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# Cognitive Warfare: Targeting the Soldier to Shape the Strategy

*By Dr. Robert Nelson and Sgt. Maj. Benjamin Pingel*

Sergeants Major Course

**O**n today's large-scale, complex battlefields, a single junior Soldier's actions can have major, even global, consequences. This idea is not new, but in a globally connected world, this concept has become more relevant than ever. In the 1990s, U.S. Marine Corps General Charles C. Krulak published an article in which he coined the term strategic corporal to address this phenomenon. The concept holds that low-ranking leaders must be ready to make major decisions independently in complex, rapidly changing situations (Annis, 2020).

The core idea behind the strategic corporal acknowledges that junior leaders cannot always wait for direct orders. Instead, they must deeply understand their mission and what their commander wants to accomplish (Krulak, 1999). Krulak described the battlefield as a

three-block war, where a Soldier might be in a firefight on one street, keeping peace on the next, and delivering humanitarian aid a block away. In such an environment, a single tactical mistake can have strategic consequences.

Since Krulak published his paper, the targets of intelligence operations have remained the same, but the speed and impact of harmful messages have increased. Modern Soldiers are not just fighters; they are potential vulnerabilities in the information environment. To counter the strategic corporal phenomenon, military doctrine and NCOs must align to train Soldiers not only in kinetic warfare but also in the cognitive defense required to protect our nation's strategic capabilities. Today's Soldiers must not only know how to fight, but also how to mentally defend against disinformation and targeted information operations (IO).

## Mistake Magnification and the Modern Battlespace

While the world has grown more complex since Krulak's article, the idea that tactical actions can create strategic effects remains constant. In large-scale combat operations (LSCO), this dynamic becomes even more critical. Junior NCOs and Soldiers operate at the edge of the battlefield, where adversaries can capture, magnify, and weaponize their actions in the parallel world of disinformation. As a result, even small tactical mistakes can undermine operational and strategic capabilities. The multi-domain battlespace further complicates this reality.

The contemporary operational environment is a multidimensional battlespace that is amplified by internet and social media influence. This means the decision of a single Soldier or the actions of a small unit — whether to engage a potential threat, de-escalate a tense situation with civilians, or adhere to the rules of engagement under pressure — can be broadcast worldwide in an instant, shaping public perception and influencing political outcomes far from the battlefield. Our adversaries know this, and as proven in recent conflicts, will use tactical mistakes or undisciplined acts to attack the nation's collective will in hopes of degrading military's strategic capabilities.



Krulak described the battlefield as a three-block war, where a Soldier might find themselves in a firefight on one street, keeping peace on the next, and providing humanitarian aid a block away, and if they made a tactical mistake, it could have negative strategic consequences. (U.S. Army photo by Capt. William Stroud)

Stark examples throughout history illustrate how singular, tactical-level incidents can cause strategic fallout. For instance, the U.S. airstrike on a Médecins Sans Frontières hospital in Kunduz on October 3, 2015

(Médecins Sans Frontières, n.d.), and the murder of 17 Afghan civilians by Staff Sgt. Robert Bales on March 11, 2012 (Pellerin, 2012), were both exploited by adversaries to undermine the perceived legitimacy of the entire military effort. This phenomenon is what military legal scholar Geoffrey Corn has termed mistake magnification, noting that in an era where society expects perfection from professional militaries, any error can have a profoundly disproportionate impact on strategic perception (Corn, 2024). However, rather than simply waiting to capitalize on tactical errors, a modern adversary proactively seeks to shape and weaponize these perceptions as a central line of effort in their campaigns. Building on Corn's (2024) concept of mistake magnification, the sheer scale of a war between two great powers will transform tactical mistakes into strategic victories.

## The Weaponization of Perception: LSCO and Enemy Information Operations

In modern LSCO, the strategic corporal is not just a combatant but a central consumer and contributor to the information war. Adversaries are adept at exploiting individual Soldiers' actions to fuel propaganda and disinformation campaigns. The goal is to delegitimize military operations, erode public support at home, and

sow discord among allies (Kish, 2023). Within the last four years, the world has witnessed this in several conflicts.

### The Russia-Ukraine War

Russia has consistently used propaganda to frame its invasion of Ukraine as a denazification campaign. The actions of individual Ukrainian Soldiers, taken out of context or fabricated, are used by Russian state media and social media proxies to reinforce this false narrative. Conversely, as noted by researchers at the RAND Corporation, Ukraine has effectively used footage captured by Ukrainian drones or civilians' phones of alleged misconduct by

Russian Soldiers. This content has been used effectively by Ukraine to galvanize international support and expose war crimes, demonstrating the two-way nature of this informational battlefield (Treyger et al., 2025).

This strategy is part of a broader information war that includes using social media to shape public perception and undermine the other's narrative.

### **The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War**

The Azerbaijani military effectively combined drone warfare with a sophisticated information campaign directed by the Azerbaijani government. By disseminating daily videos of successful strikes against Armenian military hardware, the Azerbaijani military, in concert with the government, demoralized both Armenian Soldiers and the civilian population. These videos, amplified on social media, created a perception of overwhelming technological superiority and inevitable defeat, which hastened the collapse of Armenian resistance (Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2021). This conflict underscored how tactical victories, when expertly packaged for information operations, can achieve strategic psychological effects (SpecialEurasia, 2025).

### **The Israel-Hamas War**

This ongoing conflict provides daily examples of how tactical events are filtered through the lens of information warfare. Both sides have been quick to publicize footage of military actions, often framing the narratives to support their respective versions of either justified self-defense or brutal aggression. A single video from a Soldier's phone or a contested report about an explosion can become the focal point of global debate and influence public opinion. This leads to diplomatic pressure in ways that directly impact the strategic environment. According to Zelin (2023), the explosion at the Al-Ahil Arab Hospital in Gaza is a great example of information warfare centered on a single event. The dispute between Israel and Hamas over the cause of the explosion became a global debate with significant public influence.

