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PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS:
WILL THE REAL APPROVAL AUTHORITY PLEASE STAND UP?

by

Brian M. Pugmire
MAJ, USA

A paper submitted to the faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature: ______________________

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Faculty Advisor
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ABSTRACT

The only organic tool the combatant commander has in his arsenal to communicate with enemy forces or civilians in his theater is Psychological Operations. Accordingly, when the Psychological Operations effort is well coordinated, it can aid significantly in the success of the commander’s mission. To be most effective Psychological Operations must be timely. Psychological Operations are most responsive when the theater level commander retains the approval authority for Psychological Operations products.

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“There are but two powers in the world, the sword and the mind. In the long run the sword is always beaten by the mind.”  -Napoleon Bonaparte

INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a marked increase in the need and use of forces that specialize in convincing adversaries of the United States to do that which it desire without the use of force. This asymmetrical capability, commonly known as Psychological Operations (PSYOP), is often considered by military leaders as the option of choice to employ before committing combat forces. From the initiation of combat operations until post cessation activities, PSYOP are used throughout the campaign to support and achieve the commander’s objectives.

At the national or strategic level, there are many organizations that contribute to this effort, specifically the Department of State (DOS), the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Department of Defense (DOD), to name a few. Within DOD, Psychological Operations forces are responsible for this mission. At the theater level and below, the combatant commander controls only DOD PSYOP assets. Moreover, his PSYOP assets represent his only organic means to communicate directly with the enemy forces or civilians within his theater of operations.

“The intent of PSYOP is to influence target audiences behavior that support United States (U.S.) national policy objectives and the combat commander’s operations at the strategic, operational and tactical levels of warfare.”¹ In order to support fully the commander’s mission and intent, PSYOP functions are “inherently joint, frequently combined, and must be integrated and synchronized at all echelons to achieve their full force-multiplier potential.”²
The complexity and responsibility of this task, however, does not only reside within the combatant command. At the national level, interagency organizations also plan and conduct information activities. As such, national and theater level information programs require coordination, deconfliction and synchronization so that all elements of national power (diplomatic, military, economic and information) can be brought to bear against any threat. Consequently, a Commander in Chief (CINC) or Joint Force Commander (JFC) may not have the authority to use his organic PSYOP capability to its fullest potential or in a manner the commander determines is necessary, based on the situation evolving before him, in his theater of operation.

Coordination must occur between national and theater levels; however, the theater commander must have the authority and flexibility to conduct timely and effective PSYOP. To this end, clear guidance must exist delineating which agency is responsible for approving PSYOP plans. Additionally, the CINC or JFC must have approval authority for PSYOP products and activities within his designated theater and joint operations area. It is only in this way that PSYOP can meet the commander’s intent to influence behavior in accomplishing his objectives.

**TYPES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS**

From the beginning of recorded history, Psychological Operations have been used in support of defeating an enemy. In doing so, different levels of PSYOP have emerged that span the entire operational continuum. It is imperative, therefore, to provide a core set of definitions of PSYOP before moving on. In current military terms, PSYOP are divided into three different categories. They are:
Strategic PSYOP – U.S. Government departments and agencies conduct strategic PSYOP to influence foreign attitudes, perceptions and behavior in favor of U.S. goals and objectives. These activities take place predominately outside the military arena, but frequently use Department of Defense (DOD) assets and receive support from military PSYOP forces. Military PSYOP efforts with potential strategic impact must be coordinated with other national assets and efforts.\(^3\)

![Levels of PSYOP](image)

Operational PSYOP – Are conducted prior to, during war or conflict, and at the conclusion of open hostilities in a defined geographic area to promote the effectiveness of the area commander’s campaigns and strategies.\(^5\)

Tactical PSYOP – Are conducted in the area assigned a tactical commander during conflict and war to support the tactical mission against opposing forces. These operations are
designed to bring psychological pressure on hostile forces and to persuade civilians to assist the tactical commander in achieving the objective.\textsuperscript{6}

In the post-Cold War era, Psychological Operations have assumed a more important role in supporting the CINC’s or JFC’s objectives. The strict lines that once separated strategic, operational and tactical PSYOP have become increasingly blurred. The recent growth of informational technologies practically ensures that any act performed in the execution of statecraft (either political or military) will have a near real-time international audience. The implications of this are many. For example, what was once considered a relatively benign tactical PSYOP mission, a Psychological Action (PSYACT) planned and executed in support of the tactical commander on the ground, may have strategic implications when distributed electronically and viewed by friendly, hostile, potentially hostile or neutral audiences around the world. As a result, clear and concise PSYOP doctrine must exist in order to compensate for the increase in overlap among PSYOP levels.

**PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS APPROVAL DOCTRINE**

Given the potential for overlapping effects during the application of informational activities, it is crucial that clear and well-defined doctrine be established and understood by all those involved in the PSYOP decision making and approval process. This will alleviate bureaucratic bottlenecks, clarify staff and interagency responsibilities, and increase the overall timeliness of the PSYOP approval process.

Normally, there are two parts in the PSYOP approval process. The first is the PSYOP plan, which usually contains the PSYOP plans, programs, objectives, themes and target audiences. The PSYOP plan approval authority is DOD.
Joint Publication 3-53 defines responsibility for PSYOP planning and approval. The Department of Defense is responsible for, “establishing national objectives, developing policies, and approving strategic plans for PSYOP.” The Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (USD[P]) or his designee, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (ASD[SO/LIC]) acts as the principal advisor to the Secretary of Defense on all PSYOP matters. ASD(SO/LIC) also reviews and approves all PSYOP programs that are “conducted during peace or in conflict.” The Joint Pub also states, however, that, “In peacetime operations or in conflict, the Department of State may restrict PSYOP messages and themes within countries or areas.” It further asserts that, “The combat commander is responsible for the centralized direction and conduct of PSYOP within his operational area.” The PSYOP Supplement to the Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan (JSCP) maintains that, “In order to maximize PSYOP support, PSYOP must be centrally controlled and approved by the CINC or JFC and executed at the most appropriate levels.”

In effect, current doctrine places PSYOP plan approval with DOD, albeit at various levels, and provides the CINC or JFC the flexibility, within the approval plan, to conduct PSYOP within his designated theater or Joint Area of Operations. However, it also affords DOS a similar opportunity, making the approval authority unclear and divisive.

The second part of the PSYOP approval process is the authorization or approval of finished PSYOP products prior to their dissemination. Product approval authority is different in times of peace than during conflict or war. In peace, product approval authority resides with DOS which provides overall direction, coordination and supervision for PSYOP. Typically, peacetime PSYOP are conducted in foreign countries under the Overt Peacetime Psychological Operations Program (OP3). The country team member, designated by the
Ambassador, exercises product approval authority for the conduct of PSYOP. "The DOS controls all information until an execute order for the PSYOP plan is approved. During this time period prior to the execute order, and consistent with CINC guidance, the DOS retains product approval authority while the C2 remains in military channels."

During conflict and war, or once the execute order for the PSYOP plan is given, the PSYOP product approval authority is passed to the CINC. "When a campaign plan is approved for execution, the Secretary of Defense normally delegates approval authority for PSYOP products and actions to the supported CINC and allows the CINC to subdelegate that authority to the JFC. However, approval authority may not be subdelegated below the JFC without SecDef approval."
THE PROBLEM

Simply put, the existing doctrinal PSYOP documents often contradict themselves in terms of the approval process. At a minimum, the vagueness and sometimes loosely defined use of key terminology in the documents can lead to misinterpretation of who is actually the approving authority for PSYOP. This should be evident in the examples provided in the previous section.

The foremost example of this is DOD Directive S-3321.1 (1984) titled, Overt Psychological Operations Conducted by the Military Services in Peacetime and in Contingencies Short of Declared War. This directive governs OP3, which states that the DOS has product approval authority. According to the definitions and doctrine provided in the previous sections of this paper, the title of this directive alone indicates that the DOS has had the approval authority of all products since the end of World War II, which was the last time the United States was in a declared war. In reality, this is not the case. In contingencies and operations in Panama, Haiti, the Balkans, and in the Persian Gulf, product approval authority has resided within DOD. Even within DOD, the product approval authority has not always been consistent. In most cases the authority was at the CINC level, but in some cases the authority came from the Secretary of Defense (Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, Afghanistan) or from the President himself (Operation RESTORE HOPE, Somalia,\textsuperscript{17} and Operations supporting Joint Task Force Southwest Asia [Desert Fox], Iraq).\textsuperscript{18}

Another example that leads to confusion is the Clinton Presidential Decision Directive-68 (PDD-68). Essentially, PDD-68 (1999) ordered the creation of an International Public Information (IPI) section within the DOS. The IPI core group consists of officials from Defense, State, Justice, Commerce and Treasury departments, as well as the CIA and
FBI. Since all agencies today have the ability to communicate internationally and interact with foreign populations, DOS was tasked to be the lead organization to coordinate the U.S. international information effort, while at the same time to deconflict and synchronize the domestic information effort to avoid any contradictory messages. Unfortunately, President Bush’s National Security Presidential Directive (NSPD-1) did not keep PDD-68 effective. Consequently, there has been a great deal of political maneuvering to keep this organization, and the progress it made, alive. So much so, it is unclear to many the current role it plays in the information (PSYOP) chain. This turmoil impacts heavily on the speed at which PSYOP guidance is available for incorporation into the PSYOP planning process.

The impact of this ambiguity in some of the key PSYOP documents is the source of disagreement among some agencies as to who is the actual approving authority. Confusion and delays also occur when product approval is retained at a higher level than it should. Unfortunately, it is the CINC or JFC that pays the ultimate price because his PSYOP support is not timely, nor does it meet his needs in accomplishing his mission.

HISTORICAL ILLUSTRATIONS OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS APPROVAL PROCESS

To better illustrate this dichotomy, one need only review the PSYOP activities leading up to and during each operation the United States has conducted in the past decade. An examination of these operations reveals that most are unique in their individual situations; however, events surrounding the application of Psychological Operations share common deficiencies in PSYOP planning and the control, or perceived control, the CINC or JFC commander had in the execution of PSYOP. All situations have deviated to some degree from established doctrine in the PSYOP approval process. This paper will review Operation
DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM (DS/DS), Operation ALLIED FORCE, and Operation ENDURING FREEDOM to make this point.

**Operations DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM**

After the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, it was determined that the existing plan did not take into consideration the developing scenario in the region and a request for additional PSYOP planners was sent to USCENTCOM. The planners assembled on 11 August 1990 to begin their effort. Within five days, the cell briefed the USCENTCOM PSYOP strategic concept to General Schwarzkopf, which included an overall theater concept, a list of proposed strategic PSYOP initiatives, specific target audiences, objectives, themes, actions, and actors. The following day, USCINCCENT sent a message to the Joint Staff with a list of 67 strategic PSYOP initiatives for approval. Complications developed when the strategic level initiatives reached DOD and interagency committees for concurrence. The core issue was the propriety of a field commander, not technically in combat, making such recommendations within the interagency communities. These questions persisted when the theater campaign plan was submitted for approval one month later. However, the Joint Staff promptly approved General Schwarzkopf’s PSYOP concept.19

By 10 September, the theater PSYOP campaign plan, now named BURNING HAWK, was reviewed within USCENTCOM and by month’s end was refined to include a list of discrete campaigns and specific actions. On 20 September, General Schwarzkopf approved BURNING HAWK and directed it be hand carried to Washington to expedite the approval necessary to assure earliest possible initiation of activities designed to prepare the battlefield psychologically. Quick approval, however, was not obtained. Rapid review of the plan was made by some agencies, while differences of opinion on methodology and slow
review by staff personnel in other agencies debilitated the process. For example, on 24 September, the package flowed quickly in and out of the office of the Director of the Joint Staff. However, at his own discretion, he had the campaigns and their component actions divided into two sub plans-- a white (overt) sub plan to be executed by DOD, and a black (covert) sub plan added to the CIA as a recommendation. In fact, few if any of the proposed actions were truly covert. Most of the black actions involved clandestine delivery of overt U.S. messages through channels not accessible by USCINCCENT, for example, the Kuwaiti resistance. The planning cell assumed the CIA had such access and therefore suggested it serve as the lead agency. This distinction was apparently lost during the review process.  

The actions and campaigns were found to overlap and easy division between DOD and CIA responsibilities was not possible. Many of the black campaigns had one or more white actions, which appear, based on documentation, to have been lost. The breakout produced a DOD sub plan, which contained only a small number of the original items recommended, thus defeating the coordinated nature of the original concept. On 26 September, the Joint Staff and the Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Security Policy (DUSD[SP]) approved the DOD sub plan. Meanwhile, the entire submission continued to raise questions concerning the appropriateness of DOD tasking other agencies. The process then slowed again. On 12 October, the DUSD(SP) recommended that the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (USD[P]) adopt the remaining actions contained in the white plan. Three weeks later, the Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) received the plan for review and approval. The SECDEF approved the plan within the day but it was another 14 days before the plan found its way back through DOD, as each level prepared and cleared its notification message.
Because only a small number of recommended actions were approved, the long-awaited response to USCENTCOM was not well received. In a strongly worded message to the SECDEF, General Schwarzkopf stressed the urgent need to reincorporate without further delay 21 important PSYOP actions which had been deleted from the original text and which he fully intended to implement. “The message conveyed frustration over the void still existing between pre-hostility public diplomacy and psychological warfare – a transition period which had to be addressed with policy decisions in order for any CINC to commence his PSYOP preparation of the battlefield.”

By early December, the SECDEF approved 16 of General Schwarzkopf’s 21 proposals, and overt PSYOP began on 12 January 1991 – five days before the start of the air war phase of Operation DESERT STORM.

Throughout DS/DS, USCINCCENT retained PSYOP product approval authority. This followed established PSYOP doctrine and consequently, worked well. USCINCCENT, as outlined above, did not obtain PSYOP plan approval until very late into Operation DESERT SHIELD. Potentially, this delay could have rendered PSYOP ineffective to the needs of USCINCCENT. Fortunately, the enemy was cooperative and the delay was not impossible to overcome and, as history has proven, DS/DS was a success.

**Operation ALLIED FORCE**

Psychological Operations during Operation ALLIED FORCE provide another example of the complexity of the PSYOP approval process. In late 1998, PSYOP planners within USEUCOM and from the 4th Psychological Operations Group developed a PSYOP plan in Naples, Italy, that was incorporated into the overarching plan for Operation ALLIED FORCE. Because this operation was a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) led operation, the PSYOP plan required approval through NATO channels. The plan was
initially approved by Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), who then forwarded it for approval to NATO headquarters in Brussels, Belgium. The final hurdle in the approval process occurred when the North Atlantic Council (NAC) of NATO headquarters approved the plan, allowing it to be executed. The NAC is comprised of a senior member representative of each of the NATO member states.

The plan, which did not differentiate between strategic, operational, and tactical PSYOP, authorized SACEUR, General Clark, as product approval authority. He then passed product approval authority down to Admiral Ellis, the NATO commander of Task Force ALLIED FORCE. Because of the nature and complexity of this combined operation, Admiral Ellis wore four different hats. He was CINCUSNAVEUR, Commander USJTF Noble Anvil, Commander NATO CJTF ALLIED FORCE, and CINC ALLIED FORCES Southern Europe. In April 1999, PSYOP missions began in support of the air campaign. Up to this point, the plan and product approval process had proceeded with little complications.

