



(U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Mark Wyatt, Joint Task Force Jaguar PAO)

Maj. Mike Nicholson, public affairs officer for 1st Heavy Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division, helps Pfc. Kyle Ingle update the "Iron Brigade" blog on the hood of a High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle 5 November 2009 at Camp Red Cloud, South Korea. Ingle maintained a small digital camera to shoot photos and videos for a week during a field exercise and provided an update to the brigade's website.

Public Opinion

A Center of Gravity Leaders Forget

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The moral elements are among the most important in war. They constitute the spirit that permeates war as a whole, and at an early stage they establish a close affinity with the will that moves and leads the whole mass of force The effects of physical and psychological factors form an organic whole, which, unlike a metal alloy, is inseparable by chemical processes. In formulating any rule concerning physical factors, the theorist must bear in mind the part that moral factors may play in it Hence most of the matters dealt with in this book are composed in equal parts of physical and of moral causes and effects. One might say that the physical seem little more than the wooden hilt, while the moral factors are the precious metal, the real weapon, the finely-honed blade.

—Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*

The military has long employed the center of gravity (COG) concept as an analytical tool for assessing both enemy and friendly vulnerabilities during strategic and operational planning as well as for the study of past wars and conflicts. The COG concept is attributed to Prussian Gen. Carl Von Clausewitz as described in his theoretical treatise, *On War*. In that master work, albeit unfinished, Clausewitz described a COG as an emerging confluence of certain key factors from among a complex web of interrelated and interdependent components within an entity at war that, during a certain window of time, forms “the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends.” He goes on to say that it is this hub against which the friendly major offensive effort should be directed in order to upset the coherence and equilibrium of an adversary’s war effort.¹

Though there has been intense and oftentimes emotional debate within the military regarding exactly what Clausewitz had in mind by this description, interpretations of his thoughts on the COG concept (especially since the post-Vietnam era of the late 1970s) have had a deep and lasting influence on U.S. doctrinal thinking. Such influence is on display in Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning*, which recasts the COG concept in somewhat different language as “a source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act.”²

The pre-9/11 Army was initially inclined to interpret the COG as primarily a physical attribute or entity (e.g., an army, a key logistical point, a vital political center such as a capital city, or a port, etc.). However, the lingering legacy of the Vietnam War, where public opinion played a decisive role in U.S. moral commitment to the conflict, combined with similar challenges in maintaining national moral commitment to conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq over the last fifteen years, caused Army doctrinal thinkers to revisit Clausewitz’s theoretical assertions about COGs. Such deliberation has resulted in increased awareness of the preeminence of moral factors within the context of his overall theory of war. The influence of Clausewitz on U.S. Army thinking is clearly evident in Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0, *Unified Land Operations*, which states that “centers of gravity are not limited to military forces and can be either physical or moral. They are a part of a dynamic perspective of an operational environment.”³

However, irrespective of having admitted the plausibility of moral factors becoming, in fact, the main hub of power upon which the outcome of an entire conflict may be decided, ADRP 3-0 gives short shrift to stipulating just how a moral COG should be attacked or defended. Instead, the doctrine writers of ADRP 3-0 appear to have contented themselves by merely noting that moral COGs are difficult to identify and influence.⁴

The vague admission and lack of detail begs the question: precisely how does a friendly power or force go about attacking something identified as the moral hub of an adversary’s war effort?

Information as a Key Component of the Moral Center of Gravity

Among the most important factors that directly impact moral convictions and commitment on all sides of a conflict is targeted information packaged to



be persuasive in content and rapidly disseminated in many venues. Yet, despite apparently broad appreciation for the potential influence of information within the military, what guidelines there are in ADRP 3-0 for effectively developing and discussing targeted information transfer do not as yet identify information as a center of gravity. It is only cryptically alluded to in the “Unified Action” chapter, mentioned but once as the necessity for the Army to participate in interagency coordination to formulate strategic communication for support of defense and public diplomacy.⁵

This article contends that such a lack of doctrinal emphasis—acknowledging the necessity for developing and distributing information aimed at influencing various audiences as a decisive component of modern warfare—is a key indicator of a dangerous deficiency in military thinking. Our recent experience in conflicts such as Iraq and Afghanistan reveal

that failure to recognize public opinion as a center of gravity, and the intrinsic role that effective public communication now has for shaping public opinion in the information age, risks failure to win wars.

