

In air combat, “the merge” occurs when opposing aircraft meet and pass each other. Then they usually “mix it up.” In a similar spirit, Air and Space Power Journal’s “Merge” articles present contending ideas. Readers are free to join the intellectual battlespace. Please send comments to aspj@maxwell.af.mil.

Damage Control

Leveraging Crisis Communications for Operational Effect

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After more than 6,700 days of continuous combat operations in support of US national security objectives, it is useful to evaluate the extent to which our nation’s enemies have adapted to the coalition’s asymmetric advantage in air and space. Since these enemies currently have no significant air defense at either medium or high altitude, it stands to reason that air operations should be able to function almost completely unfettered. Unfortunately, the notion that al-Qaeda and the Taliban have no air defense is woefully incorrect. Their air defense lies in the information operations (IO) logical line of operations (LLO), which takes the form of a concerted propaganda effort to discourage coalition air forces from using a valuable weapon—airpower—in all of its manifestations.¹ Logically, the natural inclination goes therefore to the question, how can US operational leaders adequately defend against the IO propaganda threat?

Controversial air strikes are inevitable. Although we must make every effort to minimize bombing errors, history shows that some strikes will tragically go wrong. Similarly, the use of IO to degrade or defeat war-fighting advantages in the air is almost as old as airpower itself. We can find examples of employing IO in combat airpower during World War I, World War II, the Cold War, Korea, Vietnam, the Balkans, Iraq, and South Asia. Examining a few historical examples of enemy IO attacks can

help us devise counter-IO strategies to ensure our freedom to use air and space power. This article addresses two classic enemy IO attacks: those that followed the Chinese Embassy bombing in Belgrade during Operation Allied Force and the accidental bombing of civilians interspersed with terrorists in Azizabad, Afghanistan, in 2008. Each case study represents a different type of controversial air strike—and our enemies used each one to further their IO campaigns. Taken together, they provide a powerful rationale for offering future training to counter this threat through the use of crisis communications (CRICOMM) tactics, techniques, and procedures—a critical public affairs (PA) sub-capability of a campaign’s overall strategic communication (SC) plan.² US operational commanders, who have insufficiently adopted doctrine and measures in this regard, must drastically increase the level of importance given to this vital arena of warfare.³ Specifically, US leaders must accept CRICOMM as an essential war-fighting obligation and adopt a robust education and training program to allow commanders to combat terrorists in this realm of the battlefield.

Chinese Embassy, Serbia, 1999

Serbian government officials rushed to the scene of the embassy blaze. One of

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them, Interior Minister Vlado Stojiljkovic, told Chinese diplomats "these criminals have to stop bombing. It's a demand of the whole world." There were initial conflicting reports of casualties. Senior Yugoslav official Goran Matic said there were no deaths among the 30 staffers living in the building. But Foreign Ministry spokesman Nebojsa Vujovic later said "there are deaths and injuries," without providing details.

—Veselin Toshkov, 1999

The bombing of the Chinese Embassy demonstrates the inevitability of error in combat operations. After several months of unsuccessful negotiations between North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) principals and Serbian leadership, Allied Force combat air and maritime operations began on 24 March 1999.⁴ The US Army's Gen Wesley Clark, who served as Supreme Allied Commander, Europe (SACEUR), felt that NATO objectives could be met with only a brief air offensive, as had been the case four years earlier during Operation Deliberate Force, when Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević's capitulation resulted in the Dayton Peace Accords.⁵ Prevailing wisdom indicated that,

contrary to sound doctrinal practice, senior military leaders believed "the political objective was to prompt Milosevic to accept the Rambouillet peace agreement, and NATO calculated that by dropping a few bombs Milosevic would do so." At the outset of bombing, the MTL [master target list] consisted of a meager 100 targets, of which slightly over 50 were approved for the initial air strikes. The lack of approved target sets perplexed [Lt Gen Michael] Short, who recalled thinking that "SACEUR had us all convinced we didn't need very many targets, and we didn't need an air campaign, and Milosevic just needed a little bit of spanking, and it was all going to be done. We never really ran an air campaign in a classic sense."⁶

