

# To Respond or Not to Respond

## Addressing Adversarial Propaganda

Lt. Col. Jesse McIntyre III, U.S. Army, Retired

German political and military leaders attribute Germany's defeat in World War I in part to Allied propaganda efforts and the failure of Germany to effectively counter them.<sup>1</sup> By the spring of 1917, Germany was reeling from propaganda activities. Indeed, in May 1917, senior German officials met to outline a plan to combat the demoralizing effects of the Allied propaganda effort.<sup>2</sup> The plan included the establishment of a central agency within the Foreign Office to collect Allied propaganda and press releases, to develop programs to raise the morale of German soldiers, and to develop policy to guide propaganda activities directed at the Allies.<sup>3</sup> The Germans' decision to direct an effort at such a high level indicates the importance they placed on countering propaganda. Unfortunately for them, the effort came too late and was ineffective in changing the course of the war.<sup>4</sup>

History is replete with examples of the consequences of using or failing to use counterpropaganda measures. One of the earliest recorded was during the Peloponnesian Wars. Propagandists on both sides of the Athenian and Spartan Archidamian War (431–404 BC) responded to each other's propaganda with counterassertions without directly denying the claims or acknowledging the propaganda itself.<sup>5</sup>

Thucydides observed that the counterassertions were always more severe than the original, concluding it was a requirement for effective

counterpropaganda. <sup>6</sup>During World War I, the Italians conducted counterpropaganda operations against Austro-Hungarian troops by altering Austro-Hungarian trench newsletters with propaganda messages.<sup>7</sup>

However, history also shows that counterpropaganda efforts must be executed skillfully in order to keep them from backfiring. For example, German propaganda practitioners created an interesting counterpropaganda leaflet during the Battle of Anzio in World War II.<sup>8</sup> When the Allies disseminated a leaflet that described Allied successes against German positions on the Cassino Front, German propagandists attempted to counter the claims with remarks that reflected a reverse in battlefield fortunes for the Allies. The German leaflets ultimately proved futile as an attempt to discredit the Allied leaflet with American soldiers, but they did have the unintended result of being so ridiculously unbelievable that they increased the morale of the GIs.<sup>9</sup>

Executed by experts, counterpropaganda can have a powerful and decisive influence over an ideological adversary. For example, President Ronald Reagan delivered perhaps one of the best examples of successful counterpropaganda that had worldwide repercussions in 1987. During the 1980s, Soviet propaganda had been successful in creating the perception in Europe that then-Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev was a leader of peace efforts.<sup>10</sup> While



(Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

President Ronald Reagan gives a speech 12 June 1987 at the Berlin Wall in front of Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, Germany. From this speech came his famous quote, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"

giving a speech near the Berlin Wall, Reagan exploited this perception, undercutting it with an explicit and palpable challenge:

There is one sign the Soviets can make that would be unmistakable, that would advance dramatically the cause of freedom and peace.... Secretary General Gorbachev, if you seek peace—if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe—if you seek prosperity: come here, to this gate. Mister Gorbachev, open this gate. Mister Gorbachev, tear down this wall.<sup>11</sup>

This challenge, which so simply but clearly highlighted the hypocrisy of the Soviet Union's public pronouncements, resulted in enormous international public and political pressure on the Soviet Union. Twenty months later, in response to increasing public unrest stemming in large measure from the open challenge, East Germany opened the Berlin Wall.

## Challenging Negative Adversarial Information

The issue of addressing adversarial information attacks is a question faced daily by governments and the private sector. Like Germany's experience in World War I, failure to quickly and to properly respond can result in serious consequences for a nation or other actor in the public eye. Nevertheless, the emphasis on counterpropaganda measures in U.S. military doctrine has decreased since the end of the Cold War. The subject is merely mentioned in passing in current information operations (IO) doctrine, and no further formal guidance or direction as to its importance, methodology, or benefits exists.

This article presents a way to look at the need and ways to incorporate a doctrinal counterpropaganda methodology into joint doctrine to generate thought and discussion about counterpropaganda methods that personnel on joint IO staffs should follow in



(Photo courtesy of Bundesarchiv)

Adolf Hitler writing a speech, circa 1933.

