Psychological Operations/Warfare

"Capture their minds and their hearts and souls will follow"

Psychological Operations or PSYOP are planned operations to convey selected information and indicators to audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of organizations, groups, and individuals. Used in all aspects of war, it is a weapon whose effectiveness is limited only by the ingenuity of the commander using it.

A proven winner in combat and peacetime, PSYOP is one of the oldest weapons in the arsenal of man. It is an important force protector/combat multiplier and a non-lethal weapons system.

Psychological Operations (PSYOP) or Psychological Warfare (PSYWAR) is simply learning everything about your target enemy, their beliefs, likes, dislikes, strengths, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities. Once you know what motivates your target, you are ready to begin psychological operations.

Psychological operations may be defined broadly as the planned use of communications to influence human attitudes and behavior ... to create in target groups behavior, emotions, and attitudes that support the attainment of national objectives. The form of communication can be as simple as spreading information covertly by word of mouth or through any means of multimedia.

A psychological warfare campaign is a war of the mind. Your primary weapons are sight and sound. PSYOP can be disseminated by face-to-face communication, audio visual means (television), audio media (radio or loudspeaker), visual media (leaflets, newspapers, books, magazines and/or posters). The weapon is not how its sent, but the message it carries and how that message affects the recipient.

For instance, our American flag, when it goes by in a parade do you feel a sense of pride? How about when you hear our national anthem played? How about "God Bless the USA", Lee Greenwood’s song which became popular during Desert Storm? Music or sound can be a major factor in motivating emotion if it is associated with the right message. How many of you think about the pottery wheel scene with Patrick Swayze and Demi Moore in the movie "Ghost" when you hear the theme song "Unchained Melody"?

It has long been said that: "The pen is mightier than the sword". That is because, if used properly, words can be an inspiration to motivate others. Some examples:

"Remember the Alamo"
"Give me liberty or give me death"
"I regret I have but one life to give for my country"
"Ask not what your country can do for you? Ask what you can do for your country"
Now for psychological operations to be effective, you must carefully plan your propaganda. You must make sure that you know everything about your enemy and that you are targeting his beliefs and not using your own. For example, at the very beginning of Desert Shield, just after Iraq invaded Kuwait, President Bush referred to Saddam Hussein as being: "just like Adolph Hitler"

For Americans and most of Europe that was an insulting comparison. However, looking at it through the eyes of an Iraqi soldier Adolph Hitler tried to exterminate all the Jews. Iraq has long hated Israel. Hitler drove out the British and French forces that had long occupied the Middle East. So with the right propaganda, the comparison could be interpreted that Saddam, like Hitler, hates Israel and wants to keep the western infidel influence from contaminating the Middle East. This would be a compliment not an insult.

On the reverse side, knowing your enemy's beliefs can work for you. For example, remember when Saddam Hussein broadcasted live images of his "Human Shields, the woman and children of westerners that were in Iraq when the war broke out? The Koran, the Moslem bible, states that you can do what you with your enemy, but that you must not harm his family, (wife and children), Saddam's actions allowed us to show that he was a coward, hiding behind innocent people and ignoring the Moslem laws he was so quick to say he was defending.

How do you get to know your enemy? Intelligence reports, Area Studies, in country research, defectors, native help, and even the enemy prisoners of war all are sources of information. As leaflets were developed during Desert Storm, they were tested on cooperative EPWs (enemy prisoners of war. Some of the recommendations for changes to the leaflet's illustrations made by these EPWs were: remove any trace of the color red (a danger signal to Iraqis), show Allied soldiers with chin beards rather than clean-shaven faces (beards convey trust and brotherhood in Iraqi culture), and add bananas to a bowl of fruit shown being offered to surrendering Iraqis (bananas are a great delicacy in Iraq). Also, an illustration depicting a surrendering Iraqi thinking of his family back home confused the EPWs. "Thought bubbles" are well-known in Western culture, but virtually unknown to Iraqis. The illustration was dropped.

In a memo written to then-Secretary of State John Foster Dulles on 24 October 1953, former U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower defined psychological warfare as anything "from the singing of a beautiful anthem up to the most extraordinary kind of physical sabotage."

Used during peacetime, contingencies and declared war, these activities are not a form of force, but are force multipliers that use nonviolent means in often violent environments. Persuading rather than compelling physically, they rely on logic, fear, desire or other mental factors to promote specific emotions, attitudes or behaviors. The ultimate objective of U.S. military psychological operations is the dissemination of truthful information to foreign audiences in support of U.S. policy and national objectives to convince enemy, neutral, and friendly nations and forces to take action favorable to the United States and its allies.