In contrast to General Clark, the Air Force's General Short, combined force air component commander for Allied Force,

supported a "punishment" strategy that targeted Milošević's supporters in Serbia proper, rather than the Serbian Third Army in Kosovo.⁷ General Short argued "many times to his superiors that the most effective tactic for the first night of the war would be a knockout punch to Belgrade's power stations and government ministries. Such a strike had worked in Iraq in 1991, and it was the foundation of air power theory, which advocates heavy blows to targets with high military, economic, or psychological value as a way to collapse the enemy's will."⁸

This strategic and operational mismatch resulted in a scramble for targets after Milošević refused to play into General Clark's plan. NATO attacks on Serbian targets gradually increased throughout the spring until 7 May 1999, when a B-2 aircrew struck what they thought was the Federal Directorate for Supply and Procurement in Belgrade with five 2,000-pound GBU-31 Joint Direct Attack Munitions.⁹ Unfortunately, the attack on this target, which was in actuality the Chinese Embassy, killed three and wounded 20 noncombatant Chinese nationals.¹⁰ General Short reacted to the incident as follows:

"Impossible. I can't imagine how we could have hit the Chinese embassy unless we just threw a bomb incredibly long or short. Let me do my homework, and I'll get back to you." So I called the Intel guys in, and said: "General Clark just says we hit the Chinese embassy. Get me a map and show where we targeted on Belgrade, and then where the Chinese embassy is." It wasn't anywhere near our targets. I called General Clark back and I said, "Boss, I guess it could have happened, but I don't know how. I don't think we did. I think it's bad reporting. I've looked at where the embassy is and where we targeted, and I just don't see how we could have thrown a bomb there. It may be a missile went up and came back down." . . . But then CNN confirmed that we hit the Chinese embassy. We clearly were stunned. This was not targeting that we had done—this was a target that was passed down to us as [a] good solid target.¹¹

Following the international outrage over the bombing, NATO forces were prohibited from attacking Belgrade for nearly the rest of the war, approximately 20 percent of the length of the operation.¹² According to General Short, “We had a circle drawn around downtown Belgrade, within which we couldn’t hit anymore. . . . It took the Rock and Roll Bridge off the table, and many of the headquarters off the table. It essentially cleared the sanctuary.”¹³

Numerous conspiracy theories have sprung up concerning the genesis of this tragic mishap, but the ultimate cause was a series of tactical-level blunders by civilian Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) analysts who passed on the target to the military for prosecution.¹⁴ This incident, which naturally caused international condemnation, was by no means isolated; in fact, the Human Rights Watch organization reports that between 489 and 528 Yugoslav civilians lost their lives in 90 different inadvertent strikes during Allied Force.¹⁵ NATO officials grudgingly acknowledged responsibility for most of the errant attacks, but only after lengthy periods of denial.

Azizabad, Afghanistan, 2008

I think that airstrikes probably are the most discriminating weapon that exists. The problem is that even when you hit the right target, there are times when innocents pay the price.

—Marc Garlasco, Human Rights Watch, 2008

The incident in Azizabad highlights an air strike that killed not only adversary combatants as intended, but also civilians interspersed with the enemy, unbeknownst to the allies. During the early morning hours of 22 August 2008, Afghan and coalition ground forces coordinated an attack in Azizabad, Afghanistan, after they received intelligence that a known Taliban leader, Mullah Siddiq, was located within the village.¹⁶ Approaching the village, ground forces came under attack from terrorists

and called for close air support.¹⁷ Subsequent fire from a US AC-130 Spectre gunship killed as many as 90 Afghans.¹⁸

Immediately, Taliban spokesmen complained that the attack resulted in the deaths of innocent civilians: the United States denied those claims, insisting that the dead were Taliban combatants.¹⁹ Cell phone video of casualties, however, revealed children among the dead, prompting numerous US and international investigations into the incident; two weeks after the attack, the United States announced that in addition to Taliban fatalities, as many as seven civilians had been killed in the strike.²⁰ A PA news release from Combined Joint Task Force 101 defended the US-led initial investigation:

The investigating officer took statements from more than 30 participants, both Afghan and U.S., in the operation. Additionally, the investigating officer reviewed reports made by ground and air personnel during the engagement; video taken during the engagement; topographic photo comparisons of the area before and after the event including analysis of burial sites; reports from local medical clinics and hospitals; intelligence reports; and physical data and photographs collected on the site.²¹

The United Nations (UN) disagreed with this assessment, its investigation finding “that some 90 civilians, including 60 children, were among those killed during military operations in the strife-torn nation’s western Herat province.”²²

Unfortunately for the innocents of Afghanistan, such events occur all too frequently. In addition to the undocumented atrocities committed by the Taliban on civilians, the UN estimated in 2008 that “more than 1,400 Afghan civilians were killed in the first eight months of this year. Of those, 395 were killed in airstrikes by Western forces. The number of civilians killed by US and NATO-led airstrikes has risen by 21 percent this year.”²³

As a result of Azizabad and other high-profile incidents, US Army general David McKiernan, NATO commander in Afghani-

stan, directed a radical change in combined-arms tactics. The Canadian Army's Brig Gen Richard Blanchette described the change to Operation Enduring Freedom's rules of engagement: "Commanders are now under orders to consider a 'tactical withdrawal' when faced with the choice of calling in air support during clashes in areas where civilians are believed to be present. The goal of the order is to minimize civilian casualties, encourage better coordination with Afghan troops and discourage overreliance on air power to repel insurgent attacks."²⁴

Analysis

Given the extensive history typified by the preceding examples, our adversaries understand the operational and strategic

modern campaign plan. Many US operational leaders do not share this savvy; rather, they often underestimate the importance of accurate, timely rebuttal to enemy IO attacks, focusing their efforts on an ultimately fruitless attempt to achieve zero-defect air wars. In both case studies, the US CRICOMM response was markedly weaker than the enemy's attack.

It took the United States two months to release its official report of causation in the Chinese Embassy bombing, well after the conflict had ended.²⁶ After the mishap, Belgrade targets were essentially off-limits to NATO forces: Serb IO attacks had completed a task that the Serbian integrated air defense system could not. Recorded tapes of the B-2 attack on the embassy undoubtedly existed, but we could not release them rapidly due to security classification, resulting

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value of IO far better than do US military commanders. In his infamous letter to now-deceased Iraqi insurgency chief Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, senior al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri described his strategic vision for IO attacks: "However, despite all of this, I say to you: that we are in a battle, and that more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. And that we are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our Umma. And that however far our capabilities reach, they will never be equal to one thousandth of the capabilities of the kingdom of Satan that is waging war on us."²⁵

In his captured writings, al-Zawahiri clearly showed his operational and strategic acumen. In fact, if anything, the Zawahiri-Zarqawi letter underestimates the importance of a coherent and timely IO strategy to complement other LLOs in a

in operational-level harm to the NATO campaign plan. In contrast to the rapid response of Serbian propaganda experts during the night of the attack, almost 11 months passed before Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet fired one CIA officer and reprimanded six others for their roles in the incident.²⁷

In Afghanistan, complaints of attacks on civilians are commonplace, more so because the Taliban don't wear uniforms. Moreover, many Western media organizations simply report al-Qaeda and Taliban claims as ground truth, despite evidence to the contrary. Anthony Cordesman, of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, explains that

a great deal of media reporting focuses on claims that civilians were killed or wounded. Some of these claims are correct, but many simply report what is claimed by the Taliban,

Al Qa'ida, and other sources; or by voices on the ground that claim not to have ties to insurgent activity in areas where UAVs [unmanned aerial vehicles], ground observers, and other IS&R (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) data make it clear that insurgents were present in the area and active at the target.²⁸

