



Air Force aircrew assigned to 492nd Fighter Squadron at Royal Air Force Lakenheath, England, perform preflight checks before forward deploying to Łask Air Base, Poland, to support North Atlantic Treaty Organization air shielding efforts, August 5, 2022 (U.S. Air Force/Seleena Muhammad-Ali)

The Narrative Policy Framework in Military Planning

By Brent A. Lawniczak

It has been stated that in the modern operating environment, whose *narrative* wins is more important than whose *army* wins.¹ Additionally, it is posited that now, more than in the past, and especially since the end of the Cold War, “political struggles occur over the creation and destruction of

credibility.”² If these claims are true, how do planners understand, analyze, and derive successful narratives and incorporate them into military plans?

Military planners have learned and adopted concepts from the social sciences. One obvious example of this learning is operational design. Operational design has been informed by the concept of “wicked problems”—ill-structured problems requiring the derivation of simultaneous definition and solutions—that originated in the

social sciences.³ Because military operations must always be tied to a policy goal, it is likely that military planning may also be informed by existing theories of policymaking. One of these theories of the policymaking process is the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), which provides a method that can be incorporated into the doctrinal planning process, as part of operational design, to enable better leveraging of information as a joint function through the understanding of narratives.

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Honduran army Lieutenant Kevin Calix, 120th Infantry Brigade, prepares his team to conduct site assessment at Ostuman, in Copán, Honduras, during cultural heritage protection exchange with U.S. military experts, March 10, 2022 (U.S. Army/Maria Pinel)

The Role of DOD in Understanding and Forming Narratives

The joint force, in conjunction with the interagency, allies, and partners, will develop and communicate a consistent, credible, and compelling narrative to relevant actors.⁴

—From *Joint Concept for Operations in the Information Environment*

Although the Department of Defense (DOD) as a part of the U.S. Government is not responsible for strategic communications, it has been asked to play a significant role in the formation of narratives and themes. The Department of State is the government lead for strategic communications, yet it has been proposed that “the joint force must work with partners to develop and strengthen beneficial narratives and provide alternatives to counter detrimental ones.”⁵ Joint doctrine notes, “Commanders should

shape narratives as they plan and conduct other aspects of operations.”⁶

Additionally, the joint force must be able to “analyze and understand the landscape of relevant narratives” and use relevant actor narratives to inform operational design—but has been provided little guidance or processes on how to do so.⁷ As part of the commander’s communication synchronization, DOD coordinates and synchronizes “narratives, themes, messages, images, operations, and actions to ensure their integrity and consistency down to the lowest tactical level across all relevant communication activities.”⁸ Additionally, “the communication strategy for an operation contains at least the narrative, themes, messages, visual products, supporting activities, and key audiences.”⁹ Thus, it is imperative that commanders, staffs, and planners, though not expected to be experts in crafting narratives, should have the requisite knowledge to analyze

and understand relevant actor narratives as part of operations in the information environment (OIE).

The Significance of the Narrative in Military Operations

We have seen value in [combatant command] and operational-level [headquarters] developing compelling narratives, themes, and messages fully nested with the strategic narrative to advance the legitimacy of the mission while countering that of the adversary. A compelling narrative guides planning, targeting, and execution, and can help prevent the “say-do” gap in which our actions and words conflict in the eyes of the audience.¹⁰

—From Deployable Training Division, Joint Staff J7, *Communication Strategy and Synchronization*

Joint doctrine recognizes narratives as a critical aspect of all military operations.

It has also been recognized that the United States as a whole, and the military specifically, has fallen short in leveraging the narrative to achieve success in military operations.¹¹ According to the *Joint Concept for Operations in the Information Environment (JCOIE)*, “The joint force has lacked emphasis, policy, resources, training, and education to address the full power of information,” including a “limited ability to recognize and understand narratives, [and is] often ineffective in applying and aligning the narrative to goals and desired end states.”¹²

Much has been posited about winning the narrative in competition and armed conflict. At the strategic and operational levels, “the commander may choose to amplify or mute narrative elements to support his intent to influence individuals and groups for a purpose supporting joint force objectives.”¹³ However, without a method through which to study a narrative, the joint force is often shooting in the dark. Deriving and promulgating compelling narratives, and making them plausible, is assumed to be a key facet of U.S. military operations. Yet the planning process does not include a method for analyzing narratives that allows for the seamless integration of information into military plans.

Even after it was established as the seventh joint function, the description of information in joint doctrine is largely a rehash of major portions of the joint information operations publication.¹⁴ What makes information as a joint function different from information operations as traditionally understood? Just as subject matter experts have training and methodologies for incorporating information into operations, staff, planners, and commanders must also have tools to understand and better incorporate information—the narrative—into operations. Without a process that adds rigor to analysis, the effective use of information will continue to elude U.S. military planners and policymakers in their attempts to influence target audiences by means of the narrative. Borrowing from the social sciences, the NPF offers a method of studying narratives—and may offer important processes that can become part of the larger military planning process.

The NPF in Planning

*Every [headquarters] is engaged in an ongoing “Battle of the Narrative.”*¹⁵

—From Deployable Training Division, Joint Staff J7, *Communication Strategy and Synchronization*

The NPF offers a potentially useful path for the examination and formulation of powerful narratives that will enhance the use of information in all military operations, from security cooperation to humanitarian assistance, and from counterinsurgency to major combat operations. The NPF does not rely on manipulation or psychological operations to mislead audiences, though it may be used to do so. The study of narratives has been used in marketing, psychology, and health care. Because the United States must match words with deeds to avoid being viewed as hypocritical, the quest for a powerful and effective narrative is often elusive.¹⁶ This may be more difficult for the United States as the sole superpower because any use of its power may at times be construed as hypocritical by a target audience.¹⁷ Often, adversaries will attempt to intentionally misconstrue and spin narratives to their advantage.

The NPF allows planners and analysts to break down existing narratives to gain a better understanding of the operating environment and potentially to reverse engineer new narratives that will better align words with deeds. More important, understanding the facets of the narrative will lead to more successful use of information in military operations.

Narratives are more than stories and have been defined in the following ways:¹⁸

- as “a basis for unified communication and understanding that creates meaning through a system of story formats, which draws upon local history, culture, and religion to frame and affect the perceptions of specific actions”
- as “an explanation of events in line with an ideology, theory, or belief, and one that points the way to future actions [to] make sense of the world, put things in their place

according to our experience, and then tell us what to do”

- as “powerful stories that make sense of the past and project to the future.”

Joint doctrine simply defines the narrative as “a short story used to underpin operations and to provide greater understanding and context to an operation or situation.”¹⁹ Yet even with a common understanding of what a narrative is, leveraging narratives during military operations across the competition continuum will be difficult, if not impossible, without a clear methodology to study, understand, and develop narratives. The proposed method can be used from the national strategic to the tactical level during planning.

A narrative *is* a story. Each story has a “temporal sequence of events, unfolding in a plot populated by dramatic moments, symbols, and archetypal characters that culminates in a moral to the story.”²⁰ It is more than a message or theme, which is where many military planners land when thinking about operations in the information environment.²¹

Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Planning*, suggests several questions planners may need to answer regarding information during PMESII (political, military, economic, social, information, and infrastructure) analysis of the operational environment (OE). How information moves in the OE, how it is received and processed, by whom, and for what purposes are central questions. Additionally, identifying relevant actors, their roles, their decisionmaking processes, and the information systems they use is important to understanding the OE.²² The closest doctrine gets to asking this sort of question about narratives is including as part of OE analysis considerations of how relevant actors perceive and assign meaning to joint force activities and the behaviors that may result from those perceptions.²³ These are all valuable questions; however, more detail is necessary regarding existing narratives and the narratives that both an adversary and the joint force may want to promulgate. How the narrative is promulgated is important, but it is necessary to address the

specific components and content of the narrative to leverage information successfully during operations.

It is essential planners understand that for a narrative to function, it must have certain qualities or parts. It has been suggested that there are four necessary parts of a narrative. First, it must have a setting or context. Second, closely linked with the setting, is a plot with a temporal element—the story has a beginning, middle, and end—and the plot provides the relationships between the setting and characters. Third, the story consists of heroes who are fixers of the problem, villains who are causers of the problem, and victims who are harmed by the problem. Fourth, there is a solution to the problem that is offered within the narrative.²⁴

Elizabeth Shanahan, Michael Jones, and Mark McBeth posit that “the portrayal of policy narrative characters (heroes, victims, and villains) has higher levels of influence on opinion and preferences of citizens, elected officials, and elites than scientific or technical information.”²⁵ Thus, when seeking to leverage the narrative in military operations, planners should carefully examine which character types will resound best with the target audience. A good example to consider is Osama bin Laden, who was a villain to many but a hero to some. Understanding the tension between various perceptions when planning is essential to the development of successful narratives, but such understanding will come only through an intensive study

of all relevant characters and target audiences. This will not be an easy undertaking, but it is essential.

Additionally, understanding how actors perceive their own standing is important. Whether groups or actors see themselves as winning or losing on a policy issue will often determine the intent of their narrative. If a group perceives itself as losing, it will craft narratives with the intent to expand its influence, in terms of either public opinion or, possibly, active support. If a group perceives itself as winning, it will likely create a narrative with the intent to contain involvement by a larger segment of the public.²⁶

Closely associated with the character aspect of the narrative is the concept of the “devil shift.” Here, opposing actors



attempt to disparage their adversaries by exaggerating the “malicious motives, behaviors, and influence of opponents.”²⁷ Potential U.S. adversaries may have an advantage in using this devil shift against the United States because of the country’s unique position as the sole post–Cold War global superpower.

U.S. adversaries may be successful in their attempts to employ the devil shift against the United States—especially if or when U.S. policy actions do not align with its policy statements. It is easy for lesser powers, both state and nonstate actors, to portray themselves as the hapless victims of a hypocritical hegemon. For its part, the United States will need to be careful in attempting to craft narratives that use the devil shift against its adversaries. The

use of the devil shift, it has been observed, can often lead to intractability. This intractability, particularly in stability and counterinsurgency operations, is precisely what the United States military wants to avoid; it is often central to the problem planners are trying to solve.

Furthermore, granting the opposition the status of “devil” runs the risk that the adversary is portrayed as more powerful than it in fact is. It has been suggested, for example, that the use of information in the form of a narrative to portray China as a malign actor in the South China Sea and in other disputed areas is the best way to counter Chinese coercion.²⁸ But care should be taken not to attribute to even such a powerful potential adversary greater influence than

the United States would like it to have. Doing so might create a self-fulfilling prophecy—crediting China with power and an obligation to react to allied attempts to thwart the very malign actions the United States wants to stop.²⁹ This does not mean that the United States and its allies should completely avoid calling out China’s actions on the world stage. It does point to the fact that, rather than merely recognizing the significance of information and winning narratives, planners and decisionmakers must gain a greater understanding of the means to produce an *effective* narrative. Simply recognizing that the narrative is important is far from adequate. More important, even though it may be easier to form narratives using



F/A-18F Super Hornet, from “Mighty Shrikes” of Strike Fighter Squadron 94, launches off flight deck of aircraft carrier USS *Nimitz*, South China Sea, February 9, 2021 (U.S. Navy/Charles DeParlier)

the devil shift, it has been found that hero stories are more compelling to target audiences.

Another vital aspect of the narrative is the narrative strategy of “causal mechanisms,” that is, assigning responsibility or blame for a problem on certain actors. Causes of problems can be intentional, inadvertent, accidental, or mechanical.³⁰ The categorization of problems and the assignment of blame or credit are important aspects of the narrative. Understanding the causal mechanism—or how an audience perceives that mechanism—leads to better understanding of the narrative and how it may be leveraged or changed to achieve joint force objectives and, subsequently, policy goals.

NPF theorists also offer several postulates that military planners should be aware of as they examine and create narratives:

- **Bounded rationality:** Individuals make decisions with limited information in a limited time frame. Because of these limits, they simply settle for the most satisfying alternative.
- **Heuristics:** Because rationality is bounded, individuals rely on shortcuts to process information and make decisions. Heuristics are in part based on “information available at the time, past experiences, expertise and training, and biological biases.”
- **Primacy of affect:** Emotions play a key role in focusing attention and thus help to set priorities in decisionmaking. Research shows that emotion-based (affective) reasoning occurs a fraction of a second before true cognition.
- **Two kinds of cognition:** System 1 is an involuntary and unconscious cognition. System 2 cognition engages only after System 1 alerts the system via affective cues. System 2 focuses attention on cognitively more complicated tasks than can be handled by System 1. More than one System 2 activity cannot be conducted simultaneously. Therefore, System 1 is the default for much of human decision-making, and it is resistant to change.
- **Hot cognition:** Individuals confronted with an unfamiliar concept

will perform a search in their minds to assign emotion (affect) to the new concept that accords with their existing understanding of the world.

- **Confirmation (and disconfirmation) bias:** This occurs when individuals treat evidence that agrees with prior beliefs as more accurate than incongruent evidence; individuals process congruent information faster.
- **Selective exposure:** Individuals will select information and sources of information that are congruent with their existing beliefs.
- **Identity-protective cognition:** Individuals with stronger prior attitudes “employ what they know to protect” their prior beliefs using selective exposure and confirmation and disconfirmation bias.
- **Primacy of groups and networks:** Groups and networks that individuals are associated with play a role in helping them assign affect to concepts. “Individuals do not process information in a vacuum.”
- **Narrative cognition:** The narrative is the primary means by which individuals make sense of the world. Thus, the “narrative is the preferred heuristic employed by all for the purpose of making sense of the world because it provides essential linkages between System 1 and System 2 cognition.”³¹

Thus, narratives do not merely relay the facts; they tell the meaning of the facts.³² The bottom line, theorists note, is one that is obvious to most: people tell and remember stories.³³ This fact is reflected in the significance the military has placed on information as a joint function and the need to operate effectively in the information environment. The NPF provides the methodology to do so during planning.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It may be possible to identify sources of misinformation and disinformation coming from adversaries—which is immensely important but is only the beginning.³⁴ Breaking down the adversary’s narrative into its parts, just as

planners might do for an enemy system using systems analysis such as PMESII, will aid in the development of better narratives and counternarratives. It is not enough to simply acknowledge an adversary message or theme and then attempt to counter it; a deeper analysis is necessary. This is possible only through analyzing the narrative’s component parts.

Again, according to the JCOIE, “All military actions generate observable or discoverable information that produces effects on perceptions, attitudes, and other elements that ultimately drive behavior.”³⁵ Thus, narratives are as important in today’s military operations as any weapon system. Particularly in the age of the “competition continuum,” competing narratives are not merely a part of the operating environment but may be the “key terrain” that determines whether policy goals are achieved or not.

Although this short article introduces only the key facets of the NPF to a larger audience, the role the NPF can take in the planning process should not be underestimated. Adding a methodology for the specific examination of friendly and adversarial narratives, as well as the narratives of other actors, may be as important as analyzing centers of gravity, setting objectives, and conducting a systems analysis on relevant actors. In fact, it may be discovered that the narrative—at any level of warfare—may be the center of gravity or a critical factor. If that is the case, the narrative cannot necessarily be countered with greater military power—unless that military power is to properly exploit information in the form of its own narrative.

The NPF offers specific components of the narrative that planners can examine, create, implement, and assess during the planning and execution of military operations across the competition continuum. To do so, planners must move beyond simply planning the “message” or considering information operations as an afterthought. Each part of a narrative is necessary for both friendly and adversarial actors. Affecting facets of an adversary’s narrative—characters, plot, or moral—as well as creating and protecting



Village nurses from integrated health center discuss village's medical concerns with Soldiers from Army's 404th Civil Affairs Battalion, assigned to 409th Air Expeditionary Group, in Azel Ecole, Niger, May 11, 2022 (U.S. Air National Guard/Chloe Ochs)

the friendly narrative, can be accomplished only if each part of the narrative is well understood.

The NPF should be incorporated into operational design as part of the understanding of the strategic and operational environment. One group of authors has suggested that a narrative element of operational design be added to doctrine.³⁶ That addition would be a good start, as would be ensuring the incorporation of OIE planners into the design team. These OIE planners would bring to the planning team a higher level of expertise and the ability not only to analyze narratives but also to understand and incorporate informational considerations at large within the operating environment.

Additionally, the friendly narrative should be a key part of the operational approach itself and incorporated into a commander's guidance and intent in the earliest stages of the planning process.

As detailed planning continues through the steps of the planning process, the narrative—both friendly and adversarial—should remain a central focus for planners during action development, as are centers of gravity. During action analysis and wargaming, the narratives should remain central. It is essential by this point in the planning process that the narrative(s) be carefully aligned with other actions to avoid the trap of hypocrisy.

Furthermore, a red cell, supported by members of the J39 (Deputy Director Global Operations), should evaluate and leverage weaknesses in the friendly narrative through the examination of the facets offered by the NPF, such as specific characters (heroes, victims, villains), plot points, timelines, and solutions, to strengthen and refine the narrative. Simply alluding to a nebulous narrative put forth in vague terms will only give the illusion of operating effectively in the

information environment. Analysis of the setting, timeline, plot, characters, and solution in each narrative is essential to effective information operations.

Beyond the red cell, which may currently lack the subject matter experts and tools to conduct narrative analysis, psychological operations' target audience analysis (TAA) may provide insight into the multiple narratives in the information environment.³⁷ Through TAA, a greater understanding of target audiences can be a first step in how that audience may "be influenced by an appropriately conceived and deployed message campaign."³⁸ TAA allows bottom-up message development derived from reliable knowledge of specific target audiences rather than top-down approaches in which messages are developed for "mass audiences in the hope that they will resonate with some portions of that audience."³⁹ Although TAA addresses the *target* of narratives, not necessarily all

facets of all relevant actor narratives in a given information environment, it could provide a good starting point to ensure that narratives are integrated into planning from start to finish.

The average military planner lacks the training and experience to plan and implement narratives but should be cognizant of narratives and their component parts to ensure their proper integration into operational design and joint plans. Just as planning groups include a host of subject matter experts for the development of specialized portions of operational design and plans, planning groups should include staff members with specialized skill sets to provide informed recommendations in support of achieving military objectives. Members of the J5, J9, J3IO, Public Affairs, and Political Advisor, at a minimum, should be trained to expertly analyze and develop narratives.⁴⁰

While likely unable to produce this level of expertise, joint professional military education (JPME) could provide an introductory level of knowledge of and experience with narrative analysis. JPME institutions rely heavily on case study analysis, and the opportunity costs of expanding the examination of historical cases to include the facets of the narrative as outlined by the NPF are likely quite low. Leveraging existing curricula with an emphasis toward understanding the narratives that influenced or were influenced by operations will help to keep them low.

The goal is not to turn military planners into social scientists. Conflict, however, is a human endeavor, and narratives will always be a central facet of any military operation. Doctrine has borrowed from and should continue to be informed by relevant social theories. The NPF provides a path for a better understanding of the use of information in military operations. JFQ

Notes

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⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁶ Joint Publication (JP) 3-61, *Public Affairs* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, August 19, 2016), A-1, available at <https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_61.pdf>.

⁷ *JCOIE*, 31, 36.

⁸ JP 5-0, *Joint Planning* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, December 1, 2020), II-10, available at <https://irp.fas.org/doddir/dod/jp5_0.pdf>.

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¹¹ *JCOIE*, 6.

¹² *Ibid.*, 7–8.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁴ See JP 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, October 22, 2018), available at <https://irp.fas.org/doddir/dod/jp3_0.pdf>; and JP 3-13, *Information Operations* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, November 20, 2014), available at <https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_13.pdf>.

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¹⁶ John Arquilla, “Arsenal of Hypocrisy,” *Foreign Policy*, August 27, 2013, available at <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/27/arsenal-of-hypocrisy/>>.

¹⁷ Martha Finnemore, “Legitimacy, Hypocrisy, and the Social Structure of Unipolarity: Why Being a Unipole Isn’t All It’s Cracked Up to Be,” *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (January 2009), 58–85, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40060221#metadata_info_tab_contents>.

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¹⁹ JP 3-61, I-11.

²⁰ Michael D. Jones and Mark K. McBeth, “A Narratives Policy Framework: Clear Enough to Be Wrong?” *Policy Studies Journal* 38, no. 2

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²¹ JP 3-61, I-11–I-14.

²² JP 5-0, IV-8.

²³ *Ibid.*, IV-9.

²⁴ Elizabeth A. Shanahan, Michael D. Jones, and Mark K. McBeth, “Policy Narratives and Policy Processes,” *Policy Studies Journal* 39, no. 3 (August 2011), 535–561.

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²⁷ *Ibid.*

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³⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁴⁰ *Communication Strategy and Synchronization*, 9.