public audience. America's frontline, tactical echelon fighting units must understand their role in the information domain fight.

Before the first shot is fired, a public-facing information domain battle will struggle over the narrative of who is justified in using force. When the fighting starts, the brutality of war will be highlighted to diminish public support. The enemy will force America into impossible situations to create negative narratives that will feed into information operations designed to weaken the American public's resolve. If American military units are not factoring this into their planning, they will be caught unprepared.

America's military needs to institutionalize and operationalize the integration of physical and information power.[25] The American military is not adequately incorporating information domain operations into its military decision-making process (MDMP) at all stages of planning.

Next page: An example of the rules of engagement during hostilities from the 101st Airborne Division during the invasion of Iraq in 2003. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

ROE DURING HOSTILITIES

NOTHING IN THESE RULES PROHIBITS YOU FROM EXERCISING YOUR INHERENT RIGHT TO DEFEND YOURSELF and OTHER ALLIED FORCES.

FIRING AT COMBATANTS

1. Fire at all members of forces DECLARED HOSTILE. You may immediately fire upon any force that you know to be hostile.

2. You may use necessary force, including deadly force, against any person, vehicle, or aircraft that commits a hostile act, or exhibits hostile intent.

3. Employ only observed fire, unless unobserved fire is necessary for the immediate defense of friendly forces receiving fire **or** is approved by designated authority (See ROE Annex).

4. Do not use incendiary weapons such as napalm or white phosphorous against targets in populated areas. Tracer and illumination rounds and smoke are authorized in all areas.

5. You may employ command-detonated claymores when authorized by the Division Commander. Keep claymores under continuous observation, and remove them when no longer necessary.

6. You may use Riot Control Agents (RCA), i.e., pepper spray or CS, when authorized by your Brigade Commander. Only use RCA in noncombatant situations, such as riot control against civilians, or when civilians are used as human shields, or to control EPWs in rear areas.

USING FORCE AGAINST CIVILIANS

1. You may stop civilians and check their identities, search for weapons and seize any found. Detain civilians when necessary to accomplish your mission or for their own safety. Use the Four S's when dealing with civilians demonstrating some form of hostile intent.

    1. **SHOUT** verbal warning to halt! In English: "HALT! DON'T MOVE! HANDS UP!"
       In Farsi: "Askaree Amriekk. Dresh ya fire may kenoom!"
       In Urda: "Amriki Forge. Ruck Jow! Warna goli ma-roongo!"
       In Arabic: "Al Kawat al Amrikia. Kef ow atlook al nar!"
    2. **SHOW** weapon and intent to use it.
    3. **SHOVE** Use non-lethal physical force.
    4. **SHOOT** to eliminate the threat. Fire only aimed shots. Stop firing when the threat is neutralized.

2. Do not fire upon civilian infrastructure facilities (i.e., communication, water treatment, power) unless such facilities are being used in a manner that threatens the security of the force.

3. You may fire upon civilian vehicles carrying enemy forces, weapons, or supplies.

4. You may confiscate the property of hostile forces, except captives' personal property and equipment necessary for their protection and welfare.

5. Seize PRIVATE property only if it has a military use (e.g., weapons, ammunition, communication equipment, or transportation) & your commander authorizes the seizure based on military necessity. Give the owner a receipt. Check to see if PUBLICLY owned property can substitute. **TAKING WAR TROPHIES IS PROHIBITED.**

Lessons Learned in Action

The Army must plan for and utilize public-facing, integrated information operations at each echelon from the strategic to the tactical levels. First, the Army must assess whether it has adequate information domain SMEs at the appropriate echelon units. Second, the Army must proactively rather than reactively integrate information operation planning. Third, the Army should consider the capabilities and potential usages of cognitive warfare to expand the scope of its operations.

The Army must first ensure units at all echelons are appropriately equipped with the tools and expertise needed to integrate information operations into their planning. As part of the division-centric restructuring for LSCO, brigade-level public affairs and civil affairs slots are being consolidated and realigned into the division echelon or above. Consistent with the *Joint Concept for Operating in the Information Environment*'s guidance, the Army should consider whether the brigade has adequate subject-matter expertise on cognitive warfare to integrate it into their planning.[26] At the operational and strategic levels, that expertise should be actively incorporated into the MDMP process. Such integrated planning would result in operation orders that include guidance to subordinate units for incorporating these considerations into their own planning. Operational and strategic commands should be conducting their own public-facing information operations as part of their multidomain operations. Tactical units should be considering how their actions will impact those information operations and how they can support them.

America *knows* that its enemies will publish false information in the public domain and violate LOAC in such a way that places American forces into challenging situations. At the strategic and operational levels, information operation planning should be anticipating LOAC violations by the enemy as well as ways the enemy will attempt to entrap American soldiers into actions that, although lawful, are subject to negative portrayal in the media. America must anticipate that its lawful tactical actions will be twisted into informational weapons against it to undermine public support for American operations. Proactive information operations designed to maintain control of the narrative and prevent the enemy from effectively wielding misinformation and disinformation will help America convert tactical success into strategic victory.

One of the most important things tactical echelon units can do is to be ready for these traps. Tactical units must report to higher headquarters when enemy cognitive warfare traps are emplaced and feed the information needed for the American military's operational and strategic elements to conduct its own information operations.

Additionally, the Army must provide accurate training on ROE to help commanders maintain a mindset that is anchored to the actual requirements. At the tactical level down to the individual soldier, it must be reinforced that soldiers should "do no harm" by not committing bad acts that give the enemy cognitive warfare ammunition. This was repeatedly the case in Operation Iraqi Freedom, where both aggressive detention policies as well as crimes by individual soldiers undermined global support and increased insurgent resistance to all American forces.[27] It must be emphasized to every soldier that one of America's key asymmetric advantages over its adversaries is its global reputation for upholding the international rule of law, and their individual actions can undermine this.

