THE FUTURE OF INFLUENCE IN WARFARE

Afghan National Army and Civil Order Police officers speak to Maiwand district villagers in Kandahar Province during clearing operation in area

U.S. Army (Daniel P. Shook)

By **DENNIS M. MURPHY**

Information plays a prominent role in the history of U.S. warfare. From Winfield Scott's courting of the Catholic Church in Veracruz in 1847 to George Creel's Committee on Public Information in World War I, military and civilian leaders have long understood that information, and the influence it produces, can significantly enable the success of military operations. That is no different today. In fact, it is apparent from both current military operations and the environment in which they occur that information and influence as applied to military success will become increasingly important while significantly more complex in the future.

First, consider importance. It seems clear that success in Afghanistan hinges on the ability to change behavior through influence. General Stanley McChrystal's initial

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assessment of the situation there, published in August 2009, stated, "Strategic Communication makes a vital contribution to the overall effort [battle of perceptions] and more specifically to the operational center of gravity: the continued support of the Afghan population."[1] The transparency of the information environment and increasing access to information through any number of means, from satellite television to the Internet, portend that military operations will not only have the ability to shape the information environment, but also in turn risk being shaped by it.

Next, consider complexity. In a recent *Small Wars Journal* article, Lee Rowland and Steve Tatham, in their presentation on target audience analysis (TAA) and measures of effectiveness, make a strong case that influence operations are a complex business: "TAA—when undertaken properly—is an extremely complex process and whilst its methodology is comparatively simple, its implementation is most certainly not."[2] A discussion of the human behavior model in an article published in early 2010 in *Parameters* concludes the same: "A deep understanding of the human behavior model, specifically culture and how it informs emotion, is critical to obtaining behavior change that is driven by perception and attitude."[3] Noted communication researcher Steven Corman joins the chorus when he describes a shift in academic thought on influence from one of "simplistic . . . to pragmatic complexity."[4]

The U.S. Government, and the military in particular, has gradually recognized the value and urgency of information to affect national security since the attacks of September 11, 2001. Significant debate since then has informed the evolution and viability of concepts such as information operations (IO), strategic communications (SC), and public diplomacy.[5] In fact, the military has moved beyond the apprentice stage to what could arguably be termed journeyman status as it relates to applying information to enable achievement of its objectives. But the importance and complexity of future influence operations will require master status. The U.S. military will achieve such mastery by getting its doctrine right; by building its intelligence capability to focus on enemy use of information as a weapon of choice; and, most importantly, by creating an organizational culture that embraces the criticality of using information to influence across the spectrum of future conflict.

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Getting Doctrine Right

The concepts of IO and SC (the primary military influence processes) and their application have evolved in fits and starts over the past 10 years. Much debate in the midst of conflict has surrounded the meaning of these terms, the similarities and differences between them, and the responsibilities for each beyond theory and in practice.[6] Add to this the recent emergence of cyberspace operations, and the confusion is understandable. Still, progress, while appearing glacial to many, is occurring. A new and clearer definition of information operations has been approved by the Department of Defense. A "Strategic Communication Capabilities Based Assessment" has been completed.[7] Both of these efforts will lead to military doctrinal publications and directives that afford the opportunity to provide clarity and, more importantly, move these concepts to an understanding that enables mastery of the craft of applying information in order to influence.

An example of progress was reflected in the theme of the 2010 Worldwide Information Operations Conference: "Mainstreaming Information Operations, Normalizing Doctrine and Operations."[8] In other words, how do you take IO out of the ether, where it appears as a new, bright, shiny object, and place it squarely into the realm of routine and recurring military operations? The same challenge exists for strategic communications and cyberspace operations. The answer to that question lies squarely in getting the doctrine right. In fact, if the military does not get the next iteration of influence-related doctrine correct over the next 2 years, the progress previously described will be significantly muted.

