



STRATEGIC MESSAGE A member of a Military Information Support company talks with local Afghan citizens. MIS Soldiers play a key role in understanding and communicating with foreign populations. U.S. Army photo by Specialist George Hunt

Thinking MISO: Linking Strategy to Selection

BY COLONEL REGINALD J. BOSTICK

Today's operational environment has become increasingly more complicated, and the pervasiveness of information affects all aspects of society. Most military organizations have attempted to react and adopt innovative means of addressing information operations, but a significant gap continues to exist between their capabilities and information operations' potential.¹

In an environment that is both interconnected and unpredictable, there is a persistent struggle between the application of power and the application of influence. The United States Special Operations Command, or USSOCOM, has identified both "credible influence" and "the operator" as keys to success in today's geostrategic environment.²

Beyond that recognition, the command has actually drawn a direct correlation between influence and the operator — a real innovation that marks the dawn of a

new era in SOF's ability to change undesired behaviors while investing in the intellectual capacity required to translate information into meaningful action.

USSOCOM's informational influence platform is its capability for Military Information Support Operations, or MISO (Soldiers and units themselves are called Military Information Support, or MIS). The purpose of MISO (formerly known as Psychological Operations) is to influence the behavior of selected foreign target audiences by disseminating messages that are consistent with national objectives.³

The evolution of MIS began in 2006 when former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld realigned all MIS groups. The Army Reserve MIS groups were placed under the operational control of the Army Reserve Command, and the active component group was directed to exclusively

execute and support special operations.⁴ This paradigm shift demanded that MIS be reinvented. Changes in doctrine, organization and training would be required to ensure that the active-component MIS group could fully conduct special missions and appropriately support SOF.

As USSOCOM continues to wield influence in the global environment, the command's leaders have also turned their attention to developing a new, expanded understanding of what sort of unique attributes are required of a modern SOF MIS Soldier — and new methods to identify, select and train him. The strategic environment clearly requires a more adaptive, flexible and intellectually sophisticated SOF MIS force than in the past.

This article will link USSOCOM's Command Strategy 2010 with the selection of MIS candidates and describe a suite of



SELECT FORCE The process for selecting and qualifying MIS Soldiers tests Soldiers' adaptability and mental toughness to ensure they can meet the demands of the modern MIS force. U.S. Army photo by Staff Sergeant Russell L. Klika

cognitive attributes that should be included in their assessment.

The Strategy and MISO

*The environments in USSOCOM's assigned missions are predominately focused on addressing nonstate or transnational violent extremist threats. Future threats are emerging more from the complex convergence of crime, migration and extremism and less from traditional national-state adversaries. This "new normal" can best be described as "irregular" in nature, and as such requires more than military activities alone to address.*⁵

— Admiral Eric Olson, USSOCOM commander

USSOCOM's strategic outlook begins by analyzing the realities that special operations face today: "nonstate actors, acting in state-like ways that challenge nation-states in competition for sovereignty and influence over the population."⁶ Given the mandate to respond effectively in this irregular environment, USSOCOM has made the population its strategic focus, rather than the threat itself.⁷

To secure victory in a globally unpredictable environment, USSOCOM systematically maps out a triad of ways, means and ends. For "ways," read "the operator"; "means," read "capabilities, authorities and capacity"; and "ends," read "credible influence."⁸

Defining the endstate as "credible influence" makes sense of what could otherwise be chaos.

USSOCOM aims to foster credible influence to "build the foundation for change, one which promotes ideologies that reject extremist affiliation, action and undercut recruitment efforts."⁹ And MISO is USSOCOM's primary means to counter violent extremist ideologies.¹⁰

In acknowledging the reality of acquiring credible influence, USSOCOM devotes special clarity to its "ways" — the operator. SOF operators are the focus of all efforts to develop, field and employ a special-operations force. In the end, we can never forget that the force we field must remain the most competent, respected, effective and lethal fighting force in the world.¹¹

This perspective establishes the construct for the SOF operator and, by extension, has implications for the evolution of the SOF MIS Soldier. The prime directive for special operations is sustaining the operator and ensuring that he is the world's foremost expert in warfighting and foreign cultures, and that he can execute missions in a defense, diplomacy and development (3-D) construct.¹²

"The USSOCOM 3-D warrior is that special operator who is regionally grounded, diplomatically astute, an expert in SOF core activities, and whose actions produce tactical

through strategic effects within a coordinated whole-of-government approach."¹³

In application, the SOF 3-D construct calls for MIS operators who exhibit exceptional intelligence and possess the right mix of cognitive abilities to bridge the gap between analysis and creativity.

The Way: Military Information Support Operators

MISO's primary job today is twofold: to craft effective messages and to provide commanders with the psychological implications of conducting operations.¹⁴ But MISO did not escape a trap common to many military forces coming of age in a technology-dominated era: too much emphasis on the equipment required to transmit messages and not enough placed on the messages themselves — or even more basic, on the skills of the individual crafting the transmission.

That oversight is now being rectified. USSOCOM's former commander, Admiral Eric Olson, recently directed that the MISO organizational focus shift immediately from hardware to the exponential expansion of intellectual capital. Finally, the operator is the acknowledged platform.

With MISO's focus now squarely on the human, not the hardware, USSOCOM is faced with a challenge: How do we invest in this new SOF MIS warrior?

Special operations have always placed a significant amount of emphasis on the quality of its people. Both by doctrine and in practice, special operations are conducted by specially selected, trained and equipped units with "highly-focused capabilities."¹⁵ In fact, the most repeated SOF Truth is, "Humans are more important than hardware." SOF assessment and selection is specifically designed to ensure that Soldiers who do not possess the right cognitive attributes for mission success are screened out as early as possible.¹⁶ That evolutionary process has consistently produced Special Forces, SEALs and special-operations aviators who are the best in the world.

In the same way, USSOCOM commanders believe that identifying the right set of suitability factors for MIS candidates will significantly increase both individual and organizational effectiveness.

The Model MIS Candidate

All elements of SOF seek similar qualities in those they select for training. Soldiers must

demonstrate physical fitness, trainability, good judgment, motivation, a strong intellect and the capacity to be a team player.¹⁷ The ideal SOF MIS Soldier has the same virtues.

But the MIS mission demands an additional suite of cognitive attributes — intelligence and problem-solving capabilities that have special value in crafting effective messages and winning the battle for popular influence.

Psychologically, human beings are not created equal when it comes to their “smarts.” Instead, people possess multiple, autonomous intelligences, as opposed to a single intelligence,¹⁸ according to Dr. Howard Gardner, a neuropsychologist who helped pioneer this field of study.

For example, many of us know someone with who possesses a near-magical ability to deal with computers (technical intelligence), but zero ability to get along well with others (personal intelligence).

Likewise, in defining an individual’s psychological suitability for MISO, the key question is not if an individual is intelligent overall — that is just the minimum assessment and relatively easy to discern.

The much more complex question is whether the candidate has the right type of intelligence to make a successful MIS operator. In fact, the fundamental challenge in the MIS community is how to recognize the individual cognitive characteristics that contribute to mission success.

Based on operational engagement, observation, training and testing, the most successful operators possess three specific skill sets: an ability to read the desires and intentions of others; the ability to create mental images; and sensitivity to patterns in language, both written and oral. In short, they are “people smart” (personally intelligent), “picture smart” (spatially intelligent) or “word smart” (linguistically intelligent).¹⁹

In the case of personal intelligence, an individual can “read intentions and desires — even when these are hidden — for example, by influencing a group of disparate individuals to behave among desired lines.”²⁰

With regard to spatial intelligence, one has “the capacity to perceive the visual world accurately and the ability to recreate aspects of one’s visual experience, even in the absence of relevant physical stimuli,” according to Gardner.²¹

And in the domain of linguistic intelligence, “One has a sensitivity to the different functions of language — its potential to excite, convince, stimulate, convey informa-

tion or simply please.”²²

MIS Soldiers who excel in these three cognitive attributes are a natural fit for the demands of the mission.

The cognitive capacity expected of a SOF MIS Soldier has never been greater. The development of a MIS assessment methodology that includes the measurement of personal, spatial and linguistic aptitude will provide the influence community with a stronger foundation for enhancing the cerebral development of MIS Soldiers.

Conclusion

Debates over MIS terminology, organization and integration often miss the main point: military information support is strategically important; and the MIS Soldier’s cognitive capacity is the single most important factor in determining how effectively he will meet the complex challenges that special operators face.

As we develop the overall model for the ideal MIS operator, our efforts must focus on improving the evaluative mental models we use to select that Soldier. We must be more concerned with the influence operator’s mental wiring than with most other aspects of his professional qualifications. The quality of that intellect will ultimately decide his or her capacity for the creativity, accuracy and organizational effectiveness so critical to today’s mission.

Transforming the SOF MIS Soldier’s selection criteria will not guarantee instantaneous behavioral change in foreign target audiences. But the quest to further refine assessment methodologies cannot help but improve the effective, agile and flexible application of credible influence which the U.S. military is able to exert in today’s geostrategic environment. **SW**

Col. Reginald Bostick is commander of the 4th Military Information Support Group. In his previous assignments, he has spent more than 22 years in a variety of command and staff assignments with both conventional and special-operations forces. He has participated in numerous deployment operations.

Col. Bostick’s most recent assignments have been military assistant to the Secretary of the Army and senior military fellow at the Institute of World Politics, Washington, D.C.

Col. Bostick holds a bachelor’s degree in history from Wofford College and a master’s in international relations from Troy State University.

Notes

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19. My observations and conclusions come from multiple years of service in a variety of assignments in SOF’s influence community, including detachment commander, battalion operations officer, battalion commander, deputy group commander, and more than 15 deployments worldwide.
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21. Gardner, 173.
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