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Rediscovering the Art of Psychological Operations in the Afghan Counterinsurgency

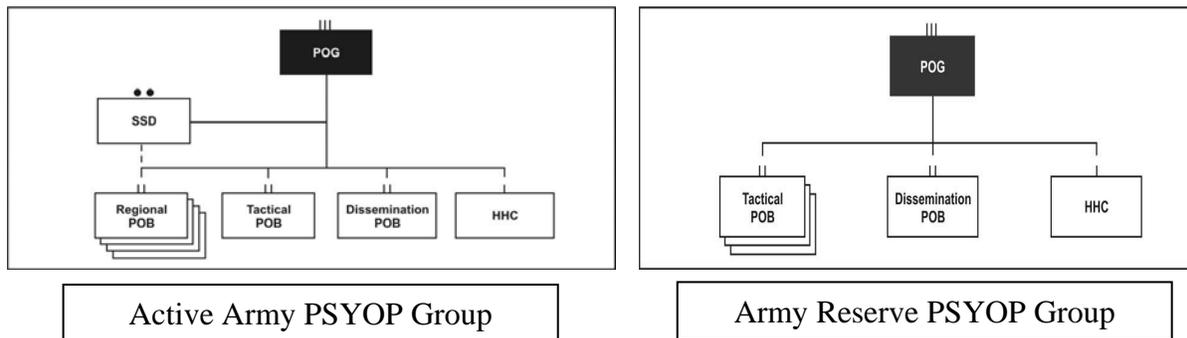
Russell Hampsey

Psychological Operations (PSYOP) professionals have too long taken a cautionary approach to the counterinsurgency (COIN) operations in Afghanistan. The forces waging COIN on a daily basis; Brigade, Battalion and Company sized units deride PSYOP as the “no” man. While the rest of the military has become learning organizations it seems PSYOP units are stuck trying to execute major combat operational war campaigns that are better suited for an enemy that is national and enjoys first or top tier second-world infrastructure. Commanders on the ground strive for responsive, timely, and relevant programs designed to influence the insurgent and selected Afghan target audiences that support or are ambivalent to the insurgents. PSYOP limitations in executing these tasks have relegated the branch to the second string. The PSYOP community must reinvigorate its agility and come prepared to fight the COIN strategy in Afghanistan.

There are underlying issues that have led the community to this undesirable point. PSYOP professionals have been in a 9 year struggle with the Information Operations (IO) field for primacy in addressing foreign target audiences. Field manuals and regulations tell you that PSYOP communicates with foreign audiences when influence is desired and Public Affairs communicate with foreign press and leaders when presenting informational releases. The PSYOP problem lies in the responsiveness in the field. In Afghanistan innovative PSYOP products that are not preapproved are scrutinized and boarded until their usefulness is irrelevant. In the meantime commanders look to the IO team to get message out, even if the risk is a less than optimal product. Preapproved product is great for standing messages such as tips lines, rewards programs and informational data e.g. tune in to x radio station; it is useless against a enemy that bases it entire campaign on influence and intimidation. It is time to get PSYOP back in the fight.

The PSYOP practitioners with the most training and capability to plan COIN operations are the active duty PSYOP forces. This is not meant to disparage the tactical PSYOP Soldiers from the United States Army Reserve who have carried the lion’s share of the work over the last 9 years in both Afghanistan and Iraq; however their force structure does not include the program development capability the active PSYOP forces enjoy in their Regional PSYOP BN Structure. The split of the United States Military PSYOP capability in 2006 between the United States Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) for the active force and the United States Army Reserve Command (USARC) for the tactical force led to a decision that active PSYOP forces would only support special operations forces while the reserve PSYOP force would only support

conventional forces. A deeper look into the force structures of these different units would have illustrated the capability differences that now put PSYOP in a second tier status.



Finally the PSYOP community has become enamored with strategic level influence campaigns. The best and brightest minds spend their time defining and redefining strategic PSYOP with little effort spent on the practical aspect of operational and tactical PSYOP support to COIN in general, and more specifically COIN in Afghanistan. Using the PSYOP process outlined in FM 3-05.30 would quickly lead COIN planners to realize that the current PSYOP force structure in Afghanistan is inadequate to execute the mission required to create the effects desired on the COIN battlefield.

Target Audience Analysis (PSYOP Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield)

The generous amount of disparate target audiences in Afghanistan alone could require the entire U.S. Active PSYOP Group's worth of target audience analysts. Not having access to these resources commanders have come to rely on Target Audience Analysis (TAA) that implies there is a unified Afghan audience that can be messaged and influenced to support the COIN effort. ISAF tactical level battalion commanders will tell you that the population in each of their company's areas of operation are different and respond to distinct types of interaction. The PSYOP professional should be the one who assists that commander in determining what causes these distinctions and how to influence each audience.

Void of a program to plan and execute, PSYOP Soldiers in Afghanistan interact with the populace to gather atmospherics. Unfortunately too many times these atmospherics become the deliverable rather than a useful tool that feeds PSYOP planner development of engagement messaging. The atmospheric report is filed in a database along with reports from a multitude of other organizations and planners must pull the information if (and it's a big if) the report is ever referenced. PSYOP units glean atmospherics for two primary reasons; first to drive an understanding of the target audience and second to assess whether or not proposed or previously disseminated product has any effect. In Afghanistan the most popular atmospheric is the collection of data that demonstrates whether or not the preapproved products mentioned above are understood by the people. Instead these atmospherics should be part of an integrated PSYOP development process that provides the commander with a useful relevant influence program. Without the analytical back-up to use the atmospherics, they become the end-game.

PSYOP Program Development in Support of Afghan COIN

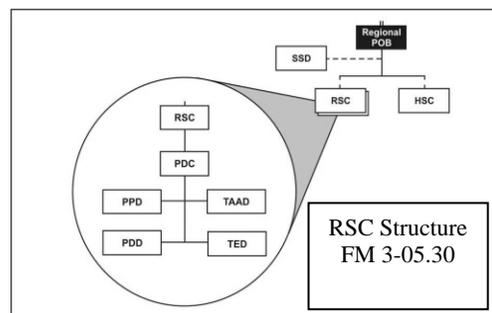
ISAF is on the leading edge of the COIN fight. The recently published Counterinsurgency FM 3-24 (December 2006) is already overcome by the COIN fight in Afghanistan. The time has come for ISAF to lead the way in developing a PSYOP methodology that enables commanders who interact with the populace and the insurgents on a daily basis. The traditional PSYOP model is irrelevant to the COIN fight. Ensuring all messages are the same in a situation that requires flexibility inhibits the creation of desired effects. Our doctrine allows for commanders to make life and death decisions with millions of dollars of equipment and the lives of Soldiers, yet we prevent that commander from making an informed decision on how to message selected target audiences using PSYOP that will affect his fight. PSYOP product approval is withheld at the regional command for some products and in most cases ISAF Joint Command (IJC) level with the exception of simplistic messages that are preapproved.

The COIN Commander requires full autonomy with the assets he is given and that must include PSYOP. To affect the COIN environment he must be augmented with active as well as reserve PSYOP specialists. Current PSYOP force structure is inadequate. Early on in the Afghanistan Theater the Combined Joint Special Forces Task Force (CJSOTF) recognized the lack of responsiveness the PSYOP community brought to the fight and decided to take the matter in hand in order to create the desired effects. The CJSOTF stood up localized radio stations in areas where they needed to message select audiences and began broadcasting. The active PSYOP force was broadcasting at the same time but not to a selected audience that could create the effects required to influence the CJSOTF effort. One ISAF regional command has adopted that strategy and is currently disseminating messages at the battalion and company level outside of the PSYOP community to achieve effects. The strain on the company commander is the lack of training in the art of influence and the requirement to produce programming. The answer is to provide that commander with a PSYOP specialist who understands how to select the right audiences to influence and assist in developing programs that are designed to create the required effects.

Providing PSYOP capabilities to the Company Commander not only would enhance radio programming but it would also allow for the PSYOP Specialists to integrate with the Company Intelligence Support Teams (COISTS) and Tactical HUMINT Teams in order to provide the COIN commander with a robust localized TAA that he can use to develop influence approaches when conducting village Shuras, key leader engagements, and other tactical COIN operations. A PSYOP professional can advise the commander on second and third order effects that might be created amongst the populace during operations from the information in the TAA and how to mitigate those effects.

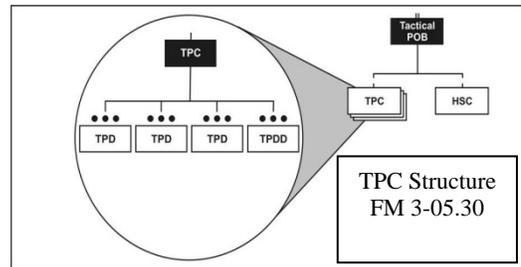
Practical PSYOP in support of COIN

The COIN fight is largely a tactical level endeavor; however this does not imply that only tactical PSYOP forces should be executing COIN. The decision to only provide active duty



PSYOP forces to SOF Units severely limits the execution of the overall COIN Strategy. Active and reserve PSYOP forces must work together in order to provide a potent force structure that will create the effects required to achieve the ISAF COIN Strategy. Each Regional Command should be assigned the equivalent¹ of a PSYOP Regional Support Company which brings with it a product development center, target audience analysis detachment, plans and programs detachment, testing and evaluations detachment and product development detachment. Simply putting the force structure in each command will greatly enhance the regional commander's capability to provide practical PSYOP support to their assigned maneuver brigades or provincial reconstruction teams.

The current PSYOP structure in Afghanistan provides a Tactical PSYOP Company per regional command. In order to enable a capability that will create effects throughout a Brigade, a Tactical PSYOP Company or equivalent should be assigned to each Brigade element owning battlespace. This increased structure would provide the brigade with a more robust planning and development capability through the Tactical PSYOP Company Headquarters and Tactical PSYOP Development Detachment (TPDD) which includes a plans and programs team, target audience analysis team, and product development team. Subordinate battalions would gain a Tactical PSYOP Detachment. The increased capability at that level would result in a subsequent increase in the number teams to support companies; the organization with the most capability to influence the Afghan populace.



Execution of practical PSYOP in support of COIN will require the PSYOP Community to increase its current Afghan force structure. The challenge for the community is to become a COIN “learning organization,” reassess current missions to resource the Afghan COIN requirement, determine how to work within the dynamic COIN battlefield alongside information operations and reestablish itself as the commander’s primary organization to influence select foreign target audiences.

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¹ Because ISAF is a NATO mission, the term equivalent is used to denote the capabilities required to include our NATO force structure.

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