## Adolf Hitler

### *Mein Kampf*

Volume 1, Chapter VI: War Propaganda

But the most brilliant propagandist technique will yield no success unless one fundamental principle is borne in mind constantly and with unflagging attention. It must confine itself to a few points and repeat them over and over. Here, as so often in this world, persistence is the first and most important requirement for success. ... The purpose of propaganda is ... to convince, and what I mean is to convince the masses. But the masses are slowmoving, and they always require a certain time before they are ready even to notice a thing, and only after the simplest ideas are repeated thousands of times will the masses finally remember them. ... All advertising, whether in the field of business or politics, achieves success through the continuity and sustained uniformity of its application. Here, too, the example of enemy war propaganda was typical; limited to a few points, devised exclusively for the masses, carried on with indefatigable persistence. Once the basic ideas and methods of execution were recognized as correct, they were applied throughout the whole War [World War I] without the slightest change. At first the claims of the propaganda were so impudent that people thought it insane; later, it got on people's nerves; and in the end, it was believed. After four and a half years, a revolution broke out in Germany; and its slogans originated in the enemy's war propaganda. And in England they understood one more thing: that this spiritual weapon can succeed only if it is applied on a tremendous scale, but that success amply covers all costs. There, propaganda was regarded as a weapon of the first order, while in our country [Germany] it was the last resort of unemployed politicians and a comfortable haven for slackers. And, as was to be expected, its results all in all were zero.

#### Source

Adolf Hitler, "War Propaganda," *Mein Kampf*, vol. 1, chap. 6, Hitler Historical Museum website, accessed 30 March 2016, [http://www.hitler.org/writings/Mein\\_Kampf/mkv1ch06.html](http://www.hitler.org/writings/Mein_Kampf/mkv1ch06.html).

responding to adversarial propaganda or negative information attacks. Inclusion of former Army doctrinal counterpropaganda techniques into joint publications would at a minimum provide those staffs with the basic tools.

## Counterpropaganda in Joint Doctrine

In recent years, joint and service IO doctrine place little emphasis on countering propaganda. Indeed, Joint Publication (JP) 3-13.2, *Psychological Operations*, replaced the term "counter propaganda" with the terms "countering adversary misinformation" and "countering adversary information activities."<sup>12</sup> JP 3-13, *Information Operations*, is equally deficient, mentioning the term "counterpropaganda" only once.<sup>13</sup> Inexplicably, neither doctrinal publication provides guidance to employ counterpropaganda measures. Conversely, Army Field Manual (FM) 3-05.301, *Psychological Operations Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures*, does provide guidance on propaganda analysis and counterpropaganda techniques.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, this manual was declared obsolete by the Army in 2014.

The current lack of emphasis placed on counterpropaganda in joint doctrine (resulting in lack of emphasis at a strategic level) is due to our consistent success on the battlefield in recent conflicts and a perceived lack of credible propaganda efforts by our adversaries. While these conditions would most likely change in a conflict with a near peer whose propaganda activities resonated with American and coalition military personnel, the United States must also consider the use of counterpropaganda against less than near-peer adversaries. For example, the United States and its allies are losing the information war against Islamic State (IS) propaganda. The Brookings Institute reports conservative estimates



of twenty thousand foreigners from over eighty countries responding to IS propaganda recruiting efforts.<sup>15</sup> Clearly, counterpropaganda concepts should be addressed more thoroughly, and the Joint Staff should incorporate the guidance found in FM 3-05.301 into joint doctrinal publications (see figure on page 66).

## Analyzing Propaganda

Though obsolete, FM 3-05.301 provides a proven approach in analyzing propaganda. Propaganda analysis is a complex process that requires historical research, examination of propaganda messages and media, and critical scrutiny of the entire propaganda procedure. While propaganda analysis is primarily done to gather



(Image courtesy of Worldwar1postcards.com)

A World War I propaganda postcard depicts the execution of Edith Cavell, a British nurse working in Belgium during the German occupation who helped more than two hundred Allied soldiers to escape. Arrested and executed for treason by German occupation forces in 1915, her death was exploited extensively by British propagandists to portray German forces as murderers of innocent women.

information to develop future IO programs, it can uncover intelligence for other uses: errors of fact that suggest a weakness in the adversary's intelligence-gathering assets, indications the adversary is attempting to prepare public opinion for a particular eventuality, issues on which the adversary displays exceptional



(Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

Australian World War I-era propaganda cartoon by Norman Lindsay, circa 1918. Allied propaganda sought to adversely shape international perceptions regarding German soldiers as well as undermine German domestic morale. German soldiers and their leaders were relentlessly depicted as brutish and uncivilized savages bent on conquering the world.

sensitivity, and successful military operations that require propaganda reaction from the adversary.<sup>16</sup>

Previously, FM 3-05.301 was the Army's doctrinal reference for analyzing adversarial propaganda. Its approach is still sound. IO cells have used its *source-content-audience-media-effects* model to effectively analyze adversarial propaganda activities.

**Source.** A source is the origin or sponsor of the propaganda.<sup>17</sup> It may be an individual, government, organization, or combination thereof. Identifying the source of the propaganda provides information concerning the purpose of the propaganda. According to Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, "Propaganda that conceals its source has a larger purpose than what is readily discernible."<sup>18</sup> For example, the Soviet Union often used left-wing front groups resident in many nations during the Cold War to disseminate its propaganda messages

globally. In one case, the Soviets provided fake scientific information to peace groups and others, aimed at stoking fear of a “nuclear winter” in an attempt to prevent the United States from putting Pershing II missiles in Europe.<sup>19</sup>

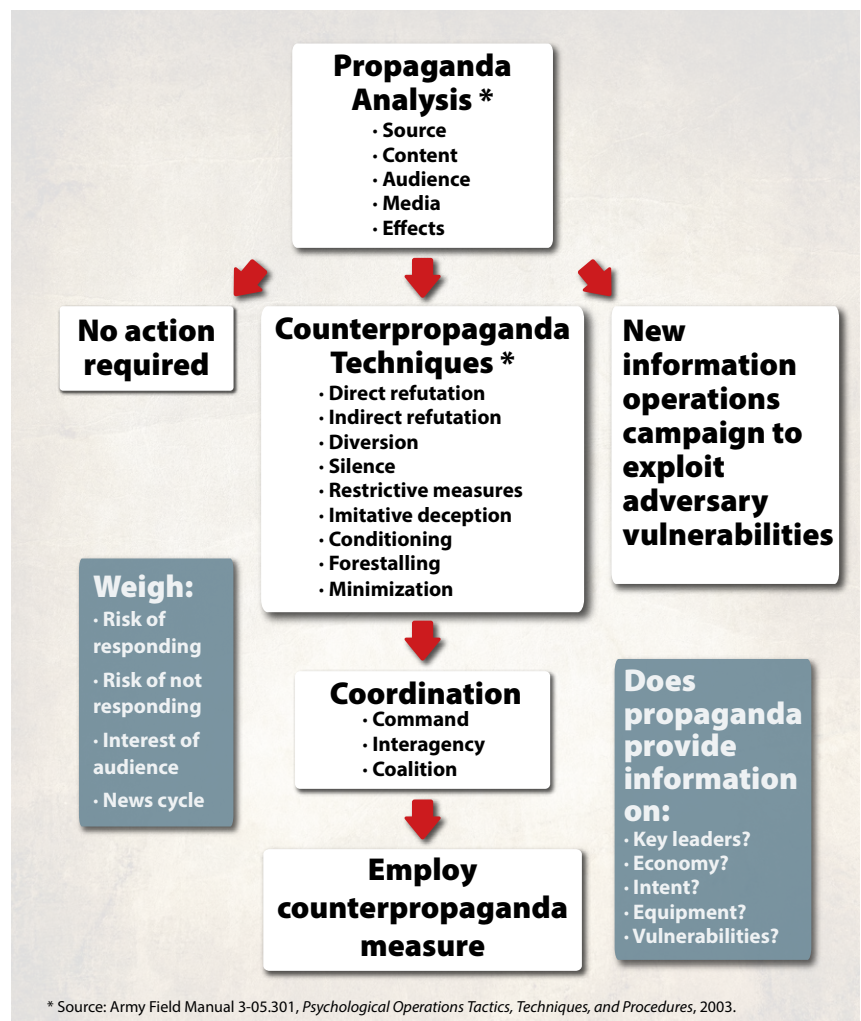
**Content.** Content analysis reveals the message and determines the source’s motives and goals for the propaganda.<sup>20</sup> For example, during the Cold War, the West learned much about Russian leadership and military capabilities by observing the Soviets’ annual Red Army Day parade in Moscow. Placement of an individual on the official party’s reviewing stand reflected importance within the party. Appearance of new equipment reflected a change in the Red Army’s military capabilities. Such content analysis of events may also provide information on morale, intentions, and propaganda inconsistencies.

