

TRUTH

IN DEFENSE OF MILITARY PUBLIC AFFAIRS DOCTRINE

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THE SIMULTANEOUS EXPANSION of information operations (IO) and the effects-based approach to operations is challenging traditional notions of military public affairs (PA).¹ Politicians looking for more support in waging an ideological war against extremism, and military commanders seeking more precise effects on the battlefield through the coherent application of all elements of alliance and national power, are blurring the boundaries between IO and PA.²

The Pentagon's short-lived Office of Strategic Influence (OSI) is an example of the move toward a more propagandistic information model. According to one news report, the aim of this Orwellian organization was to "influence public opinion abroad," a mandate that some U.S. generals felt would "undermine the Pentagon's credibility and America's attempts to portray herself as the beacon of liberty and democratic values."³

Although OSI was dismantled (at least in name), the U.S. military and many other armed forces are continuing to invest in IO capabilities. At the same time, commanders are pressing PA to contribute more tangibly to achieving effects or gaining influence on the battlefield and elsewhere. Public affairs doctrine, however, traditionally seeks to inform audiences, not influence them. NATO policy, for example, specifically states that while PA's "overall aim is ultimately to promote public understanding and support of the Alliance and its activities, information is provided in such a way that media representatives and the citizens of the countries concerned are able to make their own judgment as independently as possible."⁴

Similarly, U.S. doctrine, as cited in a Department of Defense (DOD) directive, states that "propaganda has no place in DOD public affairs programs."⁵ Some might suggest that this statement only applies within America's borders, but the same directive says, "Open and independent reporting shall be the principle means of coverage of U.S. military operations."⁶

At a glance, these lofty principles seem to offer politicians and military commanders little hope that PA can bring any tangible capabilities to the battlefield or anywhere else. Where are its measurable effects? In contrast, the effects of enemy propaganda seem evident, from decreasing support for U.S. interventions to increasing numbers of suicide bombers.

It may be true that PA "effects" are not always immediately evident, but this is a consequence of Western political ideology, which calls for transparent government, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and other such principles that militate against shaping public opinion. Therefore, before

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discarding current doctrine because of a desire to see immediate effects, its origins in the democratic tradition should be carefully considered.

Modern democracies find their roots in the 17th-century Age of Reason and the 18th-century Age of Enlightenment. The philosophers of those ages nurtured the radical notion that all men and women are created equal. This belief began to erode the long-accepted view that kings, queens, and other nobles were somehow superior and better suited to rule. Early liberal democracies like France and the United States entrenched these notions in their constitutions.

The American Declaration of Independence, written in 1776, reflects this new political outlook: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”⁷

Central to the new outlook were the notions of freedom of speech and freedom of the press. One of the most influential arguments in favor of such rights can be attributed to the English poet John Milton, whose pamphlet “Areopagitica” assailed the British Government’s licensing of books. Milton wrote: “This I know, that errors in a good government and in a bad are equally almost incident; for what magistrate may not be misinformed, and much the sooner, if liberty of printing be reduced into the power of a few?”⁸

The First Amendment of the 1789 U.S. Bill of Rights adopted Milton’s arguments: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right

of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”⁹

Two centuries later, the constitutions of most democratic nations include similar provisions, including freedom of speech and freedom of the press as fundamental human rights. The constitution of one of NATO’s newer member nations, Romania, states: “Freedom of expression of thoughts, opinions, or beliefs, and freedom of any creation, by words, in writing, in pictures, by sounds or other means of communication in public are inviolable.”¹⁰

Of course, such rights do have limits. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, for one, “guarantees the rights and freedoms set out in it subject only to such reasonable limits prescribed by law as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society.”¹¹

Although limited, these rights extend far beyond national borders. They are found enshrined in international treaties and conventions. Article 55 of the United Nations charter says that the UN shall promote “universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.”¹² These rights are more broadly delineated in a separate document, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which the UN adopted in 1948. Article 9 of the Declaration reads, “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”¹³

Freedom of speech and the press are not the only democratic rights stipulated in the UN’s Declaration. According to Article 21, “Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives . . . The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.”¹⁴

NATO nations are doubly bound to honor these human rights by virtue of their simultaneous membership in the UN and the Alliance. The NATO treaty proclaims that “the Parties to this Treaty reaffirm their faith in the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and their desire to live in peace with all peoples and all governments.”¹⁵

