

Controlling Narratives: An evolutionary element in today's conflicts or a fantasy that has always been understood but never truly established?

Il Woo, Lee, MSc (IR), LSE

Military Studies Programme, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

isiwlee@ntu.edu.sg

In any contest between rivals, there are always some elements of the material and cerebral. In the opaque world of psychological warfare, PSYOPS to some or Military Information Support (MISO) for those hoping for a more sociable appeal, has more often than not operated within the later spheres of human conflict. Similarly, in an era in which old-school domination vis-à-vis martial annihilation seems passé, notions of “influencing” civilian inhabitants to better conform to a state’s national interests, including counterinsurgency (COIN) and its seemingly more sexy brethren counterterrorism (CT), have become the operative vogues of the day. Correspondingly, only the modest of endeavors has been sought after in this ongoing scholastic voyage. The primary purpose of this study is to ignite or reignite a thorough discussion on the efficacy of such battles of the mind. In short, a brief historical sampling has been conducted demonstrating where PSYOPS initiatives have been undertaken so as to evaluate their effectiveness, identify potencies and shortcomings, and to raise potential reservations of the practice itself. Special attention is paid to aerial bombardments of old (strategic bombing) in order to demonstrate where underlying psychological impacts on the adversary were effective or not effective even with or without PSYOPS programs embedded within them. Such analogous studies appear more pertinent now, given the Western penchant for using drones as a means of messaging opponents, not to mention its relation to the overarching theme of the *(R)evolution of War*, if there ever was such a thing.

It must be noted however, that much of what is stated in this *discussion* and not definitive *statement* per say with regards to this psychosomatic tool is indeed repetitive, built upon the intellectual shoulders of others, and that any budding insight will be more of this author’s opinion rather unquestionable empirical fact. To reiterate, the scope, depth, and certainly the overall quality of this cautious study is to merely restart a

conversation on the efficacy of PSYOPS, its utility in its own right in addition to its collaboration with other military assets, and should be consumed only in this fashion. In this spirit, an added purpose of this study is to augment questions along with points of limitations with regards to whatever grounding and methodological understanding we have when it comes to military action and desired psychological outcomes. It is not the purpose of this paper to give new answers or even statistical figures due to the difficulty of retrieving information when considering “obliteration” to some degree and people’s perceptions thereafter.

Methodologically, a scanning of what many consider to be “reputable” foreign policy think-tanks (US and international), mainstream U.S. media, in accordance with other open-source material of U.S. governmental agencies were all cross-referenced for consistencies and inconsistencies in terms of this topic’s focus; the psychological manipulation—with or without specific PSYOPS programs implanted—of adversaries in conjunction with military application. Such admittedly crude observations have revealed an impression, at least to this author, that at present, the intellectual debate involving psychological combat has at the moment been marginal, and nearly non-existent when combined with certain martial functions; kinetic action in union with perception agendas. Conversely, and perhaps inevitably, between the increased discourses for the necessities of “Strategic Communication” via narratives and the legal as well as ethical considerations of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), this middle ground of 21st century target precision and the potential psychological persuasions that could be reaped from it does not appear to be pursued to any meaningful degree. To the contrary, while acknowledging there may in fact be deliberations behind closed doors and classified sessions, much of the intellectual traffic regarding precision strikes and the emotional effects on potential opponents seems more geared towards deliberating on whether the enemy can be deterred or contained, and to whether precision beatings are in fact judicial and possibly counter productive.¹ Such is one of the primary motives for seeking discovery in this small slice of armed employment.

¹ See, Daniel Byman, "Why Drones Work: The Case for Washington's Weapon of Choice," *Foreign Affairs*, 92, no. 4 (2013): 32-43, and Audrey Kurth Cronin, "Why Drones Fail: When Tactics Drive

In the end, like airpower in the general sense, this paper will reinforce the impression that psychological attacks do not appear to accomplish the mission alone, but are more or less successful when incorporated inside the overall military campaign. One can only hope that such a thesis would be useful given the propensity of drones—the inherit descendant of traditional bombers—in this day and age. Simply put, to the diehard enthusiast, psychological warfare is everything from a force protector, combat multiplier, and even economical non-lethal weapons systems. To the critic, PSYOPS will always be the bridesmaid but never the bride.