It is still true that the U.S. military has the conventional technology, training, and equipment to defeat any known single conventional enemy in the field. In conjunction, operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other locations during America’s longest period of war have provided the most experienced warfighting force the U.S. military has ever had. However, as recent (and not so recent) experience suggests, the physical means to win wars in today’s political and security environment is clearly not enough.

Experience has shown that the court of domestic public opinion, driven by modern communications, can have a dramatic impact on military decisions, generally at the strategic and operational level, but also down to the tactical level. Information conveyed to the public has the capacity to push us just as quickly out of a war as it can push us in, however unwisely in either case. Therefore, it is imperative that military decision makers acquire a higher level of sophistication when working through the many new dimensions of modern warfare’s public information component that impact the moral center of gravity so dramatically on either side of a conflict. Such must be dealt with effectively and cannot be wished away. Some of the most significant of these dimensions are addressed below.

Public Opinion Polling as a New Dimension of War

It is important to observe that future conflicts waged by democracies—like it or not—will be driven in large measure by extensive near-real-time media exposure shaped by pundit and so-called expert analysis whose commentary will be linked

Stephen Colbert interviews special guest Gen. Ray Odierno, commanding general of the Multi-National Force—Iraq 7 June 2009 during an episode of *The Colbert Report* filmed in Baghdad, Iraq. Once thought by many to be an inappropriate, and even demeaning, venue for policy discussion by those holding high government office, so-called entertainment media have evolved to become a powerful and influential channel of information to large, mainly youthful audiences that have little interest in traditional news programs. Subsequently, U.S. government and military officials have sought to participate in such programs to convey information to publics that traditional media do not reach.

(Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)



In view of the developments since we first sent out troops to Iraq, do you think the United States made a mistake in sending troops to Iraq, or not?

■ Yes, a mistake ■ No, not a mistake



GALLUP POLL

(Reproduced by permission from Gallup)

Figure 1. Gallup Poll

to public-opinion polling. This is a direct result of advances in communications technology that created the information age in which we now live. Such are likely to be a permanent feature of future conflict pending the unlikely emergence of an as yet undeveloped technological innovation that somehow replaces the influence of public opinion polling on decision makers.

History shows that U.S. wartime policy makers since at least the Civil War have obsessed over public opinion and attempted to gauge the impact of contemplated wartime decisions based largely on anticipating how domestic public opinion might react. For example, both the Confederate invasion of Pennsylvania leading to the battle at Gettysburg and the Emancipation Proclamation were arguably the products of just such U.S. Civil War gambits directly aimed at shaping public opinion by attacking the adversaries' perceived moral centers of gravity.

However, the difference in dynamics between pre-information age and today is that modern polling

techniques convey public attitudes within hours of actual or anticipated events that concentrates the enormous stress, uncertainty, and anxiety generated by war into vastly shortened decision cycles as compared to those longer timelines enjoyed in the past. This has forced decision makers to make decisions within timeframes measured in hours rather than days, weeks, or even months. One consequence of this development is that decision makers now increasingly demand evidence of supportive public opinion through polling as a precondition for decisions they consider regarding the use of military force—sometimes even as a factor or decision at the tactical level.

This increasing trend was observable in the immediate aftermath of the attacks on 11 September 2001—the worst single-day attack by a foreign power against the United States since Pearl Harbor. Almost immediately, polling linked to punditry placed great stress on the Bush administration and military advisors as public opinion data regarding the potential options for dealing with those who had planned and conducted

the attacks were collected, analyzed, and debated in the public media.⁶ Counterintuitively, one finding identified in such early polling was public reticence for committing immediately to a strong military response. Consequently, as Louis Klarevas observed, public opinion polling actually appeared to impede policy makers from taking immediate action. The subsequent delay in planning and conducting a military response until much later appeared to enable U.S. adversaries by providing additional time to prepare for a U.S. attack. “The military issues are more highly constrained,” he wrote, “because they are inherently more threatening to the public, are more often the object of media coverage, and are generally more salient in the mass public’s mind.”⁷

Based on numerous subsequent studies and indications from polling data, the public in general appears to support a perceived necessity for conducting military operations—whether inside or outside of the U.S. borders—to achieve national goals when faced with adversaries that threaten national interests.⁸ However, as demonstrated in figure 1, public opinion polling also consistently shows limited public tolerance—and little patience—for military operations that show no immediate progress or that suffer significant setbacks.