Internationally, the United States denied the Azizabad issue until cell phone video of the aftermath forced additional investigations, mentioned previously. Even after reopening the investigation, General McKiernan chose to bring in a general from US Central Command to lead it, remarking that "in light of emerging evidence pertaining to civilian casualties in the August 22 counter-insurgency operation in the Shindand District, Herat province, I feel it is prudent to request that US Central Command send a general officer to review the US investigation and its findings with respect to this new evidence. The people of Afghanistan have our commitment to get to the truth."²⁹ There is certainly nothing wrong with ensuring that the truth gets out, but we risk having this action perceived abroad as more stalling. Such evident inability to confront the enemy rapidly when he engages in IO attacks feeds right into his strategic IO plan. Maj Gen Charles Dunlap, USAF, explains that

the Taliban are keenly aware that if they can cause enough casualties or, ideally, take American or NATO prisoners as they swarm over the often sparsely manned positions, they will achieve a tremendous victory on the battlefield of public opinion.

What is frustrating them? Modern U.S. and coalition airpower. Relentless aerial surveillance and highly precise bombing turn Taliban efforts to overrun the detachments into crushing defeats. And the Taliban have virtually no weapons to stop our planes.

Instead, they are trying to use sophisticated propaganda techniques to create a political crisis that will shoot down the use of airpower as effectively as any anti-aircraft gun.³⁰

Recommendations

History has shown that many US operational leaders view air strikes gone wrong as an unfortunate PA problem to be dealt with as painlessly as possible so as to get back to the real task of war fighting. At the service level, the US Air Force does not define a PA mission to deal with this unfortunate inevitability. Air Force Instruction (AFI) 35-101, *Public Affairs Policies and Procedures*, thoroughly discusses the closest thing to such a mission: CRICOMM, including crisis actions; release of information to the media; and procedures to handle classified information.³¹ However, AFI 35-101 discusses CRICOMM in terms of its applicability to a natural disaster or mishap, not combat. This perspective contributed to the past problems described above and should be immediately discarded: we must consider CRICOMM operations an essential part of any modern kinetic air operation. As such, we should rewrite service instructions and ensure that doctrine reflects this requirement.

At the joint level, Joint Publication (JP) 3-61, *Public Affairs*, simply states that "it is incumbent upon JFCs [joint force commanders] and their PAOs [PA officers] to accommodate the media whenever possible . . . to counter adversary propaganda and erroneous information in the adversary's press. A commander's messages to the various publics must be timely, accurate, and project the purpose and scope of the mission."³² This doctrine is logical, but such guidelines leave initiative in the hands of the enemy. Left unwritten is the concept that CRICOMM should be considered part of combat; failure to contest the enemy in an IO environment unnecessarily cedes a critical part of the battlespace. JP 3-61's companion document—JP 3-13, *Information Operations*—makes only one reference to CRICOMM in its 119 pages, and the *2006 Quadrennial Defense Review Execution Roadmap for Strategic Communication*, the Defense Department's attempt to synchronize IO, PA, and defense support to public diplo-

macy, fails to mention CRICOMM at all.³³ We must address this doctrinal deficiency. “Accommodat[ing] the media whenever possible” is far from embracing CRICOMM as an essential and inevitable part of joint combat air operations.

Traditionally, the services’ PA professionals have displayed uneasiness concerning their place in the joint SC mission. AFI 35-101 explains that PA officers emphasize “truthful, credible, accurate and timely information to key audiences in order to enhance their understanding and appreciation for Air Force capabilities and contributions to national security, while maintaining due regard for privacy and communication security.”³⁴ In contrast, IO may necessarily include deception.³⁵ Although this unease is understandable, denying CRICOMM a place in an SC campaign plan is tantamount to ceding this critical war-fighting tactic to the enemy. This is not meant to advocate untruthful CRICOMM as a subcategory of PA operations; however, the importance of the CRICOMM mission demands acknowledgement of its role in the SC battlespace, a position promoted by former National Security Council member Jeffrey Jones, a retired colonel: “That is not an argument to engage in propaganda; for the United States, truthful information is the best antidote and is exactly what its public affairs, public diplomacy, and information operators seek to provide.”³⁶

In addition to modifying service and joint doctrine, US and coalition operational and strategic commanders must change their mind-set to acknowledge CRICOMM as a worthy facet of both SC and operational art, not as a necessary evil to hand over to junior PA officers as soon as possible. Commanders caught unprepared by an air strike gone wrong—whether unplanned (the Chinese Embassy incident) or planned but involving unexpected civilian casualties (as at Azizabad)—furtheracerbate a regrettable, but always potentially inevitable, situation. Compounding the errors of this inevitability is intolerable in modern joint kinetic air operations, espe-

cially in light of the ready availability of communication tools to address the IO effects of these operations. Air strikes will go wrong in the future; the only question remaining is, will operational and strategic commanders have the mental agility to defeat the enemy’s likely IO counterattack?

We must develop leaders prepared to make the often tough decision to communicate openly and candidly in the wake of mishaps that compromise intended effects, especially when those mishaps kill and injure innocent civilians. Otherwise, we will continue to serve up propaganda opportunities that our adversaries will use to great effect in nullifying any potential operational gain. It seems obvious that the highest levels of military leadership must encourage CRICOMM education and that phases one and two of joint professional military education (JPME) must thoroughly address it. Until officers are educated in CRICOMM’s importance and nuances, senior US military commanders will continue to respond poorly and see the mission degraded. Thankfully, minor efforts in this regard have recently been implemented at the phase-two level of JPME—but we must incorporate more.

Finally, we should include CRICOMM scenarios as a typical facet of air-operations training and must integrate CRICOMM into joint operational-level exercises such as Red Flag, the Joint Expeditionary Force Experiment, and the USAF Weapons School syllabus. When a Navy officer is pulled from a mission debrief in an Air Force–hosted exercise to get in front of cameras rapidly and explain why simulated Marine bombs fell on allied soldiers or civilians, we will have finally arrived at acceptable CRICOMM training.

Admittedly, the whole idea of media relations remains uncomfortable to many officers. However, even though naysayers argue that SC’s efforts are overblown, others have soundly rejected the notion that engaging the media is a chore to be avoided. What was the Doolittle raid if not a kinetic attack to further an SC effort?³⁷ Gen George

Washington never would have fought the Battle of Trenton if he had not been keenly aware of the need to bolster the image of the Continental Army as an unbeaten force.³⁸ In both of these examples, US leaders recognized the primacy of SC for mission execution and the importance of the SC plan to the overall war effort.

This attitude is underscored by Senior Gen Võ Nguyên Giáp, former Vietnamese military commander:

We paid a high price [during the Tet offensive] but so did you [Americans] . . . not only in lives and materiel. . . . Do not forget the war was brought into the living rooms of the American people. . . . The most important result of the Tet offensive was it made you de-escalate the bombing, and it brought you to the negotiation table. It was, therefore, a victory. . . . The war was fought on many fronts. At that time the most important one was American public opinion.³⁹

Similarly, CRICOMM, well executed as part of an overall SC plan, can maintain the operational commander's critical requirement of remaining free to operate. General Dunlap explains the importance of this mission in the context of the global war on terror: "We must not reward the Taliban for deliberately putting civilians at

risk; it will only encourage them—and others—to make increasing use of innocents as defensive shields. The world will become an even more dangerous place for the truly blameless. The grim reality is that if our forces in the field are deprived of their most effective weapon, more than just coalition troops will die."⁴⁰

Conclusions

Kinetic air operations may indeed be surgical when compared to other types of fires, but they are in no way infallible. Mistakes are inevitable. In Belgrade and Azizabad, US operational leaders allowed the enemy to use IO in the form of propaganda to undermine US and coalition objectives. US leaders need to modify the conventional wisdom of CRICOMM as a necessary evil, embracing it as an inevitable part of warfare, no different from tactics or logistics. Only by adopting a robust education-and-training regimen in SC and its subcapability of CRICOMM will US leaders deny the enemy this critical LLO and maintain the freedom to prosecute operations in support of friendly operational and strategic objectives. ✪

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Notes

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