Now please note that I stated above that Psychological Operations as conducted by the US Military is the dissemination of "truthful" information, not propaganda which is categorized as "white, grey, or black". Now what is the difference between PSYOPS and propaganda? A
memorandum prepared by the Chief of Army Field Forces at Fort Monroe, Virginia in September of 1953 briefly explained the difference between "gray" propaganda, messages broadcast with the goal of "avoiding identification," and "black" propaganda, which involves "attribution to a source other than the true one."

A more recent set of definitions, reportedly used by former CIA chief William Colby and cited in at least one commercial publication, calls truthfully-attributed and non-attributed messages "white" propaganda, whereas messages falsely attributed to a third party are considered "gray." The term "black propaganda" is reserved for those materials "planted by the United States but in such as way that it seems to be the product or even an internal document of the target group." In other words, "black propaganda" is nothing less than a form of intellectual and political subversion.

History of Psychological Warfare

Now Psychological Operations (PSYOP) is not a new military tactic by any means. There are numerous examples of the use of psychological warfare throughout history.

Alexander the Great of Macedonia

Perhaps one of the earliest examples of Psychological Warfare was attributed to "Alexander the Great of Macedonia. Alexander had conquered most of the known world during his reign. With each region he conquered he left behind soldiers to keep control of the newly conquered area. Eventually, there came a point when Alexander realized that he had stretched his army too thin and was now in danger of losing to a large opposing force. Alexander's only option was to retreat and regroup forces with the armies he left behind. However, to do so would certainly incite the opposing force to pursue him and very possibly capture or defeat his now smaller army.

Alexander knew that if he could intimidate the opposing force they would be scared to follow his army. Alexander instructed his armorers to make several oversized armor breastplates and helmets that would fit "giants", men 7 to 8 feet tall. As Alexander and his forces withdrew during the night they left behind the oversized armor. The oversized armor was of course found by the opposing force who then believed that they had come close to engaging in a battle with giants. A battle that they surely would have lost. The oversized armor coupled with the stories they had heard from travelers of the savagery of Alexander's army caused enough doubt and fear that they elected not to pursue Alexander's army.

Sun Tsu, recognized as one of the greatest military tacticians of all times, strongly advocated the use of psychological warfare as a force multiplier. Sun Tsu wrote that:

"To capture the enemy's entire army is better than to destroy it; to take intact a regiment, a company, or a squad is better than to destroy them. For to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the supreme excellence. Thus, what is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy's strategy. Next best is to disrupt his alliances by diplomacy. The next best is to attack his army. And the worst policy is to attack cities."
Sun Tzu understood that given the opportunity, an adversary will surrender to a superior commander prior to conflict. In order to have a chance to be that superior leader, PSYOP must be coordinated and included in initial planning and implemented prior to conflict. If hostilities begin, proper PSYOP implementation can end the conflict earlier than otherwise expected. PSYOP is a force multiplier and resource saver.

Genghis Khan

Mongol leader Genghis Khan was widely known for leading hordes of savage horsemen across Russia and into Europe. While not totally unfounded, the Mongols' image of total, barbaric domination was greatly enhanced by Khan's use of PSYOP, deception, operational security (OPSEC), and targeting his adversaries' decision-making process. "Agents of influence" were sent in advance of his armies to do face-to-face PSYOP, telling of brutality and large numbers in the Mongol army. Khan also used deception to create the illusion of invincible numbers by using rapid troop maneuver, making his army look larger than it really was. He had a network of horsemen called "arrow riders" to communicate quickly with his commanders, and he targeted enemy messengers to prevent enemy commanders from communicating with each other. All these actions caused a weakness in their enemy's psyche, and the Mongols were feared wherever they went.

World War II

Psychological operations were used extensively by all sides during World War II. Adolf Hitler rose to power by exploiting the dissatisfaction of supporters of the traditional left and right wing parties, by dwelling on the failure of these parties to solve the problems created by the conditions imposed on Germany under the Treaty of Versailles. He then presented National Socialism as the one movement capable of uniting conservative nationalists with international socialists, the professional classes with the working classes in the service of the nation. The speeches he delivered urged national pride and unity and placed the blame for all of Germany's problems on others. His oratory techniques and use of propaganda gave him a truly hypnotic grip over the German masses. After taking over as dictator, the Germans continued to use propaganda both to unite Germany and to intimidate their enemies.