For the above reasons, public opinion polling has evolved to be an important factor influencing strategic decisions as well as shaping communication strategies for U.S. administrations and elected officials. Additionally, such constant polling during times of conflict directly influences the military leadership in its daily operational and tactical decisions in a formerly unheard of way as policy guidance from the national civilian leaders and strategic objectives vacillate in response to trending opinion data.

Whether military commanders and subordinate leaders sufficiently understand and appreciate the impact of greatly speeded public opinion data on their decisions is not clear and is consequently an area that requires further research. However, what is known, based on U.S. Army and joint doctrinal publications, is that relatively little education and training is given to leaders to adequately prepare them for command decision making in an environment of real-time, globally distributed polling data.

Quite the contrary, there is a fair amount of anecdotal information indicating that many commanders

and leaders continue to live in denial that the public information domain and public opinion are either “key terrain” or critical centers of gravity. As a consequence, there is a real danger that in the future, military leaders who decline to consider the impact of public opinion polling on their operations, and who make no plans to address what they may wish to dismiss as disproportionate public reaction to minor adverse events, place themselves and their operations at much greater risk of failure.

A historical example is reflected in events associated with Operation Restore Hope, the follow-on mission to Operation Provide Relief, part of the United Nations multinational relief operations in Somalia (UNOSOM I and II) that began in August 1992. Operation Restore Hope was initiated under United Nations Security Resolution 794 with the United States in the lead. After success in reestablishing a measure of order and relieving famine under UNOSOM I, UNOSOM II was initiated on 26 March 1993. UNOSOM II changed the objectives of the mission from relieving famine to confronting militias in order to establish political order.⁹

As a result, the mission evolved quickly into a situation that saw U.S. forces become involved in almost daily combat operations over a period of many months. One event that completely changed the mission, largely due to public opinion shaped by coverage from CNN and other media, involved the aftermath of the Battle of Mogadishu, an action fought in the Somali capital from 3 to 4 October 1993. This battle, which resulted in the loss of two U.S. Army Black Hawk helicopters and eighteen special operations soldiers, became widely known as “Black Hawk Down.” It was unique in U.S. Army history because of the global transmission of imagery showing the bodies of several special operations soldiers being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu by mobs within hours of the event together with video of a captured helicopter pilot being interrogated.

For comparison’s sake, it is useful to note that approximately twenty-three thousand soldiers were killed at Antietam, Pennsylvania, on 17 September 1863; eight thousand American soldiers were killed during the Normandy landings on 6 June 1944; and 275 American soldiers were killed in the Battle of Ia Drang Valley, Vietnam, from 14 to 18 November 1965. Yet, none of these, or other large-scale battles

with vastly more casualties and much greater loss of materiel, were impacted so quickly and dramatically by public opinion in so short a timeline as the Battle of Mogadishu with its comparatively light loss of life and materiel. In response to the dramatic dip in public support for operations in Somalia, largely attributed to images broadcast on cable television, then Pres. William J. Clinton directed that operations be immediately curtailed. Within a week, negotiations were begun with the militia leaders with whom U.S. forces had just been fighting, followed by an order that all U.S. forces be withdrawn from Somalia no later than 31 March 1994, irrespective of having not achieved the stated political objective of establishing stability.¹⁰

This dramatic disengagement from Somalia in direct response to what can only be perceived as political concern for adverse public opinion had far-reaching policy implications that profoundly influenced later Clinton administration decisions regarding use of the military. These included: declining to send troops to stop the genocide in Rwanda; trying to put an end to the Balkan civil war mainly through air strikes instead of with troops on the ground; and, slow and ineffectual responses to attacks against the United States and its allies by a newly emerging al-Qaida, which encouraged and emboldened it to eventually conduct the 9/11 attacks against targets in the United States on the

apparent assumption that the United States would be slow to respond if at all.

In another example, during Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2005—in the face of growing political opposition to involvement in Iraq—a *Washington Post*/ABC poll in June showed a distinct downturn in public support for U.S. involvement in the conflict in Iraq. The poll analysis showed that, for the first time, a majority of the American public believed that the war was not making the United States any safer than it was previously.¹¹ Similar results were reflected in Gallup polling (see figure 1.) Interpreted from a Clausewitzian perspective, the need to continue with Operation Iraqi Freedom with the stated objective of establishing democracy and stability in Iraq had soured in the public mind. In other words, the Bush administration recognized that the moral center of gravity of the U.S.-led counterinsurgency war in Iraq was deteriorating as public opinion polls reflected frustration with constant setbacks reported in the media. This led to decisions that included replacing or marginalizing a large number of senior advisors, the introduction of a new counterinsurgency doctrine together with a new strategy, and a decision to “surge” additional units to the war front in an effort largely aimed at restoring equilibrium and resilience to the U.S. moral center of gravity.

Among the most salient lessons learned from both sets of experiences above are the following:

- ◆ Demonstrable success is the only sure way to sustain one’s own moral center of gravity and to degrade that of an opponent.
- ◆ U.S. public opinion support at the core of this center of gravity has a limited shelf life and is highly sensitive to indications of failure as revealed in polling.
- ◆ The equilibrium of a moral center of gravity can be restored, even if incrementally, by effective changes in policy that lead to success, supported by effective use of information to promulgate public awareness of success.

Another major lesson learned is that—in the crowded information environment among an overabundance of competing media venues—commanders cannot be complacent, contently believing that success will speak for itself. Quite the contrary, leaders who do not aggressively push awareness of battlefield successes to the



(U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Joseph McKee)

A local villager and his camel pass in front of the nearly complete eco-dome project 1 November 2012 in Karabti San, Djibouti. U.S. service members assigned to Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa worked with local villagers to build the twenty-one-foot-tall structure, which will serve as the village’s community building. After three years of working on the project alongside CJTF–HOA service members, Karabti San residents acquired the skills to build an eco-dome on their own.

top of the domestic or global information agenda, using all available information venues at their disposal, are derelict in allowing the positive moral influence of such stories to disappear, which effectively cedes the information battlefield to narratives promoted by more aggressive information adversaries. Promoting public awareness of mission successes may be possible well after events, but at considerable risk of having to divert precious time and greater numbers of resources than would have been required by acting promptly, or preemptively, to counter enemy narratives, adverse public perceptions, and inappropriately elevated expectations among allies or “fence sitters.”

By promoting their success stories and using transparency effectively, commanders and other leaders complement their overall operational efforts by “seizing the high ground” in the battle between opposing moral centers of gravity, keeping their own public informed at the same time they marginalize or entirely undermine the impact of information from adversarial sources. The best-case scenario for winning the contest of moral centers of gravity results from enlightened commanders who anticipate the impact that polls, as well as media punditry and criticism, will have on public opinion. Such commanders invest time to understand what factors engender domestic support for conflicts, and conduct detailed planning in advance to either immediately exploit success to bolster moral support or counter the moral effects of adverse media coverage if things go other than planned in the battlespace.

Such planning should anticipate exploiting the moral impact of all available warfighting functions, if possible, including those not ordinarily considered as such. For example, one might aggressively publicize some particular success of drone strikes (which our enemies constantly malign in a global drumbeat aimed at fostering broad international opposition to their use) by highlighting in detail the vile backgrounds of those killed in such strikes for the purpose of informing public opinion prior to polling among external publics regarding drone use.

Impact of New Social Media

A second phenomenon commanders need to understand and master, however reluctantly, is social media. Instantaneous communication on a global

scale is now a feature of the battlefield. The days of censorship, or technological challenges to communications that caused long delays in information and imagery leaving the battlefield, are gone. As a result, commanders must make a key assumption in their planning that everyone is potentially connected, even in the most remote locations, via satellite or cellular infrastructure. This certainly means that those with positive, nefarious, or somewhere-in-between intentions have the ability to collect information and disseminate it globally. It should be clear such capability enables a wide spectrum of players to repackage what is collected to support parochial objectives, including targeting audiences to shape public opinion affecting a commander’s specified mission.

