
Applying the Principles of War to Information

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Editorial Abstract: The author examines how the accepted Principles of War apply to the use of information content in an open media environment, and the need to address public perceptions as a necessary aspect of engaging and defeating an enemy force.

The nine Principles of War as defined by Joint Doctrine are: Unity of Command, Objective, Offensive, Simplicity, Security, Surprise, Mass, Maneuver, and Economy of Effort

The United States is engaged in a war against terrorism, a war that will probably involve two generations of Americans before victory can be achieved. To ensure victory, Americans will have to be committed to applying the full range of U.S. government capabilities – economic, military, diplomatic and informational. During this war we will need to counter terrorist attacks against our citizens and interests. An equally important need is to communicate our ideas and ideals to those peoples that stand at the crux of supporting either the objectives of the U.S. or those of our enemies.

There is focus within U.S. military circles on how best to apply the military discipline of Information Operations (IO) – broadly defined as affecting and protecting information transmission means – to the problem of terrorism. However, of the IO elements (Electronic Warfare, Computer Network Operations, Operational Security, Military Deception, and Psychological Operations, or PSYOP), only PSYOP and, to a lesser degree, Military Deception, directly address the perceptions of broad and/or specific audiences. The others are targeted at militarily significant targets or forces to achieve operational or tactical advantage in the physical or electronic domains. Said another way, most of IO is conducted against *mediums* of information, rather than the *content* of information itself. But it is in the information’s content where perceptions are formed – and then acted on – by the listener. This paper will examine how the enduring yet evolving Principles of War apply to the use of information *content* in an open media environment, and the need to address public perceptions as a necessary aspect of engaging and defeating an enemy force.

To frame our discussion, we will use a recently developed construct that separates our world into three different domains that we can affect – E-Space (the electro-magnetic spectrum, including the virtual cyber world, within which data flows), Physical Space (where the manifestations of information infrastructure reside, and that can be affected using kinetic effects), and Perception Space (the space of minds and societies, in which content and context matter). This paper focuses solely

on the Perception Space – the human and societal aspect. The Principles of War, however, were developed with regard primarily to Physical Space, where opposing forces position, maneuver, and attack each other for dominance of territory, strategic geographic points (like straits or passes) and each other’s forces. Applying the Principles to the use of information content for Perception Space does not always apply directly but, when they can be applied, there are benefits.

When applying the Principles to Perception Space, there are two aspects to consider – the audiences within the information environment, and the effects we are trying to achieve in this dynamic realm. When comparing Perception Space with Physical and E-Space, there are a multitude of differences in

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the very nature of these realms. We apply our understanding of the laws of physics to Physical and E-Space, using effects that work within the bounds of these laws in

fairly predictable ways. Perception Space is governed by no such laws, making application of effects much more difficult to predict with assurance, to apply reliably and to assess afterwards. The wide array of overlapping audiences that we try to communicate with is organic, dynamic and capricious, and we must deal with competing influences and perceptions of legitimacy and credibility.

Applying the Principle of Objective – striving towards a clearly defined, decisive, and attainable objective – to Perception Space is difficult by definition, due to the fluid and ambiguous nature of this environment. We can clearly define decisive objectives, but their “attainability” – unlike a “take the hill” objective – can be more problematic to achieve and assess. As the September 2004 Defense Science Board (DSB) report on U.S. Strategic Communication succinctly stated, “...In the global information environment in which we live and work there are numerous audiences that can be affected differently by the same message.”¹

In Physical Space, the Principle of Maneuver accepts the fact that two objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time, and that Mass presence of a force or absence of a force are determinants in battle. In Perception Space, ideas can and do

occupy the same space at the same time, and vie for credibility and dominance. Information is a sharable commodity – it can be many places at once – and shares “space” in the mind with other incongruous information. Yet it can have differing effects depending on the context, receptiveness, emotions, presentation, prejudices and preconceived notions of those receiving it. Militarily, we can dominate a local environment’s Physical or E Space, but it is virtually impossible to do so in the Perception Space, especially through the use of force, which paradoxically can cause the opposite effect with a target audience.

Massing “information” is a difficult concept. Audiences can be inundated with information, through PSYOP leaflets and broadcasts to denied audiences, or repeated messages through media avenues, yet if they are not receptive to the information or find it not credible, it may have little or even counterproductive effects. You cannot “mass” information against a target unless it accepts your messages. I would posit a new Principle for application to Perception Space – Ubiquity. While seemingly contradicting Mass and Economy of Force, the nature of Perception Space enables this concept. It would be a quasi-combination of the existing Principles of Mass and Maneuver. The purpose of Mass is to “concentrate the effects of combat power at the most advantageous place and time to achieve decisive results,” whereas the purpose of Maneuver is to “place the enemy in a position of disadvantage through the flexible application of combat power.” Ubiquity would be “the concentration of effects at the most advantageous time and information mediums to place the adversary in a position of disadvantage through the flexible application of information power.” Drawing more from joint doctrine on Mass and Maneuver, Ubiquity would coordinate and synchronize informational efforts to optimize their effects. Further, it would put us at a “positional” advantage – through proper, credible information avenues, keeping the adversary “off balance, ...preserving freedom of action and reducing vulnerability” in the information realm.² Ubiquity considers the non-physical aspects of Perception Space, where time, forethought and virtual positioning are more important than physical presence vis-à-vis an adversary’s position(s).

The messages and actions of the U.S. government must compete within Perception Space. We cannot always deliver the desired effects to the end user through the vast array of media that is available. Rather than the oft-stated problem of media saturation though – the ever-proliferating avenues of information – is the issue of selective choice of media avenues that suits an audience’s tastes and desires. For example, *Al Jazeera* and its Arab news competitors are often primary and singular sources of news and opinion to many Arabs and Muslims *because* they present news from a distinctly Arab perspective. Within Perception Space, sometimes the enemy, the ally, and the friend are nebulous and ill-defined. We can have defined wartime adversaries, but *adversarial* information can come even from ostensible allies and friends.

In Physical and E-Space, the military objective is usually to destroy, disable, dominate, or deny objects and objectives

– all generally negative effects on the adversary. In Perception Space, the objective is to influence the collective mind of the target audience to behave as we wish to acquiesce to our objective – which can have either positive or negative effects regarding the audience’s present state. Unlike effects in the other domains, information can have broad, lasting and influential effects on those that receive it, but it may also have little to no effect, or effects other than or opposite to those intended. Information can have latent resiliency, with recurrent effects long after initial release. It can also be malleable and manipulable, conformed to what audiences perceive, given many other factors – unlike effects governed by the laws of physics. It is indivisible in a sense, but can also be “invisible,” filtered by mediums to alter, diminish or enhance its desired effect. Even measuring the “power” of an idea can be difficult; repetition through different communications means and over time certainly has its role in reinforcing an idea, but a countervailing idea that upends the logic of an oft-repeated message may be “asymmetrically” overpowering.

If something “did not happen” in Physical or E Space, there would obviously be no effect within those realms. However, in Perception Space, an event that factually “did not happen” can still create tremendous effects, because in Perception Space, facts are not as important as perceptions. Preconceived notions, paradigms, prejudices, cultures and conspiracy theories weigh heavy on the interpretation of a *reported* event or series of events that can have lasting legacy – without ever having occurred. As Thomas Friedman recently codified as a rule, “In the Middle East, if you can’t explain something with a conspiracy theory, then don’t try to explain it at all – people there won’t believe it.”³ The aforementioned DSB Strategic Communication report talks of “Global Transparency, driven by new media and low cost technologies, [that] shape the strategic landscape.”⁴ What is unsaid here is that this “new media” is able to effectively communicate whatever message it desires – whether that message is truthful or possibly intentionally inaccurate, inciteful, or deceitful. Like entropy, fabrication of false stories is much easier to create than verified and validated reporting, which takes time, fact checking and balance. Disinformation can be a strong “weapon” within Perception Space.

The Principle of Security – to never permit the enemy to acquire unexpected strategic advantage – is the inverse of that of Surprise – the ability to strike at a time or place or in a manner for which the enemy is unprepared. When considering the media environment, the very nature of news is that it is surprising (or “breaking”). Still, much news is expected, based on predicted or predictable events, while other news is truly attention grabbing and shocking (which speaks to the very nature of terrorism). For the U.S., informational surprises are usually negative, whereas for our adversaries they are necessary and essential to their strategy. The Principle of Surprise is very difficult for the U.S. to apply in Perception Space, given our non-agility, open society and other factors. Given that, we should make ourselves good at countering Surprise through the application of Security, preventing and pre-empting unexpected strategic advantage.

Consider the September 11th attacks; Americans understand the emotional and psychological impact it had on us. But worldwide, different audiences reacted different ways. In Europe, immediate sentiment could be summed up by *Le Monde's* headline, "We Are All Americans," whereas many Americans were stunned to see Palestinians rejoicing and passing out candy in reaction to the attacks. In much of the Middle East, it immediately became seen as a CIA or Mossad plot to justify American retaliation against Muslim targets – yet remember that the initial and reflexive reactions by many Americans to the Oklahoma City bombings was to blame Arab terrorists.

