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Military Strategy, Ethics and
Influence: a Response to Mackay
and Tatham

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Introduction

In their 2009 paper *Behavioural Conflict* Mackay and Tatham make a plea for greater understanding by the British military of the need for an influence strategy in current and future conflicts.¹ Their paper is the result of wide research and deep thought and it draws attention to a number of important issues that require more work by policy makers. It is valuable that Mackay and Tatham have started this conversation; however their work raises some difficult issues that require further consideration.

Mackay and Tatham argue that,

“...success in battle will demand as much an understanding of social psychology, culture and economics as it does military art and science” (p5).

This is a challenging and appealing assertion that sets the tone of their paper. However, given what is known about warfare it is unlikely that such an equivalence balance will ever be required or achieved. It is not clear in any case how such a balance could be assessed or planned for. Nevertheless, this argument does show where Mackay and Tatham intend to take the reader. We agree with Mackay and Tatham that non-kinetic effects will become increasingly important in operational theatres. This is reflected in current doctrinal thinking.² It is vitally important, however, that the relevant underlying theories of psychology, politics, sociology and economics are understood by commanders and those looking to influence within

¹ Steve Tatham and Andrew Mackay. *Behavioural Conflict: from General to Strategic Corporal: Complexity, Adaptation and Influence*. Shrivenham Papers No 9, December 2009

² JDP3-40 Security and Stabilisation: the Military Contribution

the operational theatre. Furthermore, there has to be an understanding of why and when influence needs to be used, not only in the specific tactical area of operations, but also, in a wider strategic sense. This idea of both tactical and strategic use of influence is a part of the concept of “Smart Power”.³ This paper suggests that military influence strategies embody a number of ethical, political and scientific issues about which Mackay and Tatham’s thinking encourages further reflection. Their paper is a wide ranging discussion and the focus here is on two of their overarching themes, rather than on addressing the individual arguments of their paper.

The Politics of Cross Cultural Influence

Mackay and Tatham claim (p. 10) that the British military must learn quickly how to apply influence concepts to the operational conflict in which it find itself. They argue that public opinion has a huge impact on the success of military operations. As the authors suggest,

“As a result of opinion, which for many in the world will form perceptions of reality, people will make choices. Our preference is that people should make the ‘*right*’ choice (italics in the original). In Afghanistan, and perhaps in future conflicts, the task of nudging people towards that choice, either by design or consequence, should become a function that the military perform in conjunction with civil actors.” (pp. 10-11)

³ Joseph S. Nye Jr. ‘In Mideast the goal is smart power’ Boston Globe. 19/08/2006
http://www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2006/08/19/in_mideast_the_goal_is_smart_power/ Retrieved 10/08/2010

This argument raises a number of important issues. Either opinion forms the perception of reality for everyone in the world or it does not. If it does not do so for some people we need to know why and the authors do not tell us. They seem to be working from an unstated assumption that, unlike other less enlightened individuals, they are highly educated professional westerners who are able to sift out and evaluate opinions and that therefore their reality is indeed a freely chosen one. Meanwhile, others who, implicitly, do not share the same outlook as the authors', do not make "right" choices because unlike the authors they are people whose thinking is determined for them by the opinion of others. The authors are supporting an Enlightenment view of human nature here, one that sees the individual as a malleable piece of clay that can be shaped one way or another to form reality for that person. This viewpoint typically leads on to an elitist view of politics where the elite know what is right and wish to alter the environment of others so that they will conform to the truth – think Plato's guardians. An obvious response to this argument is to ask the authors to show us that their perception of reality is not shaped by the opinions that they have received. Should we not also therefore be concerned about the choices that they make and the opinions that they express? Are they, indeed, "right" ones? This problem with their foundational argument in many ways weakens the analysis in their paper.

When Mackay and Tatham argue that they want people to make "right choices" as a result of their influence strategy, without explaining where these right choices originate, they quickly fall into this trap. Of course, we are not wholly unsympathetic to this viewpoint, but it is one that is open to many objections that need to be

thought through in detail and rebutted, if this argument is to be made. Western opinion which, implicitly, we are being asked by the authors to judge is “right”, finds its expression in military thinking. For example, one of the features of British military thought is a dislike of theory and an intuitive affection for what is practical.⁴ The British Army’s ethical statement, known as Values and Standards, which applies to every officer and soldier, illustrates this when it grounds its appeal for ethical behaviour on the ethics of a “decent society”.⁵ In doing this it is being pragmatic and avoiding the difficulties inherent in developing an ethical theory. British counter insurgency doctrine has rested on just such an intuitive sense of the “moral high ground” for many years as the 2001 edition of the Armed Forces Manual on COIN demonstrates.⁶ UK counter insurgency policy rests upon western assumptions about what are “right choices” and these are contemporary western liberal democratic principles of what is considered to be “right”.