**Audience.** Audience analysis reveals the group whom the propagandist is attempting to target, as well as the propagandist’s understanding of and expectations for the audience.

**Media.** Media analysis determines why a particular medium was selected, what are an opponent’s media capabilities, and how consistently it communicates a message.

**Effects.** Effect analysis reveals the impact that propaganda has had on the target audience. The IO staff is given the responsibility of determining behavioral or attitudinal changes within the intended audience and assessing the need and means to respond, as required.

The propaganda analysis methodology found in FM 3-05.301 serves as an excellent starting point in determining the need for a propaganda response. It allows the IO staff to analyze adversary propaganda and its effect on the intended audience. Additionally, effective



**Figure. Proposed Joint Counterpropaganda Methodology**

propaganda analysis can provide valuable information regarding the adversary’s intent, capabilities, sensitivities, economy, and leadership. It can also identify potential vulnerabilities of the adversary for targeting during future IO campaigns.

## Pros and Cons of Counterpropaganda

When assessing options for dealing with adversary propaganda, the IO staff should consider all potential positive and negative consequences. Responding quickly is essential; a rapid response provides a better chance of controlling the discussion and the outcome by increasing the audience’s perception that the respondent is credible.

Additionally, audience interest in a topic will decrease over time.

One of the most compelling reasons for utilizing counterpropaganda measures is that they provide a responding organization the opportunity to regain information dominance or change the topic to something more favorable for its purposes. Conversely, however, their use could give legitimacy or credibility to the source or the allegations in the propaganda. Counterpropaganda measures may also allow the adversary to control the discussion. Finally, failure to respond fosters the perception of hiding something, or it may be perceived as a tacit admission of guilt.

It is important to keep in mind that trained, experienced personnel are needed to execute successful counterpropaganda measures, and that patience is required since the results of counterpropaganda efforts may not be known for some time.

## Counterpropaganda Techniques

After weighing the pros and cons, the IO staff should determine the proper counterpropaganda response. FM 3-05.301 provides nine options with examples in responding to adversarial propaganda: direct refutation, indirect refutation, diversion, silence, restrictive measures, imitative deception, conditioning, forestalling, and minimization. (These are only some of the variety of techniques used by military practitioners, political campaigners, and advertisers. However, these nine are the most prominent.)

**Direct and indirect refutation.** Direct refutation is a point-for-point rebuttal of adversarial claims.<sup>21</sup> Indirect refutation seeks to change the topic by

questioning the creditability of the speaker or some other aspect of the allegation. During the Civil War, for example, the South countered Northern antislavery propaganda with themes depicting the deplorable working conditions in Northern factories.<sup>22</sup> These themes argued that slaves were provided decent working conditions and cradle-to-grave shelter and subsistence, while wage laborers in northern factories were treated far worse.

### Diversion.

Diversion seeks to avoid addressing a topic through the introduction of a new topic.

An example of this occurred in late 1943 when the German propaganda ministry introduced rumors of a German plan to establish a redoubt in the Alps as part of a campaign to divert attention away from increasing German battlefield defeats.<sup>23</sup> The plan, titled “Alpine Fortress,” consisted of Germany’s government and military forces retreating to prepared positions in the German Alps. Rumors of an Alpine Fortress became a major concern for Allied military planners in early 1945.