Doctrine is what drives the conduct of military operations. It is guidance that (as noted on the inside cover of all joint doctrine publications) "is authoritative [and] as such will be followed except when, in the judgment of the commander, exceptional circumstances dictate otherwise."[9] Once doctrine is written and codified, Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and Airmen read it and follow it. It becomes "truth." Given that this is the case, defining the correct audience for the doctrine is critical since the future of information in warfare should focus on movement to mastery of the concept. One may understandably default to the influence practitioner as the obvious audience for this doctrine. But the most important audience is the *commander*. The progress previously described is reflective of IO or SC staffs who really understand how to achieve effects in the information environment after 10 years of practice in war. What is lacking, however, are commanders who understand the concept sufficiently to provide appropriate guidance, resources, and advocacy for those same IO staffs, which makes all the difference in the world.[10]

First, the focus of commander-oriented doctrine must be on information effects, not IO or SC. Both are integrating processes that are often misunderstood and confused with the individual capabilities that they integrate. Adding further confusion are related processes and capabilities like the newly minted cyberspace operations. Information effects, on the other hand, are clearly understood by commanders. *Effect* is a doctrinally accepted term, a part of operational design.[11] Commanders know that they must achieve information effects to enable achievement of military objectives. However, they may not understand the nuances of IO or the other related but different concepts. In general, doctrine focused on information effects must be incorporated into the currently understood areas of operational art, design, and science.

Second, IO, SC, and cyberspace operations are still terms that will be used. This proposed doctrine need not go into excruciating detail about the specific staff processes that they portend, but it must describe the relationship between them.

Some specific examples of what this doctrine should include are worthy of discussion. First, and arguably foremost, is the importance of considering influence in the development of commander's intent. Commander's intent drives both the planning and execution of military operations. It defines command ownership of the operation. A commander's intent that includes a desired information endstate (a defined attitude or behavior change for critical audiences at the conclusion of the operation) will drive the military

course of action development, analysis, and selection. That is, the military actions will be undertaken in a fashion to achieve the standard operational endstate in a way that also allows the desired information-effect endstate to be achieved. Branch planning should also be considered in terms of influence. Branch plans answer the question, "What if?" Given that our enemies routinely use influence to enable success, we should plan for an immediate response to their influence operations through branch planning in order to minimize our reaction time. Additionally, it is important to do a side-by-side comparison of the operational art, design, and science aspects of kinetic operations as compared to influence operations. This should clearly point out the requirement for an information endstate (the art), resources necessary for understanding the complexity of both human behavior and measuring influence effectiveness (the science), and the long-term nature of achieving influence effects (the design).

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When the Joint Publication *Information Effects in Joint Military Operations* is available, it will go a long way toward normalizing future influence operations. It buys informed and educated commanders. That in turn makes the life of the influence staff easier since the commander can now provide appropriate guidance, resources, and advocacy. And that moves information in warfare to a level of mastery not previously seen or practiced. Still, that mastery requires an acute understanding of the enemy, who chooses to vote routinely with information effects as his asymmetric weapon of choice.

Know Thine Enemy

In the apprentice stage of employing influence operations, the commander and staff are proactive in considering the information environment and the required information effects in the planning process. Counterinsurgency, as a population-centric military operation, has driven commanders, over time, to focus on information effects during planning in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

In the journeyman stage, the commander and staff both plan to achieve their own information effects and quickly shift to being "proactively reactive" regarding unpredictable circumstances in the information environment. That is, consideration is also given in the planning process to the fact that unforeseen situations can, and often do, occur that have potentially adverse information effects on coalition forces. (Collateral damage, Abu Ghraib photos, and staged enemy disinformation come to mind.) Recognizing this, the commander and staff develop processes to immediately react to those instances if and when they occur. Information playbooks and battle drills are examples that are prepared to plan for the unforeseen but expected information wildcard as a result of branch planning.[12]

But in order to achieve mastery in influence operations, one must move from being proactively reactive to becoming predictive. This is a critical task, and certainly not an easy one since it speaks to the complexity of the information environment. Consider the importance of being able to predict an information effect planned by the enemy versus reacting to an unanticipated information wildcard employed by the enemy. Rowland and Tatham note that "an unintended incident . . . will have an immediate information effect on [the] target audience and a much slower return to *below* stasis."[13] In other words, even if coalition forces are doing a

Participants at town hall meeting discuss methods for locals to practice their religion conveniently in Kandahar Province, Afghanistan

U.S. Army (Courtney Russell)

good job achieving planned and intended information effects, the unexpected incident not only adversely impacts operations for the short term, but also never allows a return to the effects achieved before the incident. (One step forward, two steps back.)

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So, how does one become predictive in order to cut the legs out from under enemy information effects? The answer lies in the often-overlooked but long-term Achilles' heel of influence operations: intelligence support. A highly publicized report coauthored by Major General Michael T. Flynn, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization intelligence director in Afghanistan, points out current intelligence flaws: "Our intelligence apparatus still finds itself unable to answer fundamental questions about the environment in which we operate and the people we are trying to protect and persuade."[14] Only when the Intelligence Community develops the skill sets, a pipeline of experts, and, most importantly, organizational focus toward influence operations will coalition forces have a chance of being predictive regarding enemy use of information. The enemy has a well-established modus operandi (MO) using information as his strategic weapon of choice. In fact, American-born-turned-enemy-propagandist Zachary Chesser recently made that MO rather simple to understand by laying out the 10 most effective ways to conduct enemy influence operations.[15] That is not to say that predictive information analysis is always easy. As previously noted, intelligence based on the human behavior model, social psychology, cultural anthropology, and emotion is inherently difficult. But intelligence-gathering and analysis focused on both open sources and traditional and more complex sources will move friendly influence operations from proactively *reactive* and allow the possibility of being predictive and proactively *disruptive* before the fact.

The shifts to commander-focused information effects doctrine and intelligence focus on enemy influence operations work hand-in-hand toward forcing a change in organizational culture in support of fully integrated planning and execution of influence operations.

Organizational Culture

In 2009, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen stated, "We have allowed strategic communication to become a thing instead of a process, an abstract thought instead of a way of thinking."[16] It is this inherent "way of thinking" that defines the organizational culture of the U.S. military today, and in terms of wielding influence through SC, Admiral Mullen sees a basic flaw. This is not surprising since researchers note that organizational culture changes in a fairly slow, evolutionary manner.[17] What commander-centric information doctrine and intelligence support to

Army and Marine information support operations team with Afghan National Army soldier clear compound to conduct census patrol in Marjah, Helmand Province

U.S. Marine Corps (Christopher M. Carroll)

information effects provide, however, are forcing functions to drive an organizational culture that embraces information effects as an inherent part of military planning and execution.

Within military organizations, the commander sets the tone, establishes the command climate, and drives the organizational culture. A commander who embraces and emphasizes the value of information effects to military success will drive the unit to a similar recognition. Doctrine that focuses on and directs commanders to provide initial guidance on desired information effects will result in planning and execution reflective of organizational change. A commander who identifies an information endstate in his intent implies to the staff and subordinates that information effects are important to mission success and must be considered throughout the planning, execution, and assessment processes.

Intelligence support follows this commander-driven change. With an information endstate defined, the intelligence staff determines most likely and most dangerous enemy *influence* courses of action. The staff then wargames against these scenarios and, in doing so, increases the opportunity to both predict the enemy's use of information and plan to prevent it from ever occurring.

Other standard military decisionmaking processes will follow with a routine consideration of influence on mission accomplishment. Priority Intelligence Requirements will necessarily consider collecting on the environmental factors that portend enemy influence operations. The Commander's Critical Information Requirements will raise time-sensitive influence activities to the commander's level for action, both to exploit friendly effects and blunt enemy effects.

Commander-centric doctrine on information effects, accompanied by intelligence support enabled by appropriate resources and focus on enemy influence activities, will drive organizational culture. If and when that occurs, the military will be well on its way to mastery in planning and executing influence operations and deterring and defeating the primary source of enemy power.