Radio broadcasts became a major means of passing propaganda to the enemy. Japan used the notorious "Tokyo Rose" to broadcast music, propaganda, and words of discouragement to our allied forces. The German's used Mildred Gillar, better remembered as "Axis Sally". The American's used deception and psychological operations to convince the German high command that the D-Day invasion was not going to be launched at Normandy but at Calais.

However the best and most innovative use of psychological warfare must be attributed to a radio broadcast by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). A BBC radio announcer made the following broadcast at a time when the Germans were making plans to invade England by crossing the English Channel. The text of the broadcast went something like this:

"Attention Jerries (British slang for the German soldier).
Since you are preparing to invade our country
it is important that you learn some English phrases."
Please Repeat after me, The Channel Crossing, The Channel Crossing.
Very good, now some words you will find helpful while you are on the boat.

"The boat is sinking", "The boat is sinking".
Again very good! Now, let’s practice the conjugation of verbs.
Now repeat after me.
"I am burning", "You are burning", "We are burning".

Documents found after the war showed that as a result of this broadcast, the German High Command believed that the British had a workable plan to set fire to the English Channel. The German’s therefore decided that it would be futile for them to try to invade England by crossing the Channel.

Korea

Having learned the effectiveness of radio broadcasts and leaflets during World War II, the U.S. Army Far East Command’s small Special Projects Branch of the Headquarters G-2 (Intelligence) Division, began radio broadcasts and leaflet drops over the Republic of South Korea immediately after North Korea’s invasion across the 38th Parallel in June 1950. Later during the fall of that year, the 1st Loudspeaker and Leaflet Company arrived in South Korea. This unit would serve as the 8th Army's tactical psychological warfare unit to the end of the war in 1952.

The 1st Loudspeaker and Leaflet Company used both vehicle and aircraft mounted loudspeakers to get their verbal messages across. However, as in previous U.S. wars, leaflets were still the major medium. Korean War leaflets themes center around the "happy POW." "good soldier-bad leaders," "surrender and you will be well-treated," "we can crush you," and nostalgia for home, family and women.

Vietnam

Vietnam Psychological Operations were used by both sides. Many G.I.’s may remember the notorious "Hanoi Hannah", who like "Tokyo Rose" of WW II broadcasted a daily radio program where she played music, coupled with the North’s view of the news and messages of discouragement to our troops.

The Americans countered with their own radio broadcasts, and leaflet programs.

In Vietnam, the United States conducted air attacks against military and military-related strategic targets partly for psychological effect. The principal psychological objective of these attacks was to persuade enemy leaders to negotiate an early end to the conflicts on terms acceptable to the United States.

These air attacks failed to deter the communists from protracting the fighting for over eight years in Vietnam. In addition to the humanitarian and other constraints the United States imposed on its air operations, various conditions and attitudes in the enemy camp diluted the coercive effects of the U.S. strategic attacks. These included the enemy government’s:
Access to support and sanctuary from external powers, which allowed the enemy to continue fighting even when its indigenous war-related production facilities had been destroyed. 

- Strong commitment to the objectives or cause that gave rise to the conflict with the United States. 
- Readiness to absorb enormous human and materiel losses. 
- Ability to maintain domestic support for the war effort and/or sufficient internal security to suppress any potential opposition. 
- Perception that the likely benefits from continued conflict would exceed the costs resulting from the U.S. bombing.

After having already made what it considered to be its maximum feasible concessions in the Vietnam peace talks, the United States resorted to escalation or threatened escalation to bring the negotiations to closure.

Severe U.S. escalation or threatened escalation was required to extract comparatively modest concessions from both enemies. In Vietnam, Washington had to employ massive B-52 and fighter-bomber strikes on Hanoi and Haiphong to force the communists to complete a peace agreement, the key provisions of which they had already accepted.

The communists agreed to terms only after their military forces on the battlefield had been stalemated. Prior to the settlements, the communist forces in Vietnam had mounted major offensives, the defeat of which left them no prospects for immediate further military gains.

Operation Just Cause - Panama

At H-Hour, 1-508th Abn had the mission of securing Ft. Amador, an installation shared by the U.S. and Panama Defense Force (PDF). Because of the need for OPSEC, American dependents could not be evacuated in advance of the attack. This complication, and the requirement to minimize enemy casualties and physical damage, made PSYOP loudspeaker teams, from the 1st Bn, 4th PSYOP Gp, a key asset. The battalion sealed off the PDF portion of Ft. Amador and ensured that all noncombatants were safe. After daylight, the task force set about systematically securing the area. When initial appeals failed to persuade the PDF to surrender, the commander modified the broadcasts. The holdouts were warned that resistance was hopeless in the face of overwhelming firepower and a series of demonstrations took place, escalating from small arms to 105MM Howitzer rounds. Subsequent broadcasts convinced the PDF to give up. The entire process allowed Ft. Amador to be secured with few casualties and minimal damage.

