

# TACTICAL PERCEPTION



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**Foreword**

In today's operating environment every tactical action or reaction generates perceptions among the local populace, just as they always have. Modern information technology, however, is now capable of immediately propagating—if not outright manipulating—perceptions globally. Every Marine who interacts with a foreign populace has a piece to play in the world's perception of the United States. From the daily interaction with civilians to the treatment of prisoners, each Marine must understand his role in shaping perception at the tactical level.

Generating favorable perceptions of our efforts does not result exclusively from technical information operations, over-arching themes, or a strategic communications plan, but through the integration of those means with day-to-day tactical actions.

This concept espouses that all Marines must have an appreciation for the role they play in shaping perception in a “war among the people.” It posits that they must develop sufficient understanding of the society in which they are operating—its culture, religions, politics, economy, and so forth—to guide their actions in a manner that creates a favorable impression. It is not enough to “do the right thing,” they must do so in a manner that is known and understood by the local population as being both for their benefit and consistent with their culture. That understanding, nested within but not constrained by the overarching campaign design, is the key ingredient to success. Armed with that understanding, technical information operations can be more effectively integrated with day-to-day tactical operations, both lethal and non-lethal.

Today's strategic environment makes it critical that small unit leaders and their Marines understand how their tactical actions and responses to the local people merge with the use of information operations to shape public perception and effect a campaign's outcome. This concept is intended as the basis for training and education enhancements toward that end, as well as the foundation for practical application in the crucible of current operations.



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# Tactical Perception

*“The most effective information operations tools we have are the kindness, compassion, discipline, and courage of the Marines, soldiers and sailors that interface daily with the Iraqi population.”*

*BGen Robert Neller*

## Introduction

The United States finds itself in a new strategic era and faces a security environment composed of numerous and diverse challenges which threaten our national interests. These challenges include a complex mix of regional and rising peer competitors, states who sponsor terrorism, failing states that undermine regional stability, and a variety of transnational extremists, insurgents, pirates, criminals, and paramilitary forces who seek to destabilize legitimate governments. The Marine Corps *Midrange Threat Estimate 2015* identifies three means future adversaries may employ that constitute the greatest cause for concern: **information operations**, **terrorism**, and **weapons of mass destruction**. It forecasts that information operations, to include attack, exploitation, propaganda and media manipulation, will be conducted by a variety of extremist organizations, criminal elements, and nation states.

To offset our traditional military dominance our adversaries have adopted irregular approaches centered on the civilian population, segments of which provide a source of refuge and support, targets to be attacked, and opinions to be swayed. Their tactical actions are designed to manipulate public perceptions, locally, regionally, domestically in the United States, and globally. Enhanced global connectivity has increased the reach and effectiveness of this approach. Our adversaries have demonstrated an uncanny ability to rapidly turn even the smallest tactical event into a perception supporting their cause. Whether filming the aftermath of an air strike or portraying non-uniformed terrorists or insurgents as innocent casualties, the effect within the population and global community is immediate.

We face an era of wars over what people think, in which battles will be fought amongst a local population in order to persuade or compel them, as well as external audiences, to support one side over another. We are unlikely to win these wars unless our tactical actions are designed and executed in a manner that achieves popular local allegiance and international legitimacy, necessitating an understanding of how our actions will be perceived by the various audiences. Perceptions are effected by our actions, our words or information, and the cultural lens through which each audience interprets them. The art of employing tactical actions to achieve desired perceptions involves a thorough grasp of the relationship between action, information, and cultural filters. We have numerous professional development initiatives underway to enhance Marines’ cultural awareness. How we use information, however, requires further examination.

Information operations are defined as: “The integrated employment of the core capabilities of electronic warfare, computer network operations, psychological operations, military deception, and operations security, in concert with specified supporting and related capabilities, to influence, disrupt, corrupt or usurp adversarial human and automated decision making while protecting our own.” In practice, information operations are often centrally driven, compartmentalized technical activities not incorporated as a comprehensive aspect of the campaign. Frequently planned and

executed by a separate staff in a manner that is incongruent with campaign design, they may work at cross-purposes with small unit actions and cause disjointed, inappropriate results. The centralized approach to information operations appears at odds with our warfighting doctrine that stresses decentralization and subordinate initiative. In the new strategic era, it is critical that the small unit leader and his Marines on the “pointy end” understand how their tactical actions will merge with the use of information to shape public perception. No amount of technology or combat power will overcome the failure to understand the perceptions generated by their use. As paradoxical as it may sound, the application of direct military force or technology has decided limitations, and may in some cases de-legitimize the best intentioned efforts in the minds of the population. Fighting wars “amongst the people” increases the need for an astute and practical understanding of information and perception management at the lowest tactical levels.

*In the summer of 2004 in Iraq, in the wake of the Abu Ghraib scandal in which detainees at a major detention facility run by the U.S. military were abused by U.S. military personnel, there was a degree of mistrust by Iraqi leaders of the way that all military detention facilities were run. In the Al Anbar Province, Camp Ramadi was the site of the regional detention facility and thus a major focus of attention. In an effort to get out in front of the battle of perceptions, the Brigade Commander who owned the facility decided to host an “open house” day for local leaders and media to tour the detention facility. Many prominent leaders took advantage of the event—to include the governor of Al Anbar, the mayor of Ramadi, and the Chief of Police for Al Anbar. The tour did not go exactly as the Brigade Commander had planned. Early on, it became obvious that the distinguished visitors were less interested in the facility itself and the formal procedures for operations than with evaluating the human dimension of how detainees were actually handled—and what these detainees had to say about their treatment. Officers on the scene opted to allow these local leaders to speak with some of the detainees during the tour. Then a really unusual thing developed. The governor asked to have a certain detainee released—to his personal custody. The Battalion Commander whose men made the arrest was on the scene and agreed immediately to the release as the man was deemed a “small fish” and of little value to either side. Also, the man was crippled from a severe injury to his foot. The man was released to the governor who took him with him when he departed Camp Ramadi and turned him over to the man’s family. What did all this accomplish? Maybe it accomplished nothing. However, what the “open approach” probably did was demonstrate to the local leaders, who could go back with the message to the local people, that the detention facility was not like the one at Abu Ghraib, that though the detainees were unhappy about being detained at all, they were not being mistreated. The governor made some local political clout by showing he had some influence with military authorities (and at little cost to the coalition effort). After the leaders left, a reporter out of Baghdad arrived. Perhaps he smelled “blood” after reading what had occurred at Abu Ghraib. Ironically, there really was not a story worth printing from his standpoint. There was no controversy, no abuse. He ended his tour complaining about the rudimentary nature of the showers. When the officer conducting the tour explained that these facilities were not unlike what the Soldiers and Marines were using, the reporter answered, “Yes, but you are soldiers and are accustomed to living in this way.” He left with little to report. Though a positive news story coming from this Baghdad reporter would have been highly desirable, the fact that the Brigade running the Ramadi Regional Detention Facility was able to preclude a negative report was a win in the perception fight.*

## The Problem

We have failed to recognize the importance of perception in wars amongst the people and the associated need for both proactive and reactive uses of information, from small tactical units up through all echelons of command. We have failed to inculcate an appreciation that creating favorable perceptions does not result exclusively from technical information operations, overarching IO themes, or a higher HQ strategic communications plan, but through the integration of those means with day-to-day tactical actions, both kinetic and non-kinetic.

***Tactical Perception*** is created through the harmonization of individual and unit actions with information operations activities. The management of perception is vital to tactical success.

## The Central Idea

War amongst a population has a dominant social and political aspect which is often difficult to understand, especially when it involves other cultures. It should not be assumed that the general population supports one adversary or another—most individuals are likely neutral. Gaining their support, however, is a determining factor in winning. Positive action, tailored to the mores and needs of the indigenous society and reinforced by rhetorical persuasion, are critical to favorably influencing perceptions. This form of influence is more akin to marketing than propaganda. Recognizing that “actions speak louder than words,” rectitude in all behavior is very much a part of generating a positive perception of friendly forces, their activities, and objectives. All Marines need a savvy appreciation for the role they play in shaping perception. They must develop sufficient understanding of the society—its culture, religions, politics, economy, and so forth—to guide their actions in a manner that creates a favorable impression. It is not enough to “do the right thing,” they must do so in a manner that is known and understood by the local population as being both for their benefit and consistent with their culture. Information operations must therefore pave the way for tactical actions in a manner that will resonate with the locals. When properly framed the tactical actions themselves—from conducting security checkpoints, to digging a new well, to providing immunizations, to raids against enemy sanctuaries—become a form of information operations that change public perceptions. While the campaign design should provide an overarching framework for such an approach, it must also be recognized that local conditions may vary widely within an area of operations. Subordinate commanders have a responsibility to understand the nuances resident within their own areas and the latitude to adjust their tactical actions and use of information accordingly.

The information domain cannot be viewed as some separate form of combat, and viewing it as such will only contribute to the problem. Even rhetoric from leaders that directs subordinates to “cloak” or wrap their activities in information operations may tend to confuse the issue. The actions of a small unit will influence, positively or negatively, the overall endeavor. Actions do, in fact, speak louder than words. They must be planned and executed in a comprehensive way to achieve both physical results and the desired perception of those results. Those ends can only be achieved when activities are conceived together as a coherent whole. The campaign plan should provide a unifying theme that allows subordinate commanders to maintain unity of purpose even as they make adjustments to suit local conditions. The issues that a company or battalion commander needs to address are often quite different than something that emanates from the national level, combatant commander, or from the ambassador’s office. Within the unifying

theme natural flexibility to address the issues pertinent to a local region must exist. This is akin to marketing, and to achieve effective market penetration, the message must be relevant for the culture or even micro-culture unique to a particular area or people group.

The Marine Corps' requires a bottom-up approach that recognizes the value of information as an element of a comprehensive approach. In order to create perceptions supporting mission accomplishment, the Marine Corps must initiate efforts to improve the informational acuity of all Marines, especially those in daily contact with adversaries and non-combatants. We need to be able to harness the energy, initiative, and local knowledge provided by these Marines and use the creative abilities of Marines and their small units to regain the initiative through the responsible and creative use of information. Marines need to understand the effects of information just as well as they understand fire and maneuver. The importance of information and the impact of perception in war amongst a population may often be more powerful than kinetic weapons.

Perception management does not occur in a static or benign environment in which one side acts on another inert actor, but rather in environment characterized by a clash of ideology with two or more elements struggling and adapting constantly. We must never underestimate the effectiveness of the opposition in their ability to counter our initiatives and influence the populace. Marines at all levels must enhance their understanding of the relationship between friendly forces, adversaries, the population, and any other actors involved in order to seize the perception management initiative. In warfare involving a population, it is essential that we push our adversaries into the reactive mode.

During initial operations in a given area, communicating the right message will be extremely difficult for Marines because they will not likely be familiar with the indigenous culture in general and local nuances in particular. However, encouraging Marines to interact with a population will provide an understanding of the culture, problems, and perception being generated. This interaction enables relevant action and supports proper use of information and management of perceptions. As discussed earlier, the Marine Corps has various cultural awareness initiatives underway. Ultimately, however, the baseline knowledge these initiatives provide must be expanded upon through direct contact with the local population and improved understanding of their culture. For instance, Marines might desire to induce an adversary to surrender, but the word "surrender" can hold negative emotional connotations. Ramon Magsaysay, who led his nation's successful counterinsurgency against the Huk Rebellion, carefully avoided the word "surrender" in his communications regarding amnesty for insurgent combatants. "What is essential is that the guerrillas stop fighting, not that they abase themselves."

Whenever practical and prudent, Marines should try to propagate their message by establishing a genuine partnership with the population, thereby