Soon after the initiation of PSYOP missions, critics within NATO began protesting the approval process of products already approved and against those that were actually disseminated. These NATO members argued that since it was a NATO mission, all members should be included in the PSYOP product approval process. Although this never happened, the politics associated with the requests did slow the product approval process. Eventually, the continued uproar within NATO did cause General Clark to reclaim the product approval authority from Admiral Ellis just three weeks into the operation. General Clark would retain this authority throughout the remainder of ALLIED FORCE.
Operation ALLIED FORCE demonstrates the challenges that PSYOP faces in a combined environment. The external pressure from allies (and to some degree internal pressure within the U.S. government) is not uncommon. In this case, General Clark as SACEUR reclaimed and retained the product approval authority. Fortunately, elevating the product approval authority one level to General Clark did not slow the process. The timeliness of the product approval process was maintained by presenting the products simultaneously through both U.S. and NATO channels to General Clark. As can be expected, General Clark routinely received the products much faster through U.S. channels because the NATO channel required more intermediate approvals. It was not uncommon for General Clark to approve and have the dissemination process in motion from the U.S. channel before the same product appeared in front of him from the NATO side. If not for the U.S. approval channel, the PSYOP effort in ALLIED FORCE would have slowed tremendously and might not have worked at all.

**Operation ENDURING FREEDOM**

After the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, Operation ENDURING FREEDOM was established to bring to justice those responsible. In late September USCENTCOM requested, through the Joint Staff, to stand up a Joint PSYOP Task Force (JPOTF) to develop and produce PSYOP products and to coordinate their dissemination. The request was approved and the JPOTF was stood up at Fort Bragg, NC.

By late September, PSYOP planners submitted the PSYOP plans and programs for approval to the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict) through the Joint Staff. The PSYOP plan was approved by the Joint Staff and forwarded to ASD(SO/LIC) by early October. At that time, the Office of ASD(SO/LIC) was vacant. In
his absence, PSYOP plan approval authority fell to the next senior person, the Principle Deputy to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (PDASD[SO/LIC]). Whether unfamiliarity with the PSYOP approval process, subject matter, dissatisfaction with the plan, or other unknown reasons, the PDASD(SO/LIC) decided to forward the plan to the next higher level for approval, the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy. The USD(P) did not approve the plan as written and designated the Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Programs (DUSD[P]) as approval authority for the PSYOP plan and subsequent PSYOP products. In October, a new PSYOP plan was submitted to the DUSD(P) and approved. However, much to the dismay of USCENTCOM and JPOTF, the DUSD(P) retained PSYOP product approval authority instead of passing approval authority to USCINCCENT. The PSYOP product approval process for this operation became extremely cumbersome and lengthy. At one point, the SECDEF required all products be sent to him on a daily basis. In early November, the DUSD(P) finally passed the product approval authority to USCINCCENT for operational and tactical PSYOP products only.29

Operation ENDURING FREEDOM is a classic example of why the CINC or JFC must have product approval authority. Speed is of the essence in the world of modern communications. The process of approving daily products through the office of DUSD(P) was painful for all involved, especially as there was no process established to facilitate such a channel. In addition, the DUSD(P) did not have the language qualification, cultural knowledge or an appropriately manned staff to verify and approve rapidly the products, further compounding the challenges of product approval. If the DUSD(P) had retained
approval authority, the PSYOP efforts in Afghanistan might not have reached the level of success and international attention that they receive today.

The illustrations discussed above are not all inclusive. They do, however, represent a sampling of the problems associated with the PSYOP approval process, difficulties in coordination and the restrictions placed on PSYOP at the national level. Similar examples have occurred in all operations from Operation URGENT FURY (1983) to the present, which are too numerous to review given the length requirements of this paper.