The Gulf War

The Gulf War brought a whole new meaning to the use of multimedia in psychological operations. Radio and TV broadcasts, leaflets, and loudspeakers used the themes of Arab brotherhood, allied air power, and Iraqi isolation to induce large numbers of enemy soldiers to desert. One of the most effective tactics involved the dropping of leaflets on a particular unit, informing it that it would be bombed within twenty-four hours and had to surrender to avoid destruction. Over a seven-week period, 29 million leaflets in at least 14 varieties were
dropped behind Iraqi lines, reaching approximately 98% of the 300,000 troops. Click here for some examples of Gulf War leaflets.

The 4th PSYOP Group began broadcasting the "VOICE OF THE GULF" radio network on 19 January 1991. It operated continuously through 1 April 1991 with more than 210 hours of live broadcasting and 330 hours of prerecorded programs. A total of 2072 news items were aired along with 189 PSYOP messages. The VOICE OF THE GULF network consisted of a 50 KW AM transmitter located at Abu Ali, Saudi Arabia broadcasting on AM 1134; a 10KW AM transmitter located at Qaisumah, Saudi Arabia broadcasting on AM 1179; a 1KW FM transmitter located at Qaisumah, Saudi Arabia broadcasting on FM 87.5 and two Commando Solo EC-130 aircraft of the 193rd Special Operations Group broadcasting on AM 690 and FM 88.5 and 87.9.

Of course like some of the other big wars, Iraq chose to use a woman, "Baghdad Betty", to conduct propaganda broadcasts to deter and disillusion their enemy. Unfortunately for Iraq, they forgot that a truly effective psychological warfare program must have the input of highly-qualified clinical psychologists "who specialize in the unconscious dynamics of human behavior and motivation" and who are knowledgeable about the "values and customs of different cultures." Such expertise is essential to the "selection of a culturally appropriate and effectively persuasive concept and value-based theme" that is the heart of any PSYOP. In one of her first broadcast Baghdad Betty warned the American soldiers listening that while they were in the desert of Saudi Arabia, their wives and girlfriends were sleeping with Tom Cruise, Tom Selleck and Bart Simpson. Now it was ridiculous enough to infer that our wives and girlfriends would be seduced by two movie stars but by their failure to do thorough research on the American culture, Betty lost any chance of credibility by telling our servicemen that a cartoon character was seducing our women back home.

During Desert Storm the 4th PSYOP Group fielded 71 Tactical loudspeaker teams. These teams provided support to USARCENT (both XVIII Airborne Corps and VII Corps), USMARCENT and USSOCCENT. Loudspeaker teams broadcast surrender appeals, harassment and deception tapes. Most loudspeaker teams had Saudi Arabian, Egyptian or Kuwaiti linguists attached to execute live broadcasts as the situation dictated. Loudspeaker teams were also innovatively employed for prisoner control at the EPW camps with broadcasts designed to accomplish prisoner pacification and underscore Military Police authority.

One of the best examples of the successful use of loudspeakers occurred during the Gulf War. The allied coalition effectively isolated, both physically and psychologically, a large element of Iraqi forces on Faylaka Island. Rather then reduce the island by direct assault, a tactical PSYOP team from the 9th PSYOP Battalion, aboard a UH-1N helicopter, flew aerial loudspeaker missions around the island with cobra gunships providing escort. The message told the adversary below to surrender the next day in formation at the radio tower. The next day 1,405 Iraqis, including a general officer, waited in formation at the radio tower to surrender to the Marine forces without a single shot having been fired.

How successful was the US PSYOP campaign in Desert Storm? The International Red Cross reported that nearly 87,000 Iraqi soldiers turned themselves over to coalition forces, most of them clutching the leaflets or hiding them in their clothing. All incidents of surrender were
bloodless. Perhaps the best testimony to the effectiveness of PSYOP was given by an Iraqi General when he stated that:

"PSYOP...was a great threat to troop morale, second only to the coalition bombing campaign."

Today Psychological Operations are a vital part of the broad range of U.S. political, military, economic and ideological activities used by the U.S. government to secure national objectives. The mission of providing Psychological Operations for the U.S. Military today rests with the U.S. Army's Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations Command at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

Link: