

## Deception—*Magic!*

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German bombers rumble relentlessly across the night sky of North Africa following a radio beam directed from German-occupied Libya toward the British port of Alexandria, Egypt. The flight commander notes an anomaly. The beam directs him forward, but he can see the lights of Alexandria to his left. The beam is known to be correct, but below him are city lights. Not only can he see the few inevitable lights in violation of blackout, he can easily see ships' lights in the harbor. He turns toward the lights and bombs . . . nothing.

In Africa during World War II, German bombers were led astray by an English deception plan that included mimicking Alexandria harbor. Creating the illusion of the actual city, lit by false house and ship lights, British officer Jasper Maskelyne, a professional magician, deceived the deadly German bombers into dropping their bombs 8 miles from Alexandria.

Deception on the battlefield is a force multiplier whose target is the adversary's mind as much as his technology. Deception can be countered by understanding the rules that govern suggestion or, better said, magic.

Successful deception events are occurring worldwide. Despite being monitored by sophisticated surveillance techniques and technology, India exploded a nuclear device under the world's nose. In Kosovo, the Serbs used fake tanks to drain away allied air sorties. Artillery that the Vietnamese "did not have" at Dien Bien Phu appeared as if by magic after having been secretly delivered from the Korean peninsula. In each case, the adversary was well and truly deceived.

### Appearance, Belief, Enticement

The great Chinese military philosopher Sun Tzu wrote, "All war is deception. Hence, when able to attack, we must seem unable. . . . When

we are near, we must make the enemy believe that we are far away. [We must] hold out baits to entice the enemy."<sup>1</sup> Almost every U.S. Army officer has read Sun Tzu's words. Yet, the U.S. military is little prepared for deception operations, which comprise a significant component of information operations. Why?

U.S. analysts tend to misinterpret Sun Tzu's text. Americans are a pragmatic, formulaic, and technology-trusting people. Sun Tzu uses verbs that refer to the mind, emphasizing appearance, belief, and enticement. How something seems or appears, what is believed, and enticement are activities discerned by the mind, not by technology. Deception in war deceives first the mind, then the eye. Few U.S. military analysts would dispute this, but fewer still offer assessments as if they believe it.

Basic military intelligence apparatus is sensory. We use platforms to see and hear the enemy. We base assessments on what is perceived as cold, rational fact. Appearance, belief, and enticement are mental, not sensory words. The U.S. military interprets enemy activities based on what can be seen, heard, and touched.

When a weaker country confronts a great power, the weaker knows it must employ deception to prevail. The U.S. Army's lack of ability in recognizing deception makes it not only vulnerable but also weaker because deception is a force multiplier.

The principles of magic, which all of us—especially children—enjoy, include the following:

- Disappearance.
- Appearance.
- Transposition of objects.
- Physical change in an object.
- Apparent defiance of natural law.
- Invisible sources of motion.
- Mental phenomena.

These principles also govern deception. We all know the old adage that the hand is quicker than the eye. The magician seems to deceive the

eye, but this is not true. The hand is not quicker than the eye. The magician actually beguiles the eye. In war, an opponent tries to beguile his adversary's perception. What appears factual might actually be an artful creation with which to convince the adversary that it is real. Properly understood, these principles can be used to assess the battlefield, to assess intelligence reports, and to defeat deception attempts.

### Deceiving the Mind

Before the enemy employs deception, he must analyze the situation, because to defeat his enemy, he must first understand how the enemy thinks. He can then orchestrate the adversary's responses. He will work to understand the enemy better than the enemy understands himself, then he will deceive the enemy's brain, not his eye.

**The Germans v. the Soviets I.** Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin despised and feared English Prime Minister Winston Churchill more than he did German dictator Adolf Hitler. Indeed, we know that in 1941 Stalin believed that reports of an imminent German attack were part of a brilliant British disinformation campaign, not a brilliant German deception operation. Even when undeniable Wehrmacht military buildups were observed and reported by communist spies, Stalin dismissed the reports because the Germans had orchestrated an illusion that played to Stalin's fears of the British.

The Germans suggested that the buildups were simply to pressure the Soviets for concessions in an upcoming parlay, making Stalin believe the buildups were in no way a prelude to war. In fact, when a German diplomat stated that war was imminent, Stalin believed and asserted that the nefarious disinformation had reached the ambassadorial level. The Germans had only to convince Stalin of their benign intent until they were ready to

launch the great assault of Operation Barbarossa.

**The Germans v. the Soviets II.** In World War II, during the battle of Stalingrad, massed Soviet gunfire suppressed German artillery batteries one by one. Even when the Germans were out of sight, crater analysis served Red Army intelligence sufficiently well to blast enemy gunners. Except for one battery, the German guns were silenced. This unseen battery fired away, despite massive counterbattery fire.

Soviet analysts plotted and targeted every meter of ground near where the guns could possibly be. Yet the Germans kept firing and killing Russians by the score. The mystery was only solved after the Germans surrendered. The wily battery commander had hammered his guns into the frozen Vistula River. Thus, he appeared to be defying natural law. The facts did not change; the enemy's brain had been tricked.

**The Germans v. the British.** Nordpol was the code name of a German deception operation practiced against England early in World War II. British-trained agents were dropped into Holland from secret night flights. Each agent had a radio with which to contact London to vouch for his safe arrival and subsequent actions. Despite the fact that when reports began to come in they did not include confirmation codes, the British never suspected that the operation was compromised. Only when one of the imprisoned British agents escaped was the truth revealed.

Desire to believe something is true can cause the denial of confirmatory observations. In this case it was often believed that the agents were too tired or too mentally drained to identify themselves properly. The allies ascribed reasons to each and every inaccurate message. The Germans gave just enough true information to offset any total reassessment by the English agents. Thus, a subtle form of disappearance was used. The absence of confirmatory codes was explained away by simply allowing the British to fill in the reason themselves. After all, were not valid, if relatively insignificant, messages coming from the agents on the ground?

German counterintelligence personnel knew that a deception must fool the prevailing adversarial inter-

pretive mind. They understood that when bureaucracies vouch for something, they are virtually impervious to change thereafter. When the first captured British-trained agent's confirmation was believed by his English handlers, the Germans concluded the others would be also. The Germans knew that the most difficult path for any analyst was to try to counter received opinion, particularly in the intelligence field. If the high command said all was well, who were the analysts to argue?

**The Arabs v. the United States.** The Arab world regularly denounces the U.S. media's stereotypical portrayal of its inhabitants as Middle Eastern terrorists. Osama bin-Laden exploited this situation when, instead of attacking embassies in the Middle East, his followers blew up two U.S. embassies in Africa, where the attack was a total surprise. The sudden appearance of Arab terrorists in benign backwater countries far from disputed areas was something the United States had never suspected or planned for.

**The Russians v. the Chechens.** During the recent Chechen rebellion against Russia, the Russians trapped Chechen rebels in Grozny. The rebels offered the Russians hundreds of thousands of dollars to allow Chechen fighters to escape safely through a minefield that surrounded the beleaguered city. The Chechens knew Russian corruption well. In fact, they had bought many weapons and much ammunition from the Russians for money and hashish. Why not pay to survive to be able to fight another day?

The money was passed, the path through the minefield was cleared, and the day of escape approached. At dawn, the Chechens entered the minefield. To their shock, the Russians, using registered artillery fire, began firing on the Chechens, forcing them to run in panic into areas where the mines had not been cleared. A Russian general commented later that what surprised him was that the Chechens believed the Russians at all.

Chechen perception of what was true about individual mercenary practices was not true about the Russians' relentless will as a group. Russian individual corruption could not be extrapolated to the entire army. We can learn from this that we can

be deceived by our own preconceptions when falsely applied to known facts.

### What the Mind Believes

Many people still debate whether British and American double agents Kim Philby and Alger Hiss were actually guilty of spying for the enemy. They were of a certain social class, therefore many people consider the possibility that they could have been traitors inconceivable. If all members of a leading social class are loyal, how can they betray their country? The trick was observable, but the mind did not want to *believe*. Even when Hiss appeared in the Venona decrypts, his supporters refused to believe he was guilty. If Philby and Hiss were guilty, a veritable "natural law" was compromised.

During World War II in North Africa before the attack at El Alamein, the British were confronted with the problem of how to hide thousands of barrels of gasoline. The solution was to line the barrels up side by side, snug against the edge of abandoned trenches that had been dug months earlier. The German analyst, having viewed the same trenches in dozens of aerial photos, would not notice that the trench shadow was just a little wider than before. What *appeared* to be truck parks with lazy campfires nearby confirmed for the analyst the absence of danger. Yet, when the British attacked, it was with well-fueled tanks that had been hidden under fiberboard truck covers. The attack turned the tide in the Sahara in favor of the British. Transposition of objects helped defeat German aerial observers because although they observed the field of battle, they never really saw it.

During World War I, when the Arabs revolted against the Turks, British military liaison T.E. Lawrence and Arabian tribesmen appeared to be mired in a torpid, sleepy Wadi, unable to take a major town or, indeed, to even formulate a plan. Suddenly Lawrence and his compatriots struck as if from nowhere to take the town of Aqaba. The Turks were shocked because they believed that the wide, sandy wastes could not be crossed.

In World War II, U.S. General Douglas MacArthur believed the Chinese army incapable of advance without detection by the United States' superior aerial intelligence systems.

Chinese General Mao Zedong's army advanced by night, using the threat of death to keep the men under cover by day. They took U.S. troops by surprise by secretly crossing the Yalu.

Appeared (seemed), believed, enticed; these are abstract words; words of the mind, not of technology. U.S. analysts must be aware of preconceptions. They must ask themselves what they believe to be true. This is perhaps the hardest question they can ask themselves. Whoever answers this question will best be able to use, or defeat, deception. This casts into high relief what Sun Tzu meant when he said, "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you

need not fear a hundred battles."<sup>2</sup>

### Exploiting Beliefs

If we know ourselves, we have identified the first target of an adversary's deception. We can then ask how the enemy might try to deceive us. What is he doing to exploit our beliefs? What is he doing to make us believe something? How is he making himself appear? What will he try to entice us into doing? Using these concepts to manipulate us can be powerful force multipliers to a determined enemy.

If we apply counterdeception, which corresponds to an awareness of the principles of suggestion as used in magic, we can begin to inter-

pret an adversary's schemes. The power of suggestion, or magic, has been used for thousands of years. The old adage, "we are not deceived; we deceive ourselves," is only true if we allow it to be. **MR**

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#### NOTES

1. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, chapter 1, verses 18-20.
2. *Ibid.*, chapter 3, verse 18.

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