



Legitimizing Army Psychological Operations

By ALFRED H. PADDOCK, JR.

Once again, we hear discussion within the U.S. Army on whether the name *psychological operations* (PSYOP) should be changed—an issue that has arisen periodically for years. The term, defined broadly as the planned use of communications to influence human attitudes and behavior of foreign audiences, is characterized by some as “toxic,” “disinformation,” “unsavory,” and with other pejorative words. This criticism inhibits the ability of PSYOP units to support U.S. military forces and to interact with other executive branch agencies—or so goes the criticism. Thus, some argue, the term must be replaced.

I believe this would be a mistake.

First, I want to place the issue in its historical context. Essentially, three terms have been used since World War I to describe the Army’s employment of persuasive communications to influence the behavior of enemy, friendly, and neutral audiences: propaganda, psychological warfare, and psychological operations.

The term *propaganda* was first widely used by the Army in World War I. Its origins, however, go much farther back. In 1622, Pope Gregory XV created a papal department named the *Sacra Congregation de Propaganda Fide*, or the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. Although the department was aimed largely at Martin Luther’s call for reformation of the Church, the term at the heart of its name has remained part of our vocabulary.

In his *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Day*, British historian Philip Taylor states that propaganda is a neutral term, an organized process of persuasion, a means to an end, and that “[w]e need to redirect any moral criticism away from propaganda itself in the direction of the goals and intentions of those conducting it.” This is a key point, which I will revisit later.

In any event, the key organization for Army propaganda during World War I was the Propaganda Subsection in the G2 (Intelligence) of General John Pershing’s Allied Expeditionary Force. Leaflets distributed by balloons and airplanes emphasized surrender themes to German soldiers: promises of good



Above: U.S. Air Force B-36 crew members arm leaflet-dropping bomb for psychological warfare mission over North Korea

Left: U.S. Naval officer loads 25-pound shell with propaganda leaflets prepared by Psychological Warfare Branch of Allied Force Headquarters, which integrated U.S. and British military and civilian propaganda efforts during World War II



MG David A. Morris, USA, commander, U.S. Army Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations Command (Airborne), speaks at Independence Day celebration



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food and humane care, privileges under international law, opportunity to return to families, and so forth.

Some leaflets related progress of the Allied forces on various fronts, with maps showing the territory gained by the Allies, particulars of German losses, and the rapid increase of the U.S. Army in the theater. The Army emphasized factual accuracy with its “combat propaganda,” thereby enhancing its credibility.

A new term—psychological warfare—emerged in World War II, but propaganda remained as a key element. “Psywar” gained recognition early in the war when a group of Americans translated German documents indicating that psychology should be employed in all phases of combat.

Most of the Army’s operational work in psywar took place at the theater level, where the responsible organization was normally designated a psychological warfare branch (PWB). The largest of these organizations was the PWB at Allied Forces Headquarters, activated in North Africa in November 1942. Its head was Brigadier General Robert McClure, who was to play a key role in this field during both World War II and Korea.

In February 1944, McClure, under General Dwight Eisenhower’s command, established the Psychological Warfare Division, Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Forces (PWD/SHAEF), for the

invasion of France and prosecution of the war in mainland Europe. As indicated in its history of operations in the Western European Campaign, 1944–1945, PWD/SHAEF defined *psychological warfare* as “the dissemination of propaganda designed to undermine the enemy’s will to resist, demoralize his followers, and sustain the morale of our supporters.”

Psychological warfare thus became the overall umbrella term—the process—and propaganda was the product (themes, dissemination). This term succinctly encompassed the divisive (undermine the enemy’s will to resist, demoralize his followers) and cohesive (sustain the morale of our supporters) purposes. In actual practice, the two terms were often used interchangeably.

Propaganda directed against the enemy was divided into three classes: “white,” whose source is clearly indicated; “black,” in which a false source is given; and “grey,” in which the source is not revealed. White was often characterized as overt propaganda, grey and black as covert propaganda. Military psywar units concentrated primarily on overt propaganda for maximum credibility of their messages. The Office of Strategic Services—forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency—employed covert actions. This division of responsibility

for overt and covert propaganda remains today.