The use of social media (such as Facebook, Twitter, Google Buzz, Bebo, and Chatter) has provided worldwide instantaneous communication and created a new dimension of conflict. For example, on 18 November 2011, CNN reported on the first known “Twitter battle,” describing it as a war of words online between NATO and Taliban spokespersons.¹² This type of engagement sounds to the uninitiated as almost comic book science fiction. In reality, however, such engagement is deadly serious, with potentially grave consequences in terms of the influence such exchanges can have on global audiences deciding on their loyalties. Leaders must be adaptive and agile regarding social media. They must trust their staff—public affairs and other advisors—and be willing to take prudent risks in terms of information release aimed at promoting mission objectives.

Knowing how to operate in, and take advantage of, social media venues is becoming increasingly critical with regard to the battle between moral centers of gravity. Gaining supremacy in this conflict is accomplished by maintaining the organization’s credibility through being first with the truth, being as transparent with information as possible based on operational security and classifications, and being consistent and confident in one’s own narrative.

It is also important to note that social media to a large extent has gained credibility comparable to traditional mainstream news media (print, wire, or electronic) through blogs, twitter, and smart phones. The result is a greatly expanded suite of media focus on

various publics to inform and influence their opinions, perceptions, and actions. In a wide variety of cases, such new media are specifically engineered to expand the influence of specific institutions. For example, scholars, academic institutions like universities, and think tanks have greatly increased their influence over governance through social media, bringing almost immediate pressure on the political process that can profoundly influence military decisions as events unfold.

Additionally, social media have now been broadly incorporated into the traditional institutional avenues of the military's own external communication outlets (as exemplified in figure 2). These include inform-and-influence activities, public affairs, military information support operations, and other areas that military leaders determine to be critical to mission accomplishment, such as key leader and soldier engagements.¹³

The quickest and most effective way to deal with the impact of the rapidly expanding venues of social media is to anticipate possible scenarios that might occur, ensure contingency plans are made to counter adverse narratives as quickly as possible, and exploit successes by rapid dissemination of information through them. This requires that commanders keep up with developments in the world of social media for situational awareness. It also requires establishing and maintaining subject matter experts on the staff who are able to plan and coordinate with higher and lower headquarters in anticipation of the impact of social media on various operations.

Necessity for Engaged Leadership

Polling, punditry, and social media have proven to have a great impact on modern war. However, more than ever, modern war also demands person-to-person engagements with key personnel. Gone are the days when commanders could hand off their responsibility for personal engagement to the public affairs officer or another staff officer. In this day and age, personal networking is a key factor in conducting successful operations; development of trust through personal engagement has become an essential factor for operational success. As a result, commanders and other leaders must understand that now, more than ever, it is a leader responsibility to learn and practice the social skills of personal engagement with key audiences, including acquiring competence in interfacing with the

members of the media as well as engagement across cultural divides.

Some may argue that acquiring such skills constitutes an illegitimate effort to inappropriately sway domestic public opinion for political purposes. However, on the contrary, Clausewitz says all wars can be considered acts of policy.¹⁴ In the current security environment, it is incumbent upon leaders to understand that the commander has evolved to be not only the principal leader and warrior but also the principal diplomat in the field until civil stability is restored in an area of operations. Consequently, it is requisite that military leaders see it as a professional obligation to master interpersonal communication skills at a high level of sophistication to convey to key figures as well as to the general public what their units are doing and how effectively such actions are accomplishing the missions given them.

In an information age, clumsy communicators degrade what should be communicated and undermine listener confidence in the leadership expertise, mission, and competence of the Army as a whole. According to the Department of Defense Principles of Information,

It is the policy of the Department of Defense to make available timely and accurate information so that the public, Congress, and the news media may assess and understand the facts about national security and defense strategy. Requisitions for information from organizations and private citizens will be answered in a timely manner.¹⁵

Maintaining the Moral Center of Gravity—The Media is Essential

Having touched upon what is new about the modern information environment, it is important to review what is not so new but continues in force: the often tenuous military-media relationship. Frequently, the two entities seem to be polar opposites at odds. Journalists have reported on all modern conflicts the U.S. military has been involved with, either on the scene or from afar, based on their ability to gain access to the operations ongoing at the time. They have also covered the military outside of conflict during training events, such as Jade Helm 15 in Texas, based on the news value of those events.¹⁶ Additionally, they have reported on significant policy changes, such as the

rescinding of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” and the integration of women in combat and in combat operational specialties, as well as on the defense budget and its impact on readiness. In all these actions, both in and out of conflicts, at some point the same complaints, charges, and countercharges have emerged. These include accusations of inaccurate reporting and bias leveled at the media by members of the military, paralleled by media complaints over the military providing misleading or inaccurate information and attempting unjustified censorship.¹⁷

However, due in large measure to the emergence of instantaneous global communications technology, coverage of conflicts and wars has changed dramatically since Somalia and Desert Storm. One response to this change by the military was the introduction of the *embedded* reporter. Such embeds in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom significantly changed how the public heard, saw, and understood the conflict, coloring public perceptions of the military and the very nature of the military-media relationship.¹⁸

The Media Embed Experiment

Since 2001, perhaps the most effective experiment to come out of the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq was the media embed program. This forward-thinking program has had a very positive impact on the military-media relationship. By embedding journalists with the military at various levels, it provided the media with unprecedented access to operations and military personnel. This type of reporting enabled the military to work closely with the media and allowed the journalists to learn about the military as an organization and as individuals, providing a learning experience for both groups. The journalistic reporting of both conflicts was markedly similar to that of Joe Galloway, a prominent reporter for United Press International (UPI) during the Vietnam War who famously reported while living with soldiers in the field.¹⁹

With any experiment, there are positives and negatives, successes and failures. This is true of the media embed program as well. Many have debated

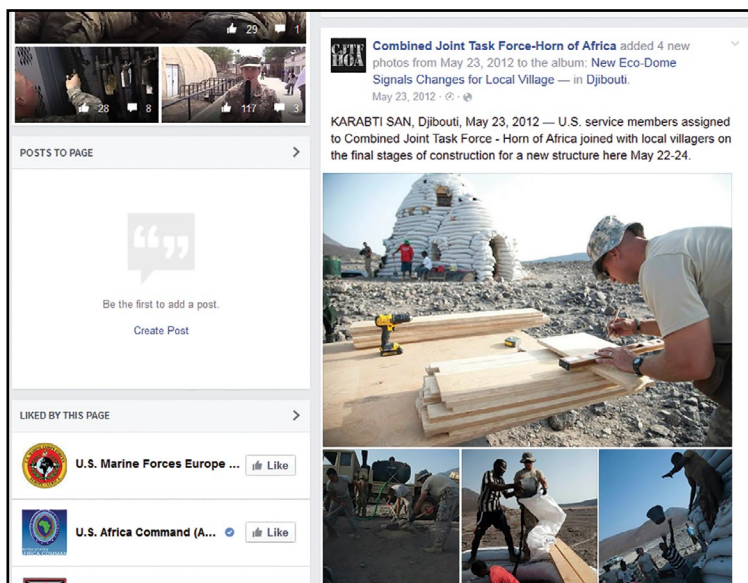


Figure 2. CJTF-HOA Facebook Page

the purpose and reputed outcomes of the program. Some claim that the journalists’ objectivity is compromised by getting too close to those they are covering. Some claim there is a loss of balance when shared experiences—such as combat—occur, those shared experiences creating a skewed positive bias that colors a journalist’s reporting. Others have claimed just the reverse to be true; that embedding causes a negative bias in reporting.²⁰

To be sure, the embed program has its problems. There continue to be instances where neither party is satisfied with the access requested or allowed; the personalities involved may not work well together; transportation will not always be able to get journalists to the right place at the right time, and the final outcomes may not meet the expectations of either the military and its leaders or those of the journalists and their organizations.

To gain the most effective outcomes possible for all involved, military leaders must do what they can to ensure reporters have the greatest access possible. In this way, there is at least some chance for the stories to include the military’s information and perspectives. At the same time, the media must be flexible; reporters must understand that, during operations, nothing is a given. Both groups must work together to obtain an effective outcome. This supports perception and expectation management from the perspective of the military and its leadership, the media, and the public.

Irrespective, leaders at all levels should understand that few operations in the future will be conducted in an information vacuum without the scrutiny of the media. For better or worse, the media continue to be key “avenues of approach” in conversing with and informing the public as to our intent, objectives, and operational outcomes. Though important, official Army or other government outlets for information are simply not enough. Government media representatives are almost always viewed with at least some measure of suspicion by the public. As a result, though many in the military lament that this is so, it is a simple fact that the public trusts government information only to the point it has been examined and screened by disinterested third-party *gatekeepers*, such as reporters in the media. Moreover, the public prefers independent reporting altogether disassociated from official government sources.

Consequently, it is imperative that military leaders continue to learn about the media and acquire the skills to understand how to operate with and through them. This requires an understanding of how the media determine what is newsworthy and how subsequent news coverage impacts public opinion.

Expectation Management

One aspect that leaders must improve upon is expectation management within the Army and services as a whole as well as with the media and the public at large. In general terms, those within the military have an expectation that the media will accurately report events they witness as part of the military operations or via information provided by the military. In addition to accuracy, the military also expects the media to provide the proper characterization of events as they occurred as well as the contextual narrative.

For their part, in order to accomplish their task of reporting, the media have an expectation of the military to be transparent in providing accurate information in a timely manner. This includes not only access to operations as permitted but access via other means of communication to obtain needed information to support the media’s position of reporting military operations.

One dynamic that military leaders need to understand is that the media world is extremely competitive—even cutthroat. The Holy Grail of reporting is to be the first to report on a particularly newsworthy item, the more sensational the better; success in such

reporting translates into both recognition for the reporter and the media outlet, and as revenue dollars for the media business from advertising to larger audiences attracted to stories.

Unfortunately, new technology, combined with extreme competition, results in media reports on complex and dynamic issues that cannot help but have errors in them. This frustrates and annoys members of the military, who are often products of a zero-defect mentality culture that sees inaccuracy as dishonesty or laziness. It needs to be understood that the majority of mainstream media in general, to their credit, do not make errors on purpose. However, due to the dynamics of combat or crisis events, errors will occur when information is provided in a hurry to meet deadlines without the benefit of thorough fact-checking that a less competitive environment might provide.

In such a situation, commanders must enable their staffs and designated spokespersons (if the leaders are not speaking themselves) to ensure the most accurate information is provided to media representatives as quickly as possible, and the media must be aware that inaccuracies in initial official releases might be identified as more becomes known about events. Military leaders as well as their public affairs officers must spend time developing relationships of trust with reporters, especially those commanders in charge of units most likely to draw media attention, such as prominent combat brigades or divisions. For their part, reporters must have confidence that the military is making a good-faith effort to put out the best information it has at any given time.

One recent event provides an example of when the narrative changed, and it was clear that the various elements of governmental power had not coordinated or synchronized the information publicly released: the effort to locate Osama Bin Laden in 2011 and his subsequent death during the operation to capture him. The president provided the initial report to the public on the specifics of the operation that were deemed releasable. During the hours and days that followed, conflicting information arose on the manner and type of operation that was conducted; specifics changed, and thereby perceptions changed as questions arose concerning what was ground truth. The military aphorism that “first reports are usually wrong” held true in this case.

In practice, the more time between the actual operation and the public information release, especially if



(Photo by Sgt. Sean Casey, Combat Camera Afghanistan)

Soldiers with Company D, 2nd Battalion, 30th Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, and embedded *Stars and Stripes* reporter Martin Kuz (right) take cover from enemy fire outside the village of Mereget, Kherwar District, Logar Province, Afghanistan, 10 May 2011.

an operation involves unusual complexity, the greater the clarity and maturity of information made available. In this case, the reporters were largely receptive to correction of the changing narrative because of the trust that had been developed over a long time between the spokespersons and the media.

This example helps illustrate that the military must be the most reliable, truthful, and forthcoming source of information available in order to effectively inform the public. Being the most trusted source of information serves to sustain the strength of the national moral center of gravity as reflected in the public's commitment to the national military objectives.²¹

News?

So what is news? The answer depends upon the perspective of the person, group, or organization answering the question. What the military considers news, what the public considers news, and what the media consider news

can be, and often are, widely different. This again leads to expectation management. At a minimum, the military and the media require a common understanding of what is news and what the public deems newsworthy.

According to "Top Stories of 2010: Haiti Earthquake, Gulf Oil Spill Summary of Finding" by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, the number-one news story of 2010 was the earthquake in Haiti, with 60 percent of the public following the story "very closely." The oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico was second, followed by 59 percent of the public, and followership of the economy was third at 52 percent. Tied at number fifteen with 36 percent was the U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq. Does this mean the news coverage of the military was unimportant? No. However, it does highlight the challenges the military faces in competing with other types of news coverage.²²

Additionally, it is important that leaders know that changing the public's perceptions or expectations on some

issue of concern may take a quite a bit of time; there is no silver bullet to make a perception change as fast as commanders or other senior leaders might want it to.

Recognizing that the Media Cannot be Controlled

Owing to the frustration that is generated by some reports appearing in the media, there are those serving in the military at all ranks who have asked, and continue to ask, why the media cannot be controlled in what it reports. When the military or any organization attempts this level of control, this is called censorship, which then becomes the focus of the media. The military's desire and, on occasion, actual efforts to control information have historically engendered a strained relationship between the media and the military. In his article "No Bad Stories: The American Media-Military Relationship," Douglas Porch explains the clash as two organizations in a constant state of tension in part due to their distinct differences in organizational cultures and missions. The military tends to keep information close to the chest due to the nature of military operations and the desire for secrecy to protect its forces and not telegraph its moves to an opposing force. In contrast, the media sees its role in the U.S. democracy as a check on government, including the military. As such, focusing a spotlight on the military to highlight errors or problems may cause adverse reactions on the part of the military bureaucracy that result in increased tension between the two.²³

Given this premise, commanders and leaders must understand that in a society that has enshrined freedom of speech and freedom of the press as elements of its foundational principles, attempts to outright control the media will backfire. Such will only spark outrage among the media members, who can be expected to join together to decry attempted government censorship and call into question the motives of such an attempt. In such circumstances, the news may very well change from the story and the information you are trying to provide to a focus on alleged infringements on freedom of speech and freedom of the press through attempted control and censorship.

Moving Forward—The Military Starts with an Advantage

Unlike the militaries of many other nations, the U.S. military starts with a credibility advantage. According to Gallup's annual "Confidence in Institutions" public-opinion poll, the military has been ranked number one in

public confidence among rated institutions continuously since 1998 and has ranked first or second in almost every year since Gallup began this poll in 1975.²⁴ Armed with this information, commanders can take one of three approaches to the dilemma of communicating to the public: avoid it, embrace it, or take a wait-and-see attitude.

Leaders who embrace as a duty communicating to the public need to ask themselves and their staffs what key and essential considerations should be made during planning to sustain the Nation's moral center of gravity and achieve desired outcomes. Commanders and leaders must understand that careful and deliberate planning for public information dissemination is essential for successful mission accomplishment in modern wars. Not unlike any other mission-related activities, such should be included in rehearsals going into the execution phase and, finally, critiqued during after action reviews.

Planning should also include development of essential task-and-purpose checklists. Though not everything can be covered in such checklists, some common tasks are an essential starting point. The questions that follow comprise suggested items that should appear on a checklist for leaders to initiate planning. The questions may serve to help anticipate immediate missions as well as shape the understanding of junior military leaders.

- ◆ What is your intent for the information line of operation or effort?
- ◆ How will you condition your team, get feedback, provide feedback, and gauge levels of effort?
- ◆ How personally involved will you be?
- ◆ How will you create a climate where speed of action is the focus?
- ◆ Will the leadership be personally and continuously involved (not micromanaging)?
- ◆ Will leaders be willing to accept risk (not everyone will get it right all the time)?
- ◆ Does the plan consider—
 - » the adversary's use of information?
 - » the speed of information dissemination?
 - » media expectations?
 - » public expectations?
 - » certainty, risk, opportunity?
- ◆ Does the plan nest within the strategic communication plan?
- ◆ Are leaders, spokespersons, and subject matter experts trained and prepared for media interviews?²⁵

Conclusion

An essential element of the moral center of gravity for any conflict is public support. To engender the necessary public confidence and support, especially in the face of hardship and setbacks, leaders at all levels must effectively communicate to the public what is happening to their sons, daughters, husbands, wives, and neighbors. To do so effectively requires a willingness to engage both the media and the public in order to inform the U.S. public

and other critical audiences through stories and events concerning soldiers and their organizations. Experience in war has shown that failure to do so will cause public opinion (and support) to deteriorate, threatening mission failure. Additionally, failing to meet the obligation to inform the public cedes the information environment and the public opinion center of gravity to those who will attempt to influence it negatively by taking the initiative to advance their own narrative. ■

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