

# Special Warfare

The Professional Bulletin of the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School



## A Common-Sense Approach to

# Psychological Operations

by CWO2 Scott S. Herbert & Maj. Robert B. Adolph Jr.

---

*PSYOP, the authors argue, is common sense with a military application. In the battle for the mind, the arsenal is limited only by the imagination.*

---

When President Reagan sent American air and naval forces into Libya on April 15, 1986, the bombs dropped by our aircraft carried a message to Col. Muammar Khadafy more articulate than mere words.

The U.S. raid was a psychological operation aimed at influencing the thought processes of the Libyan leader. The message apparently got through -- following the raid, Khadafy's support to the international terrorist community noticeably dropped, or at least went further underground.

This is the kind of war which is little understood, a psychological war where the military is just one weapon in an arsenal of possibilities limited only by one's imagination and training. For our elected leadership, the psychology of our adversaries is of overwhelming importance. It should be no less so for our nation's military. Wars are ultimately won, or lost, in minds and not on the battlefield.

For various reasons, there are many in our modern Army who think of PSYOP as an esoteric field

characterized by leaflets, posters and loudspeakers; a game played by overeducated, underemployed, unnecessary soldiers. The feeling is pervasive among many of our war-fighters that PSYOP is not essential to win battles or wars. This misperception will not stand the light of reason.

In fact, we develop a better war-fighting concept if we adjust our perspective and make the conduct of PSYOP doctrinally more important than battles. A solid case can be made that the use of military force is only a technique of PSYOP and that the only purpose of armed forces, of warriors, is to influence an enemy -- to convince him of the futility of his actions or to break his will to fight. Wars can be prevented by PSYOP alone, without applying military force, and we call these actions deterrence.

One of our more colorful presidents, Teddy Roosevelt, the former "Roughrider," defined the word deterrence when he advised us to "speak softly and carry a big stick." Roosevelt sent America's Great White Fleet around the world to

demonstrate our ability to enforce our policy decisions by military means. More recently, a quarantine of Cuba convinced the Soviet Union of our intent to enforce the Monroe Doctrine -- with military force if necessary.

Even the bombing raid on Libya had a PSYOP effect on the rest of the Middle East by demonstrating our resolve to act. In each of these cases, our military activities prevented armed conflicts. Unfortunately, many in the military see these events as incomplete military actions (since no battle ensued) rather than as completed PSYOP actions. Again, there is a lack of understanding about the real purpose of a fighting force.

Many of history's finest military thinkers have had a better grasp of the value of PSYOP than we have today. Sun Tzu, a Chinese general who lived 2,500 years ago, said, "All warfare is based on deception," and "To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill." Clausewitz asserted that "Psychological forces exert a decisive influence on the elements involved in war." Mao Tse-Tung put forth the concept that "...weapons are an important factor in war, but not the decisive one; it is man and not materials that counts." Even in the United States' most recent conflict, the Vietnam War, General Vo Nguyen Giap of the North Vietnamese Army said, "In preparing for armed insurrection, propaganda is the most essential task to be performed. During the insurrection, propaganda is even more important than fighting." Still, there is little evidence that we have taken these lessons to heart.

Throughout history, the psychological impact of battles has usually been an accidental result of events rather than a planned effect. Interestingly, many of the most significant military events, those most often cited by our military historians as classic examples of military success, are significant primarily from a psychological perspective. It was their psychological impact that

made them significant. When 300 Spartans fought the great Persian army at the pass of Thermopylae, it was the psychological impact of their battle that was memorable, not their warrior prowess.

The effects of Hannibal's elephants, Caesar's legions marching in unison and the charge of mounted knights in the Middle Ages were all




---

*"The German Luftwaffe went so far as to attach wind-driven noise makers to the JU-87 (Stuka) dive bombers so that their enemies could hear, and be terrified by, the screams of diving warplanes."*