In Europe, PWD made radio broadcasts from Office of War Information transmitters and over the British Broadcasting Corporation (indeed, the venerable BBC was often used to disseminate propaganda), conducted loudspeaker broadcasts on the frontlines, and employed large-scale leaflet operations using specially designated aircraft squadrons. PWD even provided leaflets to be dispersed by the

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then-novel method of artillery shells designed specifically for that purpose.

The basic Army field operating unit for psywar was the Mobile Radio Broadcasting (MRB) Company, whose personnel could operate loudspeakers and radios, employ mobile printing presses, and prepare leaflet bombs. The doctrinal and organizational concepts embodied by the MRB reappeared in the psychological warfare units formed during the Korean War.



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Above: 8th PSYOP battalion member and Montagnard loudspeaker team broadcast propaganda in Vietnam
 Left: MG Robert A. McClure, USA, is called the “Forgotten Father of U.S. Army Special Warfare”

During 1945–1946, Army psychological warfare staffs and units dissipated with the general demobilization of the military establishment. A prototype detachment of 2 officers and 20 enlisted men at Fort Riley, Kansas, was the only operational psychological warfare troop unit in the Army when the North Koreans attacked South Korea in June 1950. Reorganized as the 1st Loudspeaker and Leaflet (L&L) Company, it was sent to Korea in the fall of 1950 and served as the Eighth Army’s tactical propaganda unit throughout the conflict. Tactical propaganda, sometimes called combat propaganda, was directed at specific audiences in the forward battle areas. Mobile loudspeakers mounted on vehicles and aircraft became a primary means of conducting tactical propaganda in Korea.

To conduct full-scale strategic operations, General McClure—now chief of psychological warfare on the Department of Army Staff—directed the 1st Radio Broadcasting and Leaflet (RB&L) Group to deploy to Korea in July 1951. It conducted propaganda intended to further long-term strategic aims. The group had the equipment and capability to produce newspapers and leaflets, and to augment or replace other means of broadcasting radio propaganda. It supervised a radio station network known as the Voice of the United Nations and often produced more than 200 million leaflets a week, disseminated by aircraft or artillery shells. Some leaflets, for example, offered inducements for enemy soldiers to surrender, while others bolstered the morale of Korean civilians by proclaiming United Nations support.

Although the 1st RB&L Group was a concept accelerated to meet the requirements of the Korean conflict, it and the 1st L&L Company performed functions similar to those used in psychological warfare in World War II. It bore a direct linkage to the mobile radio broadcasting companies formed under PWD/SHAEF to conduct operations in North Africa and the European theater. Both the strategic concept embodied in the RB&L group and the tactical propaganda idea expressed by the L&L Company would appear in the capability formed as part of the new Psychological Warfare Center at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, in mid-1952. Indeed, they were forerunners to the activation of the 4th Psychological Operations Group in Vietnam.

This Psychological Warfare Center was the brainchild of General McClure, who con-

vinced the Army that psychological warfare and Special Forces units required such a facility and home base. The center consisted of a Psychological Warfare School for psywar and Special Forces instruction, the 6th RB&L Group, the 10th Special Forces Group, and a psywar board to test materiel, doctrine, techniques, and tactics for psywar and Special Forces.

This home base, the name of which was changed to the Special Warfare Center in 1956, formed the nucleus for expansion into the U.S. Army JFK Special Warfare Center and School after the death of President John F. Kennedy—and eventually, for establishment of the U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) headquarters at Fort Bragg. (In 2001, the USASOC headquarters building was named in honor of General McClure, “The Father of U.S. Army Special Warfare.”)

Nevertheless, interest in special warfare began to dissipate after the Korean War, and the Army’s psychological operations capability had eroded by the early 1960s. In addition, an important change in terminology occurred: psychological operations replaced psychological warfare as the umbrella term. *Psychological operations*, or PSYOP, encompassed *psychological warfare*, but the latter

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indicated propaganda directed only against enemy forces and populations for divisive purposes. The new and broader term could also be used to describe propaganda employed toward friendly and neutral audiences for cohesive purposes.

As was the case after World War II, the Army severely reduced its psychological operations capability after Korea. Consequently, an insufficient base of PSYOP-trained officers was available when the 6th Psychological Operations Battalion was activated in Vietnam in 1965. By 1967, the Army’s PSYOP forces in Vietnam had been expanded to a group (the 4th) with four battalions, one in each of the four corps tactical zones.

In addition to providing support to tactical field force commanders, the 4th PSYOP Group assisted the South Vietnamese government in its communication effort down to the hamlet level. The group headquarters

operated a 50,000-watt radio station and high-speed heavy printing presses, published a magazine for Vietnamese employees working for the U.S. Government and civilian agencies, and possessed a capability for developing propaganda.

PSYOP battalions employed light printing presses, a research and propaganda development capability, and personnel to work with American Air Force Special Operations units for aerial leaflet and loudspeaker missions. Their loudspeaker and audiovisual teams operated with American divisions and brigades or with province advisory teams. The 7th PSYOP Group in Okinawa provided valuable backup support for printing and high-altitude leaflet dissemination.

Four target audiences formed the basis of the 4th PSYOP Group’s overall program in support of the counterinsurgency effort. First was the civilian population of South Vietnam—in essence, “selling” the government of South Vietnam to its people. Next came the Viet Cong guerrillas in the South, followed by the North Vietnamese regular army, and finally the North Vietnamese civilian population.

The 4th and its battalions employed the same media used in World War II and Korea—radio, loudspeakers, and leaflets—

with the leaflets taking up 95 percent of its effort. The group disseminated propaganda via television directed primarily at the civilians of South Vietnam. It also air-dropped thousands of small transistor radios—pre-tuned to its 50,000-watt radio station—over enemy troop locations.

In targeting the enemy, one of the most effective efforts to which the 4th Group provided support was the *Chieu Hoi*, or Open Arms Program. Over the years, approximately 200,000 mostly lower level Viet Cong defected, or “rallied,” to the South Vietnamese government. Some of these ralliers agreed to participate in propaganda campaigns by having their photos taken and composing a simple surrender appeal disseminated by leaflets among their former units.

The 4th Psychological Operations Group returned to Fort Bragg in October 1971 as part of the withdrawal of U.S. forces

from Vietnam. Although officially a combat support organization, the 4th lost 13 of its members to enemy action during the war, and several others were decorated for valor.

From World War I to Vietnam, the terms *propaganda*, *psychological warfare*, and *psychological operations* were employed in total war, limited war, and counterinsurgency, respectively. They would continue to be used until near the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s when propaganda and psychological warfare were relegated to the glossaries of PSYOP doctrine. Indeed, when I commanded a PSYOP battalion in the mid-1970s and a group in the early 1980s, the Propaganda Development Center was the focal point of our operations. Under the new regime, that entity became the Product Development Center, but the “products” were, in fact, still propaganda. Nevertheless, the erosion of our terminology had begun.

Above, I quoted Philip Taylor’s statement that *propaganda* is a neutral term, an organized process of persuasion, and a means to an end. *The Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (March 2009) defines the word as “[a]ny form of communication in support of national objectives designed to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes, or behavior of any

population against the Jews, and the employment of propaganda to support U.S. forces in actions that result in the surrender of enemy troops, thus saving their lives and possibly the lives of our own Soldiers. The purposes are completely different. As Taylor states, “We need to redirect any moral criticism away from propaganda itself in the direction of the goals and intentions of those conducting it.” No matter. The term that had been a central part of our doctrine from World War I to the end of the Cold War disappeared. It was not to be trusted. Totalitarian states used it. It represented lies.

General McClure often told his psychological warfare staff and units to “[s]tick to the truth, but don’t be ashamed to use those truths which are of most value to you.” In other words, employ “selective truth,” much like the political propaganda employed by candidates for office in the United States.

A revelatory article that makes this point was Michael Dobbs’ December 2007 piece in the *Washington Post* on December 30, 2007, “The Fact Checker: Sorting Truth from Campaign Fiction.” Citing specific statements of Presidential candidates, Democrat and Republican, Dobbs states many claims were “demonstrably false.” He argues that “the art of embellishment and downright fibbing is alive and well in American politics.” In fact, much of this twisting of the facts is often poor propaganda. In the age of the Internet, as Dobbs notes, the accuracy of a candidate’s statements can be checked. Nevertheless, “electoral rewards from stretching the truth or distorting a rival’s record just as frequently outweigh the fleeting political costs.”

Another example of propaganda used by our government appeared in Robert Pear’s front-page article in the October 1, 2005, *New York Times*, “Buying of News

by Bush’s Aides is Ruled Illegal: Covert Propaganda Seen.” Essentially, the Bush administration commissioned writers to prepare stories praising the Department of Education’s programs and passed them to newspapers that printed the stories without telling readers the origin of the material. Of this affair, the Government Accountability Office stated in its September 30, 2005, report: “The failure of an

agency to identify itself as the source of prepackaged news misleads the viewing public by encouraging the audience to believe that the broadcasting news organization developed the information. The prepackaged news stories are purposely designed to be indistinguishable from news broadcasts to the public. . . . The essential fact of attribution is missing.”

This is a classic illustration of black propaganda. This and milder forms of propaganda (white or grey) have been a regular feature of American political life since the founding of the Nation. Nevertheless, military psychological operations terms continue to be deemed by some as too sensitive for interaction with commanders, other countries, and some governmental agencies.

With regard to the latter, my favorite anecdote is a discussion I had with a senior United States Information Agency official while serving as the director for PSYOP in the late 1980s. He was an old hand in the business, having been a member of the Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office in Vietnam, which, incidentally, provided policy direction for military PSYOP in the country. We had a candid relationship. When I told him that his agency in reality conducted propaganda and psychological operations abroad, he immediately responded, “You’re right, Al, but we can’t call it that.” For military PSYOP, we *should* call it that.

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It is truly ironic that a capability used to assist military commanders in accomplishing national security objectives abroad can be considered un-American, when the same techniques of propaganda are used by our government and political parties for domestic purposes. In a fruitless search for legitimacy, a steady stream of euphemisms is trotted out, usually with the word *information* attached—an amorphous term that can mean anything to anybody.

In May 1994, in a letter to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict, I wrote that “[a]nother difficulty with the term ‘information’ is its ever-widening definitional boundaries. In all of its permutations . . . it is becoming a morass which will cause even more



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PSYOP helicopter equipped with loudspeakers, circa 1964

group in order to benefit the sponsor, either directly or indirectly.”

That is about as neutral a definition as one could ask for. Yet those who criticize the term *propaganda* allude to its being used only by our adversaries for evil means. But surely, for example, there is a difference between Nazi Germany’s use of propaganda to turn its

confusion if [the Department of Defense] uses it to describe what it does in PSYOP. More profitable for the long run, in my view, would be continued efforts to legitimize existing terms rather than apologizing for them or attempting to disguise them.”

That was 15 years ago. Alas, the concerns I expressed have come to pass. A case in point is when the U.S. Special Operations Command renamed its Joint Psychological Operations Support Element the Joint Military Information Support Command in November 2007. Despite this new name, the mission of the organization—psychological operations—remains unchanged.

Now some want to eliminate altogether the name psychological operations—despite the fact that psychological warfare and PSYOP organizations served honorably in World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and in a variety of roles, to include conflicts, until the present—and despite the fact that our country is now engaged in another ideological Cold War, the very essence of which is psychological in nature. The question must be asked: If *propaganda*, *psychological warfare*, and *psychological operations* were appropriate terms for these earlier threats to our national security, why are they politically incorrect now?