The U.S. has a problem of leadership and cohesion when it comes to Strategic Communication – the ability to use all of our government's informational and perceptual assets to achieve an outcome. When it comes to kinetic and non-kinetic attacks against defined "centers of gravity," the U.S. does a better job of organizing and applying these effects than any other military. But without broader coordination and synchronization of communication efforts, we cannot succeed when pitted against the cacophony of competing voices credible to their audiences. It can be well argued that the center of gravity in this war exists in Perception Space.

With the abolition of the U.S. Information Agency after the Cold War, when we assumed that the soft power of American culture and the presumed universality of democratic yearnings would achieve the "end of history," the voice of the U.S. government shrunk from engaging foreign audiences in many aspects. The most telling comment from a recent report on the state of U.S. Public Diplomacy regarding our presence in Perception Space was, "If you do not define yourself, . . . the extremists will define you."⁵ Into this void came many competing voices and few necessarily friendly to U.S. interests. *Al Jazeera* Satellite Television, started in 1996 and now watched regularly by an estimated 35 million-plus viewers, was one of those voices, surging into the void as we retracted. In a zero-sum game, even minimal presence on the most watched media outlets for our target audiences takes away time from informational adversaries – "...*Al Jazeera* is often a vitriol machine. But you have to engage it, or Arab publics hear nothing but the vitriol."⁶ This is not only about media though – proper sequencing, timing and coordination through other avenues of Strategic Communication from all aspects of the U.S. government are required. If we shrink from having informational presence overseas, "[w]e give up intellectual and psychological space to those who most threaten our values."⁷

The DSB report concluded that, "The U.S. Government needs a Strategic Communication capability that is planned, directed, coordinated, funded and conducted in ways that support the nation's interests."⁸ This comprehensive report

provides many concrete recommendations on a way ahead for engaging in Perception Space (my assertion), and many of the Principles of War apply to this long-overdue attempt to organize – Unity of Command, Simplicity and Objective; Economy of Force and the proposed Ubiquity; and finally, Security. We certainly have the need for unity of effort, using clear plans with clearly defined and decisive objectives. Further, we need to optimize the use of our assets (a twist on Economy of Force), and decisively use information mediums and advantageous timing to place us in a position of informational advantage. Lastly, if properly organized and executed, we can minimize the ability of our adversaries to gain an unexpected advantage through Surprise, using inoculation (releasing adversarial information ourselves to inure audiences to surprise effects), anticipation, pre-emption and if needed, reaction.

The military has a defined process for targeting, codified in the Target Cycle. The Target Cycle standardizes the consideration of the effects we want to achieve on a given target, but these effects are largely intended for Physical and E-Space. We need to incorporate into strike planning the elements of an "influence strike."¹⁰ – doctrinalizing considerations for Perception Space effects into our targeting processes is essential to achieving broader strategic goals beyond intended tactical and operational goals. This action speaks to applying the Principles of Security, Offensive, Objective and the proposed Ubiquity.

How do we informationally benefit and/or limit damage from tactical actions we take? How do the goals of a particular tactical action support our overall strategic goals? An explanation of "strategy to task" rationale would be beneficial in framing our actions in context. We can apply Security to achieve

Ubiquity's ends:

- Include pre-clearance for declassification of pre-strike intelligence supporting the target rationale, using cockpit video and other imagery (from unmanned aerial vehicles or other surveillance imagery), attack details, and other relevant, explanatory information – all within the existing authorities of the commander.

- Place within the Commander's Guidance and Objectives regarding targeting the strategic objectives of shaping the perceptions of not only our adversaries but other influential communicators within the information environment.

- When examining the objective and the strategic and operational influence effects we are trying to achieve, apply "influence" gain/loss (or advantage/disadvantage) considerations, as we do with intelligence gain/loss.

- Historically we have concentrated our efforts on the planning and operational phase and on effects regarding the target only. In our current approach, we "own" everything up through the strike, and the adversary (and adversarial

media) “owns” everything past the strike. As part of doctrine, not only consider effects we desire for a target, but also the resultant reaction of targeted audiences – how will the effects be perceived, and how can negative perceptions be mitigated? Analyze and consider potential responses to our actions, from straight reporting to disinformational efforts.

- How will local, regional and global media react to effects of the attack? Identify and game likely scenarios and possible preemptive as well as responsive actions that might be appropriate, as well as possible collateral damage considerations. Applying Security, be prepared to identify and counter inconsistencies or discrepancies in any adversarial disinformation that is used against us.

- As part of the communication plan, applying Unity of Command, involve military Public Affairs in each step of the process, resulting in Public Affairs Guidance in line with the overarching approach and nested in the Strategic Communications guidance given U.S. Embassies and Missions. Identify what avenues of information will be best used through applying Ubiquity. Active rather than passive guidance is needed – take the Offensive.

In Perception Space, “often the first information to reach an audience... frames how an event is perceived and discussed – and thus can shape its ultimate impact as well.”¹¹ Applying the Principle of Offensive – to seize, retain, and exploit the initiative – is essential to how the U.S. conducts its Strategic Communication. On May 19, 2004, for example, the U.S. could have taken the informational offensive regarding an overnight strike inside Iraq and given a media brief outlining the following facts, all of which dribbled out through press conference questions posed to Brigadier General Kimmit over the next week:

“This morning, at around 0330 local time, U.S. air and ground forces struck a suspected terrorist way station that had been closely monitored near the Iraqi-Syrian border, near the Iraqi town of Al Qaim. Post-strike walk through of the site confirmed pre-strike intelligence, finding numerous weapons including sniper rifles and machine guns as well as reticule pattern binoculars designed to support mortar fire, battery packs already connected for use to energize improvised explosive devices; satellite communications equipment; approximately 300 sets of pre-packaged bedding and 100 sets of pre-packaged clothing; freezers filled with frozen food; extensive medical facilities, including an operating table and many medical supplies; and foreign passports and visa-forging equipment. During the strike, we killed just over 30 men, all of military fighting age, and six women. None of those killed had identification on their persons – no ID cards, no wallets, no pictures – however, we did find significant “pocket litter,” including pieces of paper with foreign telephone numbers, including numbers from Afghanistan and Sudan, and the men had watches – these were not

Bedouin. There were multiple 4x4 vehicles outside. Are there any questions?”¹²

A brief containing this type of detailed information would have established an information baseline, and, amplified by pictures taken both on the ground and from striking aircraft and unmanned aerial vehicles, quashed any attempt to portray this attack as a misguided and ill-planned attack on a wedding party – which local and Pan-Arab media subsequently did. *Associated Press Television Network (APTN)* released video of unknown origin which suggested a wedding party was taking place throughout that night, starting on 18 May (a Tuesday– not the Muslim weekend). Subsequent news stories told of 10, 12, 14 and even 15 children being “slaughtered” in this raid, with a gripping photo of a man’s hands holding pictures of several children supposedly killed in the attack. Several times in press briefings, General Kimmit reiterated that no children were killed in the raid and there was ample evidence that no “wedding party” had taken place. Yet this is the popular legacy of this raid, and it was woven into the “anti-Muslim crusade” of the U.S. The inaccurate and negative version of this story – that the U.S. attacked and killed over 40 people celebrating a wedding, including over a dozen children – is what was widely reported around the world, from Jordan to China, from *Al Jazeera’s* website to the English-language *IslamOnline*, but even in friendly countries such as New Zealand to the United Kingdom, and the story resonates still if the U.S. makes mistakes in its attacks.¹³

While the use of Strategic Communication through messaging and actions does not overcome the unpopularity of policies or other actions taken, the effective timing, sequencing, synchronization and coordination of these actions, with consideration of the time-tested Principles of War, can certainly improve the way the United States government communicates. The ability to organize properly, to incorporate “influence planning” into standard operating procedures and doctrine, and to apply forethought and analysis to our intended actions and potential consequences to pre-empt possible disinformation and propaganda are crucial to the fight the U.S. has ahead.

Endnotes

¹ Report of the Defense Science Board (DSB) Task Force on Strategic Communication, September 2004, p 37.

² Joint Publication 3-0, “Doctrine for Joint Operations,” 10 September 2001, Appendix A, pp A-1 and A-2.

³ Friedman, Thomas L., “Ballots and Boycotts,” *The New York Times*, 13 January 2005.

⁴ DSB, p 14.

⁵ “Changing Minds, Winning Peace; A New Strategic Direction For U.S. Public Diplomacy in the Arab & Muslim World,” p 17.

⁶ Fallow, James, “Success Without Victory,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, January 2005, quoting Steven Miller.

⁷ Beaumont, Peter, “Why we are losing the war,” *The Observer* (UK), December 1, 2002.

⁸ DSB, p 11.

⁹ Thanks to Colonel Steve “Huffer” Huffman, USAF, for his thoughts on this term.

¹⁰ Thanks to Colonel Steve “Huffer” Huffman, USAF, for his thoughts on this term.

¹¹ DSB, p 38.

¹² From Coalition Provisional Authority daily briefings, http://www.iraqcoalition.org/transcripts/20040520_May20Kimmitt_Senor.html, http://www.iraqcoalition.org/transcripts/20040521_May21Kimmitt_Senor.html, http://www.iraqcoalition.org/transcripts/20040524_May22Kimmitt_Senor.html, http://www.iraqcoalition.org/transcripts/20040524_May24Kimmitt_Senor.html.

¹³ “The Difference Between Terrorists and Wedding Guests,” Jefferson Morley, *The Washington Post*, June 1, 2004, www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A6394-2004Jun1. 