---

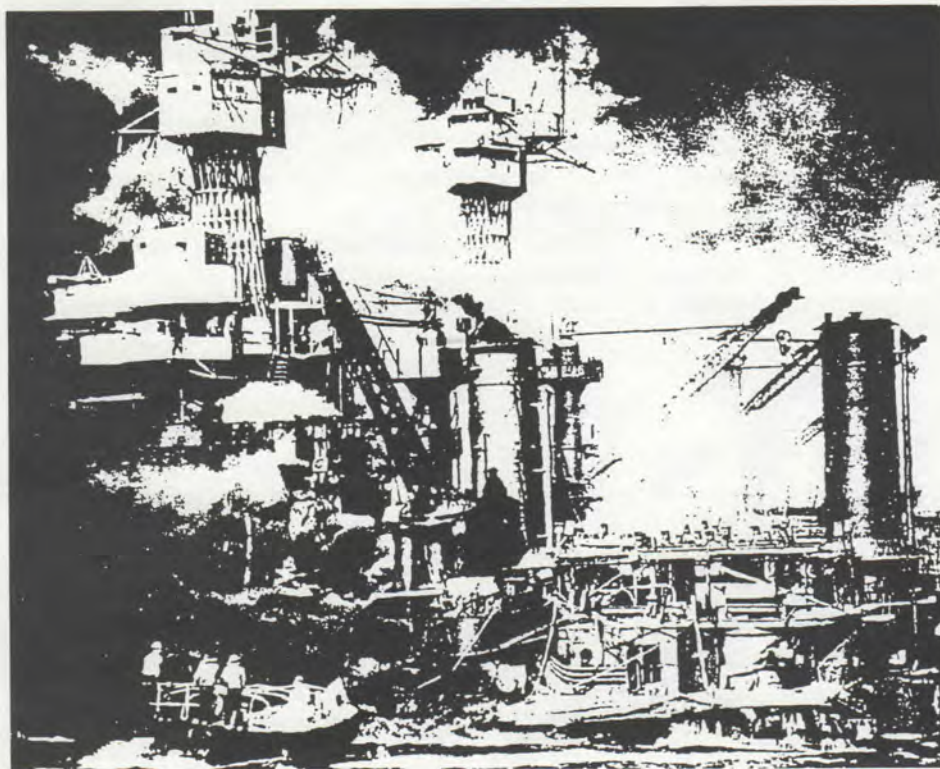
psychological in nature. Germany's "blitzkrieg," or lightning war, of World War II was designed to shock the enemy as much psychologically as tactically. The German Luftwaffe went so far as to attach wind-driven noise makers to the JU-87 (Stuka) dive bombers so that their enemies could hear, and be terrified by, the screams of diving warplanes. When an American commander, cut off and surrounded

at Bastogne, was asked to surrender, he replied, "Nuts!" -- that's PSYOP.

Psychological operations are not mysterious. In fact, PSYOP is more common sense than many might believe. In 1942, still reeling from the devastating blow at Pearl Harbor, the United States launched an extremely risky psychological operation, the Doolittle raid on Tokyo. The success of that raid, though of little significance to the warfighting abilities of the Japanese, had a devastating effect on the Japanese people. The Japanese had been told by their government that Japan was invulnerable to attack. Therefore, the psychological effects of this one small raid were greatly magnified. Not surprisingly, the Japanese military was forced to divert much-needed air-defense assets to protect the Japanese homeland. In addition, our people in the United States got a much-needed boost to their morale -- that's PSYOP.

In 1944, the Allies implemented a major deception plan. A phoney invasion force was constructed around the dynamic persona of Gen. George Patton. The apparent aim of this contrived force was to attack the German defenses across the English Channel at the Pas de Calais. The operation was designed to influence Adolf Hitler, who personally approved force dispositions along the English Channel. This "deception" caused Hitler to divert German forces and resulted in the allies being able to launch a successful invasion at Normandy -- that's PSYOP.

In 1968, the North Vietnamese Army and its allies, the Viet Cong, launched a bold countrywide attack. This operation, which proved to be a tactical defeat, was a strategic victory which announced the beginning of the end of the Vietnam conflict. The North Vietnamese had already found that they could not defeat the technologically and tactically superior American and South Vietnamese forces on the battlefields of Vietnam. They knew they had to conduct psychological operations in




---

*"The well-designed, artfully executed Japanese attack on the United States Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor failed to accomplish a major portion of its operational strategy because of inadequate PSYOP planning...The unplanned psychological effect of the 'sneak attack' mobilized the American population as nothing else could have."*

---

the living rooms of the American people to be successful. Tet '68 was the turning point of the war -- that's PSYOP.

While we have listed several examples of successful operations which demonstrate the need to make PSYOP an integral part of every military planning process, there are also examples of failures, examples where a PSYOP message caused the originator more harm than good because of inadequate planning or insufficient control of the situation. The well-designed, artfully executed Japanese attack on the United States Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor failed to accomplish a major portion of its operational strategy because of inadequate PSYOP planning. The Japanese

plan was to present a declaration of war to the United States shortly before the attack on the fleet and thereby deliver a devastating blow to the Pacific Fleet and the American psyche. Because of an elevated security requirement accompanying the declaration of war, the message was handled by inexperienced personnel. Their lack of decrypting speed caused the declaration of war to be delivered *after the Pearl Harbor attack*. The unplanned psychological effect of the "sneak attack" mobilized the American population as nothing else could have.