The information environment is a complex system that will become increasingly important to the success or failure of military operations in the future. Progress has been made since 9/11 to both exploit information effects to enable success and to counter enemy asymmetric use of information as a strategic weapon of choice. But the criticality of information as power in future warfare means that if the U.S. military hopes to routinely succeed, it must master influence operations across the spectrum of operations. Commander-centric doctrine will help jump-start that mastery by allowing the commander to provide the appropriate and necessary guidance, resources, and advocacy to influence operations. Intelligence support must simultaneously shift focus from kinetic order-of-battle analysis to a balanced approach that considers collection and analysis of influence-related enemy capabilities as well.

As this command-directed and -focused planning and execution evolve, they will trickle down to the individual Soldier, Sailor, Marine, and Airman. When they inherently and proactively consider any and all of their actions in light of their influence effects, inculcation of the organizational culture toward and true mastery of influence operations will be achieved. In a world where information is ubiquitous and increasingly impacts military success, that cannot happen soon enough. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] Stanley A. McChrystal, Headquarters, International Security Assistance Force Memorandum, "COMISAF's Initial Assessment," Kabul, Afghanistan, August 30, 2009, D–1.

[2] Lee Rowland and Steve Tatham, "Strategic Communication and Influence Operations: Do We Really Get 'It'?" *Small Wars Journal*, August 3, 2010, available at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/483-tatham-rowland.pdf>.

[3] Dennis M. Murphy, "In Search of the Art and Science of Strategic Communication," *Parameters* 34, no. 4 (Winter 2009/2010), 111.

[4] Steven R. Corman, Angela Trethewey, and Bud Goodall, "A 21st Century Model for Communication in the Global War of Ideas," Consortium for Strategic Communication, Report #0701, April 3, 2007, 9.

[5] Information operations, strategic communications, and public diplomacy are related concepts that all in some way focus on informing, educating, and influencing audiences. Still, their nuanced differences remain difficult for the nonpractitioner to grasp, as evidenced by a U.S. Department of Defense front-end analysis in summer 2010, examining the lexicon and definitions of information operations and strategic communication, among others.

[6] See Dennis M. Murphy, "The Trouble with Strategic Communication(s)," *IOSphere* (Winter 2008) for a detailed explanation of the lexicon and comparison of the terms *information operations* (IO) and *strategic communication* (SC).

[7] The new definition of *IO* is an outcome of the Department of Defense front-end analysis (see note 5). The "Strategic Communication Capabilities Based Assessment" was conducted by U.S. Strategic Command during 2009–2010 and considered SC from doctrinal, personnel, and organizational perspectives, among other considerations.

[8] The Worldwide Information Operations Conference is an annual event bringing together an international audience of approximately 500 IO practitioners, academics, and contractors to focus on both the progress and future of IO.

[9] See Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication 3–13, *Information Operations* (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, February 13, 2006), i, among others.

[10] The author has taught on the topics of IO and SC at the U.S. Army War College for the past 6 years. Over that period, senior military leader-students have increasingly recognized the importance of information effects to warfighting success. However, they anecdotally offer that even with successive tours of duty in combat zones, it takes an initial 4 months, on average, for commanders to put into place effective tactics, techniques, and procedures to compete in the information environment.

[11] Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication 5–0, *Joint Operation Planning* (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, August 11, 2011), III–18.

[12] Again, this should be planned using current military paradigms. In this example, branch planning is the appropriate mechanism. A branch answers the question "What if?" in military plans. See Joint Publication 5–0, II–18.

[13] Rowland and Tatham, 6.

[14] Michael T. Flynn, Matt Pottinger, and Paul D. Batchelor, "Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan," Center for a New American Security Working Paper, January 4, 2010.

[15] Jared Brachman, "The Internet Jihad," *Foreign Policy*, available at <www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/10/11/the_internet_jihad>.

[16] Michael G. Mullen, "Strategic Communication: Getting Back to Basics," *Joint Force Quarterly* 55 (4th Quarter 2009), 2.

[17] Christine A.R. MacNulty, *Transformation from the Outside In or the Inside Out* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Center for Strategic Leadership, 2008), 22.