THE SECOND BATTLE OF HASTINGS

By Cliff W. Gilmore

Michael Hastings' most recent attempt to unseat a U.S. general alleges members of the military illegally used Information Operations (IO) and Psychological Operations (PSYOP) activities to shape the perceptions of elected U.S. officials and senior military leaders. Many respondents quickly addressed a need to clarify lines between various communication activities including Information Operations, Psychological Operations (recently re-named Military Information Support Operations or MISO), Public Affairs (PA) and Strategic Communication (SC). Amidst the resulting smoke and fury both Hastings and his detractors are overlooking a greater underlying problem: Many in the military continue to cling with parochial vigor to self-imposed labels – and the anachronistic paradigms they represent – that defy the very nature of a rapidly evolving communication environment.

The allegations highlight two false assumptions that guide the U.S. military's approach to communication in an environment defined not by the volume and control of information but by the speed and ease with which people today communicate with one another. This article identifies these assumptions and recommends several actions to avoid yet another Battle of Hastings by eliminating existing stovepipes rather than strengthening them. The analysis presented here is grounded in two key established Truths.

TRUTH ONE: Everything one does communicates something to somebody. That is, it is not possible to not communicate. Consequently physical actions cannot be planned and executed in isolation from communication activities.

TRUTH TWO: Those involved in the communication process are influenced in some way. Taken together with Truth One this means it is not possible to *not* influence those with whom one communicates. More broadly, one cannot *not* influence those with whom one interacts because "action" itself communicates something to someone.

On then to the military's false assumptions and their impact as manifested through the latest Hastings article.

TWO FALSE ASSUMPTIONS

FALSE ASSUMPTION ONE: With the exception of rare circumstances in which the "target" is tightly controlled and has limited access to an alternate medium, one can create, control and isolate-for-measurement specific and deliberate causal influence outcomes resulting from communication activities. While this may have been possible on battlefields of the past or in controlled academic experiments today, it is not so in the midst of a rapidly evolving communication environment characterized by speed, ubiquity and mobility.

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The underlying premise of Hastings' accusation is not that the military attempted to "IO" or "PSYOP" someone illegally. These are merely labels created by the community of military communication practitioners that confuse rather than clarify. The premise of the accusation is that the military allegedly attempted to manipulate civilian leaders to achieve a desired outcome. Since, in keeping with Truths One and Two, it is not possible to not influence when communicating and it is likewise not possible in today's environment to create, control and isolate specific measurable causal communication outcomes, the military essentially stands accused of doing the unavoidable (communicating) to achieve the impossible (a controlled outcome) in an unacceptable way (selective presentation of information).

Should this accusation against the military prove accurate the result is a violation of the core tenet of U.S. Military subservience to civil government. If the credibility of and public trust in the U.S. Military are eroded by a proven inconsistency between its claim of civil subservience and the reality of its actions it will be increasingly difficult to serve as an exemplar to other nations. The damage from this would likely be deep, subtle and enduring.

FALSE ASSUMPTION TWO: IO, PSYOP/MISO, PA and SC are individually discrete but inter-related activities. Information Operations, PSYOPS/MISO, PA and SC are *all* communication activities – or paradigms – intended to lend rigor to the communication process and achieve a deliberate outcome. Despite steadfast parochial defenders of each paradigm, they are merely different versions of the same activity, espoused differences between them being in the people toward which each is directed and the criteria against which information is sorted and packaged for use in communicating with others.

The common assertion that the difference between IO/PSYOP/MISO and PA/SC is the former are targeted at enemy and foreign audiences while the latter are targeted at U.S. citizens amounts to specious self-deception for two reasons. First, how a tool is used does not change the nature of the tool itself. Having fooled itself into thinking IO, PSYOP/MISO, PA and SC are different tools merely because the military uses them to "target" different people does not make them different tools. Second, insisting that a tool can be labeled one way when used to hit one kind of "target" then labeled another way to hit a different kind of "target" represents a near-clinical denial of the fundamental changes in speed, ubiquity and mobility that characterize the rapidly evolving communication environment.

At first glance Hastings highlights the obvious problem of the military allegedly attempting to "PSYOP" someone illegally, but the proclivity for self-injury goes much deeper than that. Organizational credibility and public trust are eroded through inefficiency in communication practices and inconsistency between words and deeds. This degradation is exacerbated by recurring failure to adapt to environmental changes and parochial desires to

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preserve the status quo. While the communication environment continues to evolve into something instant, ubiquitous and mobile, the military – in defiance of established Truths -- remains steadfastly committed to the idea of information control and delivery of messages to discrete target audiences.

Public Affairs personnel who according to doctrine exist to help plan and execute an effective communication process are generally occupied escorting journalists, responding to media queries, and reacting to helmet fires like that most recently lit by Hastings. Those hired to do the job PA proved either unable or unwilling to do operate within an SC construct that is ill-defined, inconsistently integrated into operations planning processes and structure, and as yet absent from the doctrinal framework within which the entire Department of Defense functions. Meanwhile those perhaps best trained and experienced to plan and execute an effective communication process -- IO and PSYOP/MISO practitioners -- are legally prohibited from "targeting" Americans, which many sincerely believe they avoid despite the fact that in today's communication environment it is nearly impossible to "target" a discrete group and prevent secondary relay (or "collateral damage" for those who insist on thinking of communication as a process of hitting some*thing* rather than interaction with some*body*).

On occasions when practitioners from the various parochial paradigms come together, which occurs fortuitously rather than through organizational design, their purpose is typically to de-conflict activities and avoid crossing lanes. That is, they generally strive to preserve the integrity of their respective stovepipes rather than to collaborate on execution of a holistic and unified communication process that aligns words with deeds.

Some may incorrectly suggest the Second Battle of Hastings was in part a result of manpower shortages. They are incorrect. The military is abundant with the people and experience needed to succeed in the modern communication environment, but they are labeled ineffectively, organized into outdated stovepipes, and constrained by rules that quit making sense right about the time the world went on-line and became mobile. These people represent an as-yet untapped wealth of collaborative capacity and capability that can be fully realized through deliberate changes in how they think, how they act and how they are organized.

ADAPTIVE ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

The first step to successful adaptive organizational change must come in the way the military thinks about communication. Having accepted Truths One and Two – that it is not possible to not communicate and it is not possible to not influence those with whom one communicates – the military must begin to think of communication as a process of human

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interaction rather than information control and delivery. This can be facilitated through specific changes to the current lexicon. For example, the word "communication" can generally replace the word "information" throughout doctrine and in practice. People who think in context of a communication environment, communication operations and communication activities will act much differently than those fixated on information, how vast, dangerous and powerful it is, and how to control it. It may also be helpful to stop describing the people with whom the military hopes to communicate as "targets."

The second step will be to establish a unified communication process that focuses first on who the military plans to communicate with and what it plans to communicate about rather than what target it plans to hit with a given message.

Finally – and most challenging – the military needs to scrap the current structural stovepipes and create a single unified communication function staffed with people who are trained and equipped to ensure a fundamental alignment between what the military says and what it does in an environment characterized by speed, ubiquity, and mobility. This last step may involve locking each and every IO, PSYOP/MISO, PA and SC person in a room, drawing those who understand the evolving communication environment into the new construct, and re-assigning or retiring those who remain married to the past.

Without these changes the Second Battle of Hastings will undoubtedly be followed by a third, a fourth… then a fiftieth -- and it is unlikely the military will adapt in time to begin resisting the next major environmental change.

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