**Silence.** Silence refers to not responding to the propaganda claims, other than to offer “unworthy of comment.”<sup>24</sup> An interesting note is that World War II German propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels would sometimes refuse to deny or refute Allied claims concerning damage from air strikes in order to deceive the Allies into believing they were achieving great successes in the air war.<sup>25</sup>

**Restrictive measures.** Restrictive measures deny access to the propaganda. Russia utilized jamming and other measures during the Cold War to prevent the



(Image courtesy of Radio Free Europe)

During the Cold War (1947–1991), the United States used a wide variety of informational tools and techniques to counter Soviet communist propaganda. However, the strongest instrument for countering propaganda proved to be simply telling the truth. To that end, the United States established several radio broadcast agencies, such as Radio Free Europe, that beamed truthful programming into areas of the Soviet Union.

broadcast of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty from reaching its citizens.<sup>26</sup>

**Imitative deception.** Imitative deception involves subtly altering an adversary's propaganda in order to discredit it or to use it as propaganda against the adversary.<sup>27</sup> During World War II, the Allies had developed a successful leaflet depicting life in an Allied prisoner of war camp. Interrogations of German prisoners indicated a fear of being shipped to America, where it would presumably take longer to get home after the war, so the Allies modified the leaflet to say that prisoners were no longer going to be shipped to America. The Germans turned this around on the Allies. They disseminated the leaflet to German troops to prove that since "prisoners are no longer sent to America," they were instead being shipped to Siberia. This was further developed into a successful propaganda slogan *Sieg oder Sibirien!* (Victory over Siberia!) for German troops.<sup>28</sup>

**Conditioning.** Conditioning eliminates potential vulnerabilities in the target audience before exposure to adversarial propaganda. The U.S. Army educated soldiers during the Cold War on potential Warsaw Pact propaganda themes and lines of persuasion in order to condition them against Warsaw Pact propaganda.

**Forestalling.** Forestalling anticipates adversary propaganda and counters it by reaching the intended audience first with the message. German Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels used the technique of forestalling during his preparation of the German populace for the defeat and surrender of German and Italian forces in North Africa in 1942. German media reported the historic struggle of German forces in an attempt to beat Allied reporting of the surrender.<sup>29</sup>

**Minimization.** The minimization technique acknowledges certain aspects of propaganda but minimizes its importance to the audience. An example is when the Soviet Union shot down Korean Air Lines Flight 007. The Soviets initially denied the shooting, claiming the aircraft was not a passenger liner but was on an intelligence collection mission. The Soviets further attempted to minimize the incident, claiming the aircraft strayed into Soviet airspace and had ignored Soviet interceptor aircraft requests for identification.<sup>30</sup>

These are just nine of the variety of techniques for countering propaganda. The IO staff may use one or a combination of these techniques based upon the situation. The decision of which technique to use is difficult and requires extensive coordination, as well as resources and assets. The IO staff considers the consequences, especially unintended consequences, and the reaction of the adversary. The IO staff must also make their organization aware that results require time, but the benefits will be worth the investment.

Information operations will continue to play a critical role in the success of an organization to conduct operations. Our adversaries will use propaganda in conjunction with their operations in order to influence the populace, to discredit the United States and its coalition partners, and eventually to prevent us from accomplishing our goals. Timely use of effective counterpropaganda measures provides the IO staff or organization the best chance of controlling the discussion and the outcome.

## Conclusion

This article serves as a starting point for the discussion on inclusion of Army doctrinal counterpropaganda methodology in joint doctrine publications. Germany's failure to conduct counterpropaganda activities in a timely manner was a significant reason for its defeat in World War I. Germany learned from its mistake and was conducting an aggressive propaganda campaign against the United States in the late 1930s through early 1940; its activities may have contributed to America's late entry into the war.

America's success on the battlefield has marginalized the role of counterpropaganda in joint doctrine. However, the counterpropaganda techniques outlined in FM 3-05.301 need to be incorporated into joint publications. Counterpropaganda measures will become increasingly important in hybrid wars where the war of ideas takes on greater importance.

Herbert Romerstein, former director of the U.S. Information Agency's Office to Counter Soviet Disinformation and Active Measures, underscored the importance of counterpropaganda when he remarked, "Anti-American propaganda and disinformation are powerful weapons in the hands of our rivals and enemies. Counterpropaganda is our defense."<sup>31</sup> ■

## Biography

Lt. Col. Jesse McIntyre III, U.S. Army, retired, is an assistant professor at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. He holds a BA from the University of Missouri and an MA from Touro University. He served as the director for psychological operations policy, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict; as a psychological operations officer on the Department of the Army staff; and in a variety of special operations and infantry assignments. He also instructed at the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare School and Center.

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