Third, America should leverage its historic position as the lead defender of the international rule of law and its own capacity for operating in the public-facing information domain to proactively prevent its adversaries from achieving their strategic objectives. When adversaries violate LOAC, America must dominate the narrative by highlighting their criminal acts and seeking accountability. Tactical-echelon units should be on alert for such violations and feed that information to operational-echelon commands that are ready to publicize and highlight adversaries' bad acts to the world. While this will not stop all the bad acts, it will increase adversaries' cost of doing business. It may make other nations more hesitant to ally themselves with such bad actors knowing that they will become associated with such illegal acts.

Additionally, America should proactively reinforce its global reputation by highlighting the positive work it does around the world and strengthening alliances. This will strengthen America's global posture and public support while also strengthening partner nations.[28] Indeed, if proactively integrated into operational planning, America should see informational operations and thematic messaging as a strength rather than a liability.[29]

By fully integrating information operations into MDMP at all echelons, the Army will be able to

proactively rather than reactively plan for cognitive warfare campaigns. When operating at its full capacity, America can leverage its reputation as the leading supporter of the international rule of law to dominate the information domain and place its adversaries in a defensive posture that increases their cost of doing business when they violate LOAC.

Planning for Cognitive Warfare Does Not Disturb the Military's Apolitical Tradition

It is an American military principle that its members remain apolitical.[30] One potential counterargument to this article is that its suggestions would move tactical military operations too far into the political realm. This counterargument must fail because the information age has fundamentally altered the relationship between the battlefield and the public-facing information domain. Because America's adversaries will use battlefield tactics that target public opinion, America's military must adapt to remain competitive and can do so without violating its apolitical traditions.

The public-facing information domain is now a part of multidomain operations with a direct impact on tactical, operational, and strategic considerations.[31] While messaging guidance and strategic-level decisions must be made at the appropriate level, tactical units must remain cognizant of these considerations and appropriately factor them into their planning. This is consistent with America's apolitical military tradition, where it is recognized that military leaders at all echelons must understand national objectives and the strategic implications of their actions.[32]

Ultimately, while it is important that information domain considerations are factored into planning at all echelons, it is given that those planning considerations will be appropriate for the given echelon. Tactical-level information considerations will be informed by the operational order and other guidance from higher-echelon units, while key information operations will remain an operational- or strategic-echelon fight.

Appropriate planning at the tactical echelon will ensure units down to the individual soldier understand the secondary effects of their actions and may influence how certain operations are conducted. It will also help the ground-level units identify when adversaries create scenarios that place American soldiers in a situation designed for propaganda exploitation. If a situation arises such as an enemy fighting from a hospital building, tactical units should have already planned how such a situation will be addressed. The tactical-level units should understand the need to rapidly report such information to the higher echelon where the public-facing information domain fight is being managed.

At the operational and strategic levels, there should be an integrated information domain plan in which civil affairs, legal, and public affairs are involved in the planning and can immediately engage in preparing countermessaging. This will help America hold its adversaries accountable for their own LOAC violations while protecting American interests from misinformation, disinformation, and other cognitive warfare campaigns.

It is given that Army leaders must tread carefully to remain apolitical, especially when it comes to cognitive warfare. Public-facing information operations should be carefully coordinated with the strategic echelon. This will not significantly change the nature of the American military's traditional apolitical stance but, rather, simply ensure it remains cognizant of all possible threats to achieving its strategic objectives.

Conclusion

Pede, in his critique of legal commentators who are unfamiliar with the realities of war, asked his readers to imagine the well-intended, overly stringent, COIN-era ROE standards being imposed upon American soldiers during the largest battles of World War II.[33] In information age warfare, one must imagine those same historical battles are being video recorded, the choice portions selectively edited and mass-distributed on social media within minutes of happening. Troll farms and bots are reposting the images, flooding X, YouTube, and Instagram with their crafted narrative. Those videos are showing the ugly realities of war to influence public opinion against the war.

One should imagine that, in the next conflict, the American military is lawfully targeting no-strike-list entities because the enemy intentionally positioned its command nodes underneath these buildings, knowing the unlawful advantage it would provide them. The hypothetical enemy planned to compel America into targeting these buildings, knowing that the world will hold America to a higher standard regardless of the legal

standard or realities of military necessity in LSCO. Media commentators and private citizens are sharing these feeds and calling for public pressure campaigns to influence elected leaders to apply a more restrictive ROE on American soldiers, not appreciating the risk to mission and risk to personnel they are calling for. This is the reality of information age war where a picture, video, or tweet going viral could influence international events. American military units at all echelons must be prepared for cognitive warfare.

The Israeli-Hamas conflict offers lessons about a nation with power overmatch that is achieving consistent tactical victories but risks strategic defeat due to its enemy's effective use of cognitive warfare. Comparatively, the role of the public-facing information domain in the Ukraine-Russia conflict offers lessons about the successful application of information operations to further Ukraine's strategic interests. America will face similar risk from adversaries' efforts to dominate the information domain with misinformation and disinformation in future conflicts. America must apply lessons learned about cognitive warfare and information domain operations from current global conflicts to be fully prepared for modern LSCO. ■

Notes

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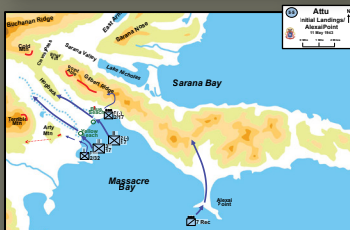30. Risa Brooks, "Beyond Huntington: US Military Professionalism Today," *Parameters* 51, no. 1 (2021): 65–77, https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol51/iss1/8/.

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