On a different front, Adolf Hitler's grand plan to destroy Great Britain's will to fight by bombing the cities failed because he was unable to account for the brilliant

countermaneuverings of the British prime minister, Sir Winston Churchill. Churchill, an astute observer of human nature and the consummate politician, rallied the population to withstand his self-proclaimed "Battle of Britain," turning a potentially devastating blow to England into a defeat for Germany. Notwithstanding the courage of English and allied fliers, the "Battle of Britain" is remembered today more as a psychological than a military success.

In reality, PSYOP is nothing more than common-sense human relations given a military application -- common sense by design. We all use PSYOP, and we use it all the time. A handshake and smile, a pat on the back or a thumbs-up are all examples of common-sense PSYOP. In every case, the act is designed to have a specific psychological effect on the person or persons who receive it. Certainly, we should apply at least as much thought to the life-and-death world of warfighting.

If PSYOP is so easy, such common sense, and so much a part of everyday life, why do we need to train anyone in its use? The easiest answer is that not all of us are equally endowed with much common sense, but that isn't the best answer. What we teach in PSYOP training are the tools and techniques necessary to conduct military PSYOP.

Low-intensity conflict is as much psychological, political, and economic as it is military. The focus in LIC is, and will likely remain, in the Third World. For PSYOP to be effective in this environment, it must take into account the language and culture of the target audience. Although PSYOP is mostly common sense, the "how" of PSYOP can be very complex. The expected effects of military PSYOP must be weighed against the effect on third parties, such as local civilians and world opinion, as well as on our own population.

To accomplish this, our Army trains PSYOP soldiers in the languages and cultures of peoples in

areas where American troops may have to operate. In addition, new technologies in print, audio, and visual media demand more specialists in order to harness the best available means to accomplish tactical, operational or strategic psychological goals. These means -- radio, television, leaflets and other techniques -- get the desired message to the target audience. The goal is to influence an audience to act, or not act, in ways which will support the commander's intent, and without risking American lives.

But PSYOP is not only near-term, practical applications. PSYOP is the use of PSYOP-trained officers on staffs at every level to ensure that all commanders have the ability to consider the ramifications of their military actions. Burning down the hut is not always the best way to convince an enemy that we are the good guys.

Today only Special Forces units routinely consider the implications of their actions. At the lowest level, the Special Forces A-detachment conducts a psychological assessment as a normal part of its target analysis. The acronym CARVER describes this process; the detachment assesses the *criticality*, *accessibility*, *recoverability*, *vulnerability*, *effect* and *recognizability* of any target before making the decision to attack it. Most significant here is the assessment of *effect*, which means the effect the operation will likely have on the local populace -- will they become more or less pro-U.S.? If the *effect* is not positive, the target will not be attacked. Only when the *criticality* of the target outweighs any negative impact will this rule be broken. Never is an operation conducted without such an assessment. If Special Forces ODAs evaluate their operations so routinely, shouldn't higher-level elements, with large planning staffs, be as thorough?

It should be clear that PSYOP is not performed behind "green doors" by pipe-smoking academics. The conduct of PSYOP is a war-fighting skill which must be planned

---

*"PSYOP is not only near-term, practical applications. PSYOP is the use of PSYOP-trained officers on staffs at every level to ensure that all commanders have the ability to consider the ramifications of their military actions. Burning down the hut is not always the best way to convince an enemy that we are the good guys."*

---

and practiced in order to be effective. Commanders at all levels, from national to squad or detachment, must train their subordinates and themselves to think in terms of psychological effect. Once an adversary thinks he is beaten, he is beaten. How to convince your enemy that he is beaten is PSYOP.

The key to PSYOP is that it is common sense with a military application. Any opportunity to change the thought processes of a target audience should never be passed up -- that's PSYOP. ✕

---

*CWO2 Scott S. Herbert is the Warrant Officer Manager for the Special Operations Proponency Office at the JFK Special Warfare Center and School. He was one of the first appointed Special Forces Technicians in 1984. Mr. Herbert has served as a Special Forces soldier with the 1st, 5th, 6th and 10th SF Groups. His enlisted experience includes training as a radio operator, a medic and an intelligence NCO. His last assignment was as an A-detachment commander in the 1st SF Group.*

*Maj. Robert B. Adolph Jr. is the former deputy chief and Functional*

*Area 39 manager in the Special Operations Proponency Office. He is currently taking language training en route to duty in the Middle East as a United Nations military observer. A former Special Forces NCO, Maj. Adolph was commissioned in the Military Intelligence Branch in 1976 and rebranched into Special Forces in 1987. He has served troop assignments with the 525th MI Group, commanded a Special Forces underwater operations detachment and served as a battalion intelligence officer in the 5th SF Group. He is a graduate of the MI Officer Advanced Course and the Foreign Area Officer Course.*