**CONCLUSION**

In the past 15 years, Psychological Operations have proved to be a capability that enhances the mission accomplishment of a CINC or JFC. Moreover, these operations remain the commander’s primary tool to communicate with foreign audiences using the appropriate language, simultaneously incorporating cultural norms, beliefs and values into the message. PSYOP can significantly contribute to the commander’s combat and peacetime missions. Given the importance that information activities can contribute, it is imperative that the approval chain for both the PSYOP plan and products be as short and streamlined as possible to facilitate timely review, approval, production, and dissemination.

To assist in the timely approval process, the documents governing PSYOP must accurately and succinctly provide the guidance required to ensure the successful application of PSYOP. Outdated, vague, and conflicting guidance must change.

It is nearly impossible to segregate the impact of military and nonmilitary informational activities. This is the very reason why the PSYOP approval authority resides at levels where the interagency process is institutionalized. The creation of ad hoc cells within the interagency environment at the time of crisis does not facilitate the timely
approval of PSYOP required by the CINC or JFC. President Clinton’s decision to bolster the international public information effort with the implementation of PDD-68 within DOS was promising. However, the lack of civilian expertise with military PSYOP, the need for increased military PSYOP manning within the interagency and the present administration’s absence of clear guidance in NSPD-1 that formalizes the conduct of information activities continue to confuse and lengthen the PSYOP approval process.

**RECOMMENDATION**

Currently, there are numerous directives, plans and publications that govern the control and application of PSYOP. For the most part they are in agreement. Many, however, are outdated and some need to be modified. For the combatant commander to have the greatest flexibility in the timely use of PSYOP in his theater necessitates the adoption of a single document that incorporates all existing publications. This would give renewed emphasis to the validity of the material found in some of the older documents, while at the same time educate those unfamiliar with the material by providing them a common source of reference. In addition, this publication should:

- Clarify terminology, such as “declared war,” “small scale contingencies,” “combat operations,” “OP3,” “Task Force operations,” “other than war” and “peace operations” in relation to the PSYOP approval process so that there is no potential for confusion in who is the approval authority in DOD, DOS and interagency circles.

- Direct that PSYOP planners have unimpeded access to the CINC or JFC. In the fluid environment of today’s operations, it is the only way to stay abreast of the
local and international situation while at the same time meeting the commander’s intent.

- Achieve presidential approval to modify and incorporate into NSPD-1 elements of PDD-68 that establish a robust, standing information organization at the Assistant Secretary of Defense level, that is capable of interagency coordination and incorporates members from departments and agencies responsible for information activities. This organization would provide the appropriate PSYOP guidance to planners, approve all PSYOP plans, and standardize informational procedures among agencies. As a standing organization, theater CINCs would receive timely PSYOP approval. Finally, it would facilitate keeping the product approval authority with the combatant commander.
NOTES

1 Department of the Army, Psychological Operations, Field Manual 3-05.30 (Washington, DC: 22 February 2000), 1-1.

2 Ibid., 1-2.

3 Ibid., 4-2.

4 Ibid.


6 Department of the Army, 4-3.

7 Ibid., vi.

8 Ibid., II-1.

9 Ibid., II-5.

10 Ibid., III-1.


12 Joint Chiefs of Staff, II-5.

13 Department of the Army, 1-9.

14 Ibid., 1-7.

15 Ibid., 1-8.

16 Department of Defense, B-2.


18 Christopher L. Leyda, LTC(P), Former Commander, 8th Psychological Operations Battalion (ABN), telephone conversation with author, 21 January 2002.

20 Ibid., 2-7 – 2-8.
21 Ibid., 2-8 – 2-9.
22 Ibid., 2-9.
23 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Department of the Army, 1-8.
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Wieler, Robert. MAJ(P), USA, Operations Officer J39, Deputy Director for Information Operations, the Joint Staff. Telephone conversation with author, 17 January 2002.