Liberalism is a political outlook that advocates individual equal individual rights, private property, personal dignity, liberty, religious tolerance and limits to government power. It is a secular outlook that has little place for religion in its politics other than as a private matter for adherents. This is the framework through which many contemporary westerners look at war and politics and it is usually what they mean, or the set of ideas that they draw from, when they appeal to “right” choices or a “decent society” to justify their thinking.

⁴ Stephen Deakin. ‘Education in an ethos at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst’ in Paul Robinson, ed. *Ethics Education in the Military*. Ashgate, 2008, pp.15-29

⁵ Stephen Deakin. ‘Ethics and the British Army’s values and standards’. *British Army Review*, No 140, Winter 2006, pp. 39-46

⁶ Stephen Deakin. ‘Counter Insurgency Ethics at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst’. In Don Carrick et al eds. *Ethics Education for Irregular Warfare*. Ashgate, 2009, pp.119-32

It is this that we believe that the authors mean when they appeal for people to make right choices. Their appeal is to reconciliation and a “liberal peace”⁷ of the kind that is found in liberal democratic practices and institutions.

There are several problems with such an appeal to liberal democratic principles. They may not be as good as their supporters claim. Liberal democracy and the western outlook have their critics; both from those who believe that the West has lost its way and may consequently be in terminal decline, and also, from those who simply disagree with much contemporary western liberal democratic thinking. It is also apparent that taking western secular liberal ethics to Islamic countries such as Afghanistan complicates these arguments greatly.

Mackay and Tatham published in 2009 against a backdrop of the British commitment to Afghanistan and naturally it seems that they are influenced by this. This campaign illustrates a number of important issues for their argument. Afghanistan is obviously not a western liberal democratic nation and its population does not show any great enthusiasm for such ideals. The natives of Afghanistan are descendants of people who have lived in the area for hundreds and thousands of years and they have developed their own culture and religion and way of life. No one has forced Afghans to live like this, or to choose this religion, or this way of life; it is a freely chosen way for them. For some, thinking from a western liberal democratic perspective, such as Mackay and Tatham, the Afghans’ life style choices are difficult to understand and appreciate if they are freely

⁷ John MacMillan. *On Liberal Peace*. Tauris, 1998

chosen ones. Hence, their argument is that they cannot be freely chosen ones, but that they must instead be the product of opinions that have shaped their realities, as the authors contend.

Of course the deployment to Afghanistan dominates much British military thinking at present, rightly so. The authors maintain that future campaigns will need to be about changing the opinions of others and that this is part of the Afghanistan policy. It begs the question though to what extent Afghanistan or similar campaign will ever happen again. No one can predict the future or warfare accurately. The Cold War battle in central Europe did not require a change of thinking by the enemy; if war began, it was to be a fight to the finish and the last man standing won. Deployments to Muslim countries are different though. Islam is a very powerful and complex religion. The reality is that if opinions are going to be changed by western outsiders some of this changed thinking, at least, is going to stem from Islamic beliefs. Implicit then in Mackay and Tatham's arguments is the belief that western liberal democratic beliefs are stronger and better than those of Islam and others and that people who hold these beliefs should be influenced out of them. Great opposition should be expected to such change attempts; as former Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Richard Dannatt, once remarked about British forces in Iraq, "We are in a Muslim country and Muslims' views of foreigners in their country are quite clear."⁸

Once the Mackay and Tatham have decided that the people of Afghanistan are good sorts with a down to earth outlook on life who merely require a policy of "nudging pragmatists in a specific

⁸ Sarah Sands. 'Sir Richard Dannatt: a very honest General'. [The Daily Mail](#), 12/10/2006

direction” (p.11) they need to identify what the key problem in Afghanistan actually is. They reach for an analysis that a liberal democratic westerner can be comfortable with since it is about basic principles of western politics. Adoption of this analysis does not involve thinking about issues such as changing Islamic religious practices and the culture that flows from them, that is so difficult for liberals to grapple with. Liberal opinion is at an impasse here; since it holds both that people should choose their own views and that they should also change them if they are wrong illiberal ones.

For Mackay and Tatham the problem in Afghanistan is a simple political one,

“Thus Afghanistan, at its heart, is about stopping a deeply unpopular former government from returning to power...” (p.11)

In this formulation there is no mention of a crusade against the infidel that motivates so many to fight British troops, no mention of the central role of Islam in Afghan thought, no mention of the many and varied cultural and religious practices that Afghans follow that are inimical to western liberal democratic thought. We have been here before; westerners of a liberal persuasion are naturally uncomfortable with beliefs that are not open to persuasion and influence by themselves such as religion and nationalism. For example, in the UK, when Home Secretary James Callaghan, famously proclaimed in Northern Ireland in 1970 that, “the border is not an issue”. He meant by this that the dispute was not a nationalistic one. Many in Ireland responded with incredulity to this since they believed that the violence

was primarily about matters of nationalism and the question of who should rule the Province.

Later the authors do acknowledge that there may be other motives at work,

“For the die-hard ideologist, removing the *‘infidel crusader from Muslim lands’* may be the single goal of the conflict.” p.12
(italics in original)

However, they take the standard liberal view here and imply that such people are a small minority amongst the dispossessed, drug barons and those seeking power. (p.12.) Liberals find difficulty with religious ideologues, since they do not understand the motivating power of religion, having themselves an essentially secular outlook. The dispossessed and power seekers and drug barons are another matter though; since by a mixture of social engineering, spending and good security something can be done about them!

The authors then perform a common liberal illusion. They seem to have established that the problem is not really religious or ideological, except for a minority who, we are to infer, cannot be helped. They then order the preferences of those they want to help for them so that they make liberal choices rather than illiberal ones. The key line in their argument, having established that it is really about getting the poor and dispossessed on side, is,

“In the grinding poverty and hopelessness of Afghanistan such people will make any number of choices – pragmatism – if what is offered is better than what they have.” (p.12)

So, given the choice, all but the ideologues, who are beyond help, will make right choices if they are better than what they already have. Such a utilitarian analysis does not allow for consideration of religious, cultural and national factors that may be at work here.

All of this could be seen as hugely insulting to those whose preferences have been reordered for them. Also, it does not suggest that this policy will be a successful one since it not based on a solid analysis of the issues involved. The arguments of an anthropologist, Scott Atram, writing recently about western policy in Afghanistan, support the critique of Mackay and Tatham’s developed in this paper.

“Outsiders who do not understand local cultural and group dynamics tend to ride roughshod over values they don’t grasp. To improve women’s status in Pashtun lands may take time (it took women’s suffrage a century in our country) and, as the Soviets learned there, not by foreign programmes. As we find again and again — in our research in Morocco, Palestine, Iran, Pakistan, India, and Indonesia—, helping to materially improve lives will not reduce support for violence, and can even increase it if people feel such help compromises their most cherished values. After all, do we really want to help build up a society with so-called friendlies or reconcilables who can turn to or

away from us on a dime, rather than working with the other side's sacred values even if some are hard to stomach?"⁹

"Now, we need to bring a similar perspective to bear in Afghanistan and Pakistan that is smart about cultures, customs and connections because the present policy of focusing on footprints and drones, and trying to win over people by improving their lives with aid programmes that we concoct, only follows a long history of foreign involvement and failure."¹⁰

The Psychology of Influence

Despite the issues discussed above regarding the cultural differences between the Coalition approach and the society they find themselves working within, influence is possible. However, there needs to be a deeper understanding of the psychological theory that underpins the influencing of others. For example the authors quote Johnson-Cartee & Copeland,¹¹ noting that facts inform and emotions inspire. Yet this is a rather simplistic view and it is important that the emotions triggered by soft power strategies are the correct ones and targeted at the correct audience. An example would be the numerous health campaigns run by the UK government, specifically the HIV /AIDS awareness campaign in the 1980'S. This campaign was an attempt to raise awareness of the risk of HIV AIDS amongst the general population using fear as the main persuader. Sherr found in an analysis of the effect of the campaign that,

⁹ Scott Attran. 'A question of honour: why the Taliban fight and what to do about it'. Asian Journal of Social Science, 38, 2010, pp.341-61

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 358

¹¹ Karen S. Johnson-Caree & Gary A. Copeland. *Strategic Political Communication: Rethinking Social Influence, Persuasion and Propaganda*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2008

“...the campaign had no effect on adjusting misconceptions and anxiety was not lowered. Attitudes and behaviour were unaltered.”¹²

Job suggests that the use of fear requires a specific set of circumstances and needs to be targeted carefully before there is any chance of effective behavioural change.¹³ Amongst the requirements is that of the possibility of fear reduction. Modern anti-smoking campaigns in the UK try and attempt this by advertising help lines and advice in order to allow the smoker to reduce the fear complex by being able to access help in changing behaviour. However, it is difficult to measure how effective some of these campaigns actually are and they need to be specific to differing target audiences; all of which means that in the ever changing operational theatre such emotional campaigns are difficult to produce effectively.

We suggest that influence operators need to try and find a win-win approach. To do this influence operators need to target specific audiences and understand the underlying needs of that audience. For example it is no stretch of the imagination that most Afghan civilians want a secure country to live in and the removal of the ISAF forces in order to take control of their own future. Isn't that what is the expressed aim of our operation is? By taking this approach, of looking for shared values and needs, we would suggest that influencers would have more intrinsic effect on attitudes, rather than explicit attitude changes which are non-permanent and often not even genuine

¹² L. Sherr 'An evaluation of the UK government health education campaign on AIDS'. *Psychology & Health*, 1 (1) 1987, pp.61-72

¹³ R.F. Soames Job. 'Effective and ineffective use of fear in health promotion campaigns'. *American Journal Public Health*, 1988, pp.163-67

expressions of true belief. We must be careful that when “nudging protagonists” (p11) we are not just producing explicit attitude change which as soon as we are gone has reverted to the original anti-ISAF attitude. We need to seek a true attitudinal change on the internal level.

The problem is one of heterogeneity of the population. We are not dealing with one group of people in Afghanistan, but a complicated collection of tribes, religions and regional groups. Each requires to be influenced in a manner that is specific to their situation, culture, beliefs and needs. The message needs to be tailored uniquely to the target population and its mode of delivery needs to be appropriate. Lines of Persuasion (LOPs) need to be developed by PSYOPS advisors with regard to information built up by Target Audience Analysis (TAA) teams.

Mackay and Tatham note the problem of perception of the actions of others and how our actions in turn are perceived by them. This in psychological terms is called Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE).^{14, 15} This is the tendency to over attribute dispositional factors when observing behaviour in others, while ignoring the situation that they are in. We also have to be aware of Actor/Observer Bias, especially when our behaviour is negative: we will blame the situational factors rather than the disposition in ourselves for certain behaviours, but the disposition rather than situation, for the same

¹⁴ L. Ross. ‘The intuitive psychologist and his shortcomings: distortions in the attribution process’. In L. Berkowitz ed. Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, Academic Press, Vol 10, 1973, pp. 173-320

¹⁵ E.E. Jones & V.A. Harris. ‘The attribution of attitudes’. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 3 1967, pp. 1-24

behaviour in others.¹⁶ Influence operators need to be aware of these errors in perception, especially since it appears to have a cultural bias. It appears that collectivist societies tend to be less prone to these effects than individualistic societies.¹⁷ With Afghan society tending to be collectivist in nature, there is great significance in how we approach our understanding of their behaviour. This may mean that we are more likely to prejudge, erroneously, the behaviour of Afghan nationals than they are of us.

The above is just one possible example of deep seated psycho-cultural differences between the Western Forces of ISAF and the local Afghan people. In order to deliver the “Dynamic Influence” suggested by MacKay and Tatham, local commanders do indeed need authority and control devolved to them. However, we would argue that this will not be effective without platoon and company commanders understanding the concepts of key leader engagement, cultural awareness and the underlying theories and applications on influence. Any training undertaken by commanders needs to be based on a sound analysis of the local human environment and not, as seems from the MacKay and Tatham paper, based on innate, intuitive understanding of the local conditions: which can be severely filtered by military and cultural stereotyping. This filtering leads to a series of flawed heuristics which, in tandem with the normal cognitive biases involved in understanding situations and problem solving, lead to gross errors in the solutions generated. The example given in the text of the bat

¹⁶ Elliot Aronson. *The Social Animal*. 9th ed., Freeman, 2003

¹⁷ J.G. Miller. ‘Culture and the development of everyday social explanation’. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 46, pp.961-78

that cost £1 more than the ball (p18)¹⁸ is a good illustration of when the intuitive response is in error, but if the reader had used a rational problem solving approach to this problem they would have in all probability reached the correct answer. Rational problem solving is slower and takes more cognitive effort; however the solution is more likely to be correct. In the case of influence operations the commanders on the ground shouldn't have to be making quick decisions on influence matters. Such operations should be considered and planned before deployment. Best practice would be for influence operations to be implemented as part of an overall strategy based on a rationally planned approach, rather than on a tactical quick reaction. We do accept, however, that there are inevitably situations where a quick response is required and in which a rational plan will take a long time to develop. This is where expert intuition can be useful; this is when the individual has built up a set of mental scripts based on previous situations in which they have found themselves and the solutions that have worked. In many cases, these scripts are accessed unconsciously by the individual and are therefore faster than the rational approach of working out new solutions. It must be remembered though, that even using expert intuition cognitive biases can still occur and the individual needs to be wary of such errors.

It is laudable that General Mackay took a rational decision to engage with Influence operations before the deployment of 52 Brigade, but it is disappointing that it seems that some of the shaping of the command thinking was based on the concept of Homo Economicus; a concept that has been criticised as too simplistic and standing in sharp

¹⁸ A bat and a ball cost £1.10. The bat costs £1 more than the ball. How much does the ball cost? Most people will give the incorrect answer of 10p. In fact the ball costs 5p.

contrast to the findings of many psychologists and sociologists.¹⁹ The authors admit that this was a start of the journey for them that did lead to the excellent work of Kahneman and Tversky (p18).²⁰ We wholeheartedly agree that the Strategic Communications and Influence Operations that are undertaken need to be based on sound applied psychology.

The awareness of the issues surrounding influence operations come from education and we agree with the authors that the MoD can use its resources in this area to better effect. The Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst already teaches elements of influence as part of the Commissioning Course. This is mainly led by the academic staff. This early introduction of the theory is vital, but we believe that this is of little use for the current crop of commanders unless access to such academic expertise is made more available. This is unlikely to happen, however, unless commanders make it clear that this is what they require and are aware that such expertise may currently be diffused throughout the MoD. It is vital, therefore, that there is a structured and informed process for commanders and influence operators to access current thinking in these areas. It may be that some consideration of the problems of diffusing this knowledge should be addressed. From private discussions with some members of the military, we are aware of the feeling of frustration from officers involved in Psychological and Influence Operations: often they are just at the stage of building up their understanding of this complex role when they are moved to their next posting. We would suggest that those involved in influence operations at all levels be allowed to build up a store of expertise upon

¹⁹ S. Schneider. *Homo economicus or more like Homer Simpson?* Deutsche Bank Research at https://www.dws-investments.com/EN/docs/research/homo_economicus.pdf

which to draw on and share. The Army Knowledge Exchange is a good start, but it may be beneficial to have specialist influence officers who are career focused in this area of expertise.

The Way Forward

In their paper Mackay and Tatham conclude by suggesting that by adopting the approach that they recommend will not have a military cost. They publish a table suggesting that the use of what they term a behaviourist approach has a significant impact on casualty rates. The table does seem, at face value, to support such a claim, but due to lack of data the current authors were unable to find any statistically significant difference in the casualty rates given. In any case, such claims are difficult to substantiate, due to a number of random variables such as: operational tempo, military mission, time of year, and other factors. Yet, we cannot dismiss what appears as a fair reduction in the casualty rates and we support Mackay and Tatham's call for more focussed and rigorous research into this phenomenon.

As we have noted above we agree with the recommendation that the MoD adopts an even more coherent organisation wide approach to Influence Operations. An approach that considers the use of a wider range of tools that can be brought to bear on the problems involved. It seems short sighted to address only behavioural change, even though this is the ultimate goal. It would be better to consider changing the underlying attitudes that drive behaviour. If we do not do this, it is likely that we will only gain extrinsic change, which is of little lasting use. To do this we need to identify the shared values held by those we hope to help make changes and use a range of disciplines

to exploit the common cognitive ground. We suggest, as the basic building blocks to practicing influence, that a well rounded influence operator will have an understanding of cognitive, behavioural, social and cultural psychology, as well as negotiation theory, problem-solving, change-management and motivation theory. We need to get away from the concept, that we see in Mackay's and Tatham's paper that communication is a purely "send" process and that by giving information we are actually persuading.