As these three examples demonstrate, information operations, especially disinformation, can influence tactical decisions by targeting an enemy's civilian population. A recent U.S. Government Accountability



Even small tactical mistakes can undermine operational and strategic capabilities on the battlefield. Staying ready and sharpening skills with every capability a Soldier has is important when making a decision to engage a potential threat, de-escalate a situation, or adhere to the ROE under pressure. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Neysa Canfield/TAAC-South Public Affairs Office)

Office (GAO) report highlights that foreign disinformation campaigns are crafted to exploit societal divisions, undermine trust in democratic processes, and ultimately manipulate public perception (GAO, 2024). This disinformation process is an effective tool that can be used against civilian populations who will pressure their governments to act in a certain way, a political concept known as the Median Voter Theorem.

### **Targeting the Center: The Median Voter Theorem and IO**

America is currently polarized, a vulnerability our adversaries recognize. This environment often pushes citizens to be either completely for or entirely against an issue (Somerville, 2020). Polarized people's commitment to their views is so strong that they will not change their minds about supporting an operation, no matter what they learn. However, there is always a small percentage of people who are near the middle who pay attention to information and can be swayed either way. When targeted, these middle-ground citizens can sway public opinion in a country (Wilson, 2024). This tactic was evident in Russia's 2018 disinformation campaign aimed at widening divisions within the U.S. and undermining our political and social ecosystem (Fly et al., 2018).

This targeting concept aligns with the Median Voter Theorem, a political science theory that posits that in a majority-rule system, political parties will converge toward the policy positions of the median voter — the individual whose preferences are in the exact middle of

the ideological spectrum — to maximize their chances of winning (Oxford Reference, n.d.). While everyone is ultimately a target, the middle of a population offers the greatest opportunity for influence.

Our adversaries apply a similar logic to information warfare. Their objective is not necessarily to convert a hardened patriot into a sympathizer, but to target the median person who is less ideologically committed, politically disengaged, or uncertain about the conflict (Ahmed et al., 2025). By flooding the information space with content that creates doubt, highlights civilian suffering (real or fabricated), or emphasizes the costs of war, an enemy seeks to shift the public's median opinion. The goal is to turn a sufficient portion of the population against their own government's war effort, creating domestic pressure to withdraw forces, cut funding, or abandon strategic objectives.



While the operating environment has grown more complex and saturated with disinformation, NCOs still have powerful tools to counter these threats. We suggest that the frontline defense against this multifaceted threat begins with NCOs, who are responsible for preparing their Soldiers not just for the kinetic fight but also for the cognitive and informational fight. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Tanisha Karn)

This is particularly effective during protracted LSCO, where public resolve can wane over time. According to Watson (2014), although the German state entered World War I with widespread popular support amongst its citizenry, high casualties and an effective Allied blockade eventually eroded morale on the home front as the conflict dragged on. The collapse of public will and support was a significant factor in Germany's eventual defeat and is an example of a powerful military's inability to succeed in a protracted conflict without the support and will of the entire nation (Watson, 2014). Germany's experience with a divided nation serves as an example of how difficult it is to wage a war in a divided nation.

## U.S. Polarization: A Force Multiplier for Adversarial Information Operations

The current state of political polarization in the United States provides fertile ground for adversarial information operations to thrive. When a society is deeply divided, the center ground shrinks, and the population becomes more susceptible to narratives that confirm existing biases. Foreign adversaries, like Russia, no longer need to invent divisions; they can simply amplify existing ones. This hyper-partisan climate erodes trust in democratic institutions, including the government, the military, and the media (Somerville, 2020).

When the media reports on a strategic corporal's actions, the public instantly interprets them through a partisan lens. One side may see a hero upholding the law, while the other sees a villain committing an atrocity. An adversary can exploit this by tailoring different messages to different

segments of the population, deepening the chasm and making a unified national response nearly impossible.

The erosion of a shared, fact-based reality does more than sway the "median voter" on single issues; it pulls them into entirely separate information ecosystems, making the nation fundamentally more vulnerable to manipulation. This is important because, as we observed during the Vietnam War, an Army struggles to win when the nation's citizens do not back them (Summers, 1982). Confronting this strategic threat to national will requires a tactical solution, one that begins with the leaders most responsible for unit cohesion and discipline.

## The NCO's Solution: Forging Resilient and Ready Soldiers

While the operating environment has grown more complex and saturated with disinformation, NCOs still have powerful tools to counter these threats. The frontline defense against this multifaceted threat begins with NCOs, who are responsible for preparing their Soldiers not just for the kinetic fight but also for the cognitive and informational fight. The solution lies in a renewed focus on fundamental leadership and critical thinking. NCOs must create an environment where Soldiers can discuss complex topics, instill robust information literacy, relentlessly train and enforce the



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**Dr. Robert Nelson, Ret. Command Sgt. Maj.** is the Department of Army Operations department chair at the Sergeants Major Course, Fort Bliss, Texas. He served 30 years in the Army and held leadership positions ranging from squad leader to battalion command sergeant major. He made operational deployments to Kuwait, Haiti, and Honduras. He holds a doctorate in education from Vanderbilt University, Tennessee.

**Sgt. Maj. Benjamin Pingel** is the Department of Army Operations chief instructor at the Sergeants Major Course, Fort Bliss, Texas. He has served in the Army for the past 27 years and held leadership positions from tank commander to brigade command sergeant major. He had served combat and operational deployments to Afghanistan, Kuwait, Poland, and Romania. He holds a graduate degree in education from Pennsylvania State University.

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