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The NATO alliance also adopted the principles of democracy as part of its 1994 Partnership for Peace program, an initiative designed to help former Warsaw Pact countries with post-cold-war transition. The framework document states: “Protection and promotion of fundamental freedoms and human rights, and safeguarding of freedom, justice, and peace through democracy are shared values fundamental to the Partnership. In joining the Partnership, the member States of the North Atlantic Alliance and the other States subscribing to this Document recall that they are committed to the preservation of democratic societies, their freedom from coercion and intimidation, and the maintenance of the principles of international law.”¹⁶

That a political-military alliance like NATO committed itself so unequivocally to the principles of democracy is significant, for it implies that such principles are not limited to the national borders of the member nations or the boundaries of the Euro-Atlantic region, but extend to the battlefields where Alliance troops are sent. The Geneva Conventions, also ratified by all NATO nations, offer specific protections of human rights on these fields of battle, including the rights of journalists.

Article 4 of the 1949 Geneva Convention *relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War* (POWs) states: “Persons who accompany the armed forces without actually being members thereof, such as civilian members of military aircraft crews, *war correspondents*, supply contractors” shall be treated as prisoners of war [italics added].¹⁷ The term “war correspondent” was found somewhat restrictive, however, and additional provisions for journalists were added to the Geneva Conventions in 1977 under Protocol I, *relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts*.¹⁸

Article 79 of Protocol I specifically addresses “measures or protection for journalists,” stating that

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“journalists engaged in dangerous professional missions in areas of armed conflict shall be considered as civilians [and] shall be protected as such . . . provided that they take no action adversely affecting their status as civilians.”¹⁹ (Interestingly, embedded journalists could therefore be imprisoned if captured, while journalists not accompanying armed forces should be accorded the same rights as civilians.)

If any conclusions are to be drawn from the above legacy, foremost would be that the international community views the trampling of fundamental human rights, including freedom of the press, as one of the underlying causes and consequences of war. It was by trampling such rights that the Third Reich rose to power and committed the most horrendous atrocities in history. Codifying such rights was one way by which the international community hoped to avoid “the scourge of war” in the future.²⁰

At the Tehran conference in 1943, Winston Churchill told Joseph Stalin that “in wartime, truth is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies.”²¹ The British prime minister was speaking of allied efforts to deceive the Germans in advance of the Normandy invasions. When directed at an enemy, such deceit is justifiable. However, the notion that in wartime the truth should “always” be protected by lies is precisely what the international community was trying to circumvent. Notions like freedom of speech and freedom of the press are the safeguards.

The tension between today’s PA and IO doctrine reflects the historical struggle between truth and deceit. U.S. joint PA doctrine explicitly states in bold letters: “Tell the Truth. PA personnel will only release truthful information. The long-term success of [PA] operations depends on maintaining the integrity and credibility of officially released information.”²² British joint media operations doctrine also cites the importance of truthfulness: “All communication with the media must be honest, transparent and accurate.”²³

Romania’s military public affairs policy states: “No information will be classified nor will it be prevented from release in order to protect the military institution against criticism or other unpleasant situations.”²⁴ According to British policy, “information should be withheld only when disclosure would adversely affect [operational security], force safety or individual privacy.”²⁵

On the other hand, NATO's IO policy holds that influencing or deceiving one's adversaries is, at times, justifiable: "The primary focus of [information operations] is on adversaries, potential adversaries and other [North Atlantic Council] approved parties."²⁶ While "approved parties" is a vague term, it is understood not to include the Alliance's own citizenry.

Still, many governments do in fact routinely seek to influence domestic public opinion through such things as recruiting advertising or health promotions. Likewise, government communicators routinely develop "messages" designed for target audiences. Such practices differ from IO, however, because they are normally transparent and follow policy decisions openly taken by elected governments. They are also subject to democratic checks and balances, including the scrutiny of the free press, attacks by elected opponents, and legal challenges. Finally, the news media resist being repeaters of government messaging and strive for balance by questioning government policy and seeking alternative viewpoints.

Notwithstanding the existing doctrinal divisions between PA and IO, many commanders still desire the more tangible effects promised by information, deception, and psychological operations; thus, they lean toward integrating PA into IO. Concern that some of these commanders were blurring the lines between the "inform" doctrine of PA and the "influence" doctrine of IO led the former chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Richard B. Myers, to issue a letter directing the military's top brass to keep PA distinct from deception and influence functions.²⁷

Can PA deliver the effects commanders desire without violating current doctrine and all of its attendant liberal-democratic baggage? Like other military disciplines, PA has to adapt to a changing world with asymmetric threats and a ubiquitous media environment that showers the entire planet with streaming multimedia. In this new information world, terrorists can propagate their information faster than Western militaries can respond.

NATO doctrine calls for the "timely and accurate" release of information. Despite this, the Alliance and its member nations have had difficulty getting inside the enemy's so-called OODA-loop (observe, orient, decide, act).²⁸ In the OODA-loop theory of decision cycles, time is the critical element, but Western forces tend to be hindered by time-consuming processes or decision-making loops that often require approvals from multiple national capitals across a spectrum of time zones.²⁹ The challenge, then, is not necessarily a doctrinal one for PA; rather, it is predominantly a process issue that requires political will and trust to be resolved.

In terms of tangible effects from PA, many nations are already taking steps to push the doctrine of "informing" to a new, proactive level. Since the 1990s, Canada has been routinely sending its several combat camera teams off to cover Canadian Forces operations around the globe. The video and stills the teams bring or transmit home is then pushed to national and international media.

In 2004, the U.S. military invested more than \$6 million in the Digital Video and Imagery Distribution System (DVIDS) hub at Atlanta, which collects and distributes raw video to U.S. and international broadcasters on a daily basis. Additionally, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), which oversees U.S. operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, has made the move from reactive media relations to a robust proactive program by standing up a full-time team of PA specialists who suggest story ideas to the media.

While some nations are moving to invest in more proactive PA capabilities, the current trend is

The screenshot shows the DVIDS website interface. At the top, it says "ACCURATE, RELIABLE ACCESS" and "dvids Digital Video and Imagery Distribution System". The date and time are "04.16.2007 9:34pm Iraq | 1:34pm EST". There is a search bar with "Search Phrases:" and a "Search" button. The user is logged in as "guest." with "login" and "register" links. The main content area is titled "March 26th, 2007 - Gallery 7821" and features a gallery of images. The first image is titled "Al Shurja Market Place" and shows a soldier in uniform being interviewed by a reporter. Below the image, there is a caption: "Gen. David Petraeus, right, commander of Multi National Corps Forces in Iraq gets interviewed by Fox News Reporter Clurissa Ward, left, at the Al Shurja Market Place in the Rusafa area of east Baghdad, Iraq on March 11. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Davis Pridgen)". To the right of the image, there are navigation controls: "<< Prev", "Next >>", "Viewing: 4 of 10 images", "High Res.", and "Images Home". On the left side, there is a navigation menu with links for Home, News, Images, Browse Galleries, Journalist Portfolios, Past Week, Popular Images, Video, Audio, Publications, Site Features, Media Requests, and General Information. At the bottom left, there is a "Member Area:" link. On the right side, there are several promotional banners: "dvids Live Webcasts" with the text "Speak to a Soldier in Iraq NAB Attendees in Las Vegas Speak to Soldiers from the 210th MPAD Live in Balad, Iraq 1400-1500EDT", "REEL LIFE 2/4/7", "dvids PODCASTS", and "Mother's Day Greetings".

Digital Video and Imagery Distribution System (DVIDS) website screen capture.

to invest robustly in IO and PSYOP. Once IO and PSYOP are activated on operations, there is also a trend to continue applying them on audiences that are no longer adversarial. The term “IO” is even being used to define communication activities where there is no defined adversary.

Given that the majority of what nations and coalitions are communicating is factual information, these trends are counterintuitive. Meantime, PA offices continue to be understaffed, under-trained, and under-resourced. If more resources were invested in simply informing the media and the public, the results could be impressive. The power of the truth, presented factually, should not be underestimated.

Moreover, if target audiences understood they were not the targets of IO or PSYOP, they might find conveyed information more credible. America’s black propaganda program in Iraq, where articles were surreptitiously placed in newspapers by the Lincoln Group (initially contracted through a military PA office), damaged U.S. credibility.³⁰ It aided and abetted the enemy’s portrayal of America as a hypocritical interloper.

In the face of IO, the obvious questions an adversary might pose are: If western nations are

so confident in democracy, why do they resort to propaganda? If they are so confident in the truth as a moral force, why lie?

It might be justifiable to deceive an adversary for the sake of saving lives and winning battles, but in accordance with national and international laws and conventions, it is not acceptable to violate the human rights of those who have done no wrong. Telling the truth is not a simple proposition in today’s complex media environment, where information targeted at an adversary in a remote location will inevitably bleed into media and reach friends and allies in every corner of the globe.

As with kinetic weapons, there will be collateral damage in the information war. So long as the military PA arm of government remains true to its doctrine, friendly publics will be told the facts and the free press will be accorded its place. If the West is so confident that this works at home, then this confidence should be projected into the regions where the West sends its fighting troops. In the meantime, those seeking immediate effects must be reminded that it takes time to build democracy, and that although it can be painful at times, the truth will ensure democracy’s survival. **MR**

NOTES

1. “Effects-based approach to operations” is a term NATO uses, but it is synonymous with similar “effects-based” terminology employed by U.S. forces. The glossary on the U.S. Joint Forces Command website offers this definition: “The coherent application of national and alliance elements of power through effects-based processes to accomplish strategic objectives,” <www.jfcom.mil/>.

2. The White House’s September 2006 *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* refers to both “a battle of arms and a battle of ideas,” stating, “We will attack terrorism and its ideology” and cites the need to neutralize terrorist propaganda, <www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nsc2006/>.

3. Tom Carver, “Pentagon plans propaganda war,” BBC News, 20 February 2002, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/1830500.stm>>. This is only one example of the many articles and editorials attacking the Office of Strategic Influence.

4. Final Decision on Military Committee (MC) 457, NATO Military Policy on Public Information, 14 June 2001. For more information, see <www.nato.int/ims/docu/nmp1.htm>.

5. U.S. Department of Defense Directive (DODD) 5122.5, “Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs (ASD CPA) and enclosures,” 27 September 2000, <www.dtic.mil/whs/directives/corres/html/51225.htm>. The latest version of joint U.S. public affairs doctrine cites the same principles.

6. Ibid.

7. U.S. Declaration of Independence, 4 July 1776, <www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/index.htm>.

8. John Milton, “Areopagitica: A speech for the liberty of unlicensed printing to the Parliament of England,” 23 November 1644, <www.econlib.org/library/Essays/milA1.html>.

9. U.S. Bill of Rights, Amendment I, 25 September 1789, ratified 15 December 1791, <www.cs.indiana.edu/statecraft/cons.bill.html>.

10. Constitution of Romania, Article 30, “Freedom of Expression,” <www.oefre.unibe.ch/law/icl/ro_indx.html>.

11. Constitution Act, 1982, Article 1, Part 1, “Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms,” <<http://thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1ARTA0001270>>.

12. Charter of the United Nations, San Francisco, CA, 26 June 1945, <www.un.org/aboutun/carter/>.

13. UN, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted and proclaimed by the UN General Assembly, 10 December 1948, <<http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/udhr/>>.

14. Ibid.

15. NATO treaty.

16. NATO Ministerial Communiqué Annex to M-1(94)2: Partnership for Peace: Framework Document, 10 January 1994, <<http://hq.nato.int/docu/comm/49-95/c940110b.htm>>. This document also commits NATO partners to “reaffirm their commitment to fulfill in good faith the obligations of the Charter of the United Nations and the principles of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights [para. 2].”

17. Ratified by all NATO nations, the Geneva Conventions were adopted on 12 August 1949 by the Diplomatic Conference for the Establishment of International Conventions for the Protection of Victims of War. They entered into force on 21 October 1950.

18. *Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of August 12, 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol 1)*, adopted 8 June 1977 by the Diplomatic Conference on the Reaffirmation and Development of International Humanitarian Law applicable in Armed Conflicts, and entered into force 7 December 1979.

19. Ibid.

20. Charter of the United Nations.

21. Library of Congress, *Churchill and the Great Republic*, <<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/churchill/wc-unity.html>>.

22. U.S. Joint Publication (JP) 3-61, *Doctrine for Public Affairs in Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 9 May 2005), on-line at <www.au.af.mil/au/awcgate/awmedia.htm>.

23. British Army, JSP 512, *Joint Services Media Handling Guide* (unknown: March 2006), <www.army.mod.uk/atgl_service_pubs/_agais/jsp/index.htm>.

24. From documents provided to the author by the Directorate of Public Affairs, Romanian Ministry of Defense.

25. *Joint Services Media Handling Guide*.

26. NATO Policy, MC 422/1, NATO Military Policy on Information Operations, 2002.

27. JP 3-61.

28. JP 3-61 states: “The first side that presents the information sets the context and frames the public debate. It is extremely important to get factual, complete, truthful information out first. . . . [chap. 1, 1-4].”

29. For a discussion of the OODA-loop by its originator, see John R. Boyd, *A Discourse on Winning and Losing* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University, 1987).

30. Willem Marx, “My Summer as a Military Propagandist in Iraq,” Harper’s (September 2005): 51-59.