Related to this is the heritage issue. I wonder, for example, how 4th PSYOP Group veterans who served in Vietnam—and who lost 13 troops—would feel about changing the name of their unit. And now we have a PSYOP Regiment comprised of one Active-duty and two Reserve Component groups. All have personnel serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. The regiment has as its purpose the development of pride in the heritage of a unit. Changing the PSYOP name will detract from that purpose.

One can only imagine the hue and cry that would arise if a proposal were made to change the name of the infantry, the artillery, or armor. These are combat arms units that use lethal means to accomplish their missions. Thus, it is particularly ironic that some would change the name of PSYOP units that employ nonlethal means to support these combat arms. Apparently, undermining the morale of the enemy is more politically incorrect than killing them.

Then there are practical considerations. A name change would require significant retooling of Service and joint doctrine. Additionally, the development of a PSYOP branch for officers in the Army was a further important step toward legitimizing the name. I have

not heard any calls for renaming the Special Forces branch.

Calling PSYOP or propaganda something else will not deceive anyone. It certainly won't fool our adversaries or the media. As an example of the latter, Pulitzer Prize winner Tom Ricks wrote a front-page article in the *Washington Post* on April 10, 2006, the lead sentence of which read: “The U.S. Military is conducting a propaganda campaign to magnify the role of al-Qaeda in Iraq.” Just changing the name is not going to camouflage what psychological operations does: persuasive communications to influence attitudes and behavior of foreign target audiences in ways that support U.S. objectives. As Richard Crossman, a brilliant propagandist who worked for McClure in World War II, stated, “The art of propaganda is not telling lies, but rather selecting the truths you require and giving it mixed up with some truths the audience wants to hear.” The “truth” is that psychological operations are based on manipulation of facts. Using euphemisms will only draw attention to our efforts to disguise the real purpose of PSYOP.

recommended the creation of an interagency public diplomacy committee to support counterterrorism efforts and a PSYOP working group as part of the committee. These recommendations were implemented.

During my tour as the Director for Psychological Operations in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, one of my top priorities, approved by the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, was institutionalizing PSYOP. To do so, I continued briefing senior officials throughout the Department of Defense, and for 2 years I lectured at the Service war colleges. When the Secretary of Defense recommended to the National Security Council that an interagency PSYOP committee be formed, we insisted that “psychological operations” be included in its title. It was.

A final personal anecdote. A few years ago, I was invited to participate in a National Public Radio panel to discuss psychological operations. As it turned out, the panel comprised three journalists—and me. The moderator was also a journalist. At the beginning, I sensed that they were all just waiting to pounce. So I began my comments with

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Let me address the argument that changing the name would make it easier for PSYOP to be accepted by supported commanders. Historically, the biggest challenge for PSYOP personnel has been convincing commanders how PSYOP can help them accomplish their mission. The PSYOP name rarely plays a part in this equation. Part of that difficulty stems from the fact that measures for effectiveness of PSYOP are often difficult to demonstrate. Another factor has been that little instruction on psychological operations historically has been included in the curricula of the Army's professional military education for officers. Thus, PSYOP personnel continually have to reorient commanders and staff on their capabilities.

As for selling PSYOP at “higher levels,” I should like to provide some personal experience. While serving as the military member of the Secretary of State's Policy Planning Staff with a portfolio that included public diplomacy, PSYOP, and terrorism, I arranged for the 4th PSYOP Group to brief senior State Department officials on its activities. I also

a frank explanation of the military's use of PSYOP and propaganda. I also compared it to the hypocrisy of U.S. domestic political propaganda, and cited a couple of examples. When I finished, it was as if all of the air had been let out of their collective balloons, and the discussion proceeded on a much less adversarial basis. After the session, the moderator thanked me for my candor.

What I have described are examples of aggressive institutionalizing that can and should be done by all PSYOP individuals (Active-duty, Reserve Component, and retired) to prevent a loss of identity for their craft. PSYOP personnel should take pride in their discipline and avoid apologizing for its name. The use of euphemisms in an attempt to disguise PSYOP should cease. And senior Army officials must take into account the rich legacy of this specialty, plus the practical limitations of changing its name. In sum, they should resist political correctness and legitimize military psychological operations. **JFQ**