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Psychological Operations and an Iatrogenic Threat in Iraq

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Abstract. This article describes a psychological phenomenon that might lead to the backfiring of an attempt at employing psychological operations.

In the military context, psychological operations (PSYOP) denotes the attempt to influence intrapsychic phenomena within a human target for the benefit of the implementer. This influence leads, in turn, to target behavior that generates consequences desired by the implementer. In the context of a United States (US)-led military intervention against the Iraqi regime, PSYOP already is being employed and consists, for example, of dropping leaflets with content intending to influence Iraqi military personnel not to fight, to give up, to give up to avoid death or legal prosecution for war crimes, how to give up, and not to employ weapons of mass destruction.

PSYOP has many attractive features from the perspective of a war planner--especially that of helping to achieve objectives that otherwise might be completely contingent on one's personnel casualties, the expenditure of one's finite military materiel, and the identification of sensitive intelligence that might not be unavailable or might be misinterpreted or mistransmitted. Other attractive features might include the putative benefits of not having to cause more casualties among one's adversary, more destruction among the adversary's productive infrastructure, and more damage to one's professed public image as a lover of human rights, liberty, and peace.

However, contemporary research by Tormala & Petty (2002) suggests that successful psychological resistance by the target of PSYOP influence may lead to target intrapsychic phenomena that are even more resistant to PSYOP influence. In essence, the target becomes even more certain about that which the PSYOP implementer finds undesirable. This undesirable consequence seems to occur when the PSYOP attempt is perceived by the target to be strong and to have been successfully resisted.

There are at least three implications of this research for the PSYOP implementer. First, a PSYOP attempt may not only not work, but may make matters worse, if unsuccessful. Second, to guard against making matters worse, the PSYOP implementer must attempt to either keep the target from being aware of implemented PSYOP or of perceiving the implementation to be strong. Third, the PSYOP implementer also must attempt to keep the target from being aware of that target's own psychological resistance.

Such caveats are important in that PSYOP may be employed against others for purposes other than just not fighting or giving up and may constitute not just verbal or pictorial representations but activities that can be primed for a target to generate meaning desired by the implementer. For example, Norwood et al. (2001) have described how the very threat of employment of weapons of mass destruction as well as its actual use can generate a myriad of psychological consequences--including fear--desired by the implementer. Moerk (2002) has described how PSYOP can be employed to generate general support for a military intervention among not only one's adversary but among other observers including those who experience military intervention and its political context only through the mass media--the latter observers being crucial in contemporary warfare that often occurs as if within a global fishbowl. Albanese (2001) has described how PSYOP can contribute to support for the employment of and

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activation of behaviors that are unethical, immoral, and illegal, such as rape as a military tool. And Rucker (2001) has described how PSYOP can be employed to deflect blame away from one's own misdeeds during a military intervention and towards that of one's adversary.

Already, the seemingly incipient US-led military intervention against the Iraqi regime is providing empirical data that will further elucidate the functional do's and don'ts of PSYOP. Given that the history of psychological research related to PSYOP can be characterized as much more frequently studying how PSYOP works than on the resistance of PSYOP targets (cf. Tormala & Petty, 2002), field data may now be collected and analyzed to rectify this situation. That this opportunity is linked to war does not leave us sanguine about the human condition--even if that war might be justified. (See Albanese, P. (2001). Nationalism, war, and archaization of gender relations in the Balkans. *Violence Against Women*, 7, 999-1023; Moerk, E.L. (2002). Scripting war-entry to make it appear unavoidable. *Peace & Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 8, 229-248; Norwood, A. E., Holloway, H. C., & Ursano, R. J. (2001). Psychological effects of biological warfare. *Military Medicine*, 166, (12, Suppl 2), 27-28; Rucker, D.D., & Pratkanis, A.R. (2001). Projection as an interpersonal influence tactic: The effects of the pot calling the kettle black. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, 27, 1494-1507; Shanker, T., & Schmitt, E. (February 24, 2003). Firing leaflets and electrons, U.S. wages information war. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Tormala, Z., & Petty, R.E. (2002). What doesn't kill me makes me stronger: The effects of resisting persuasion on attitude certainty. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83, 1298-1313.) (Keywords: Information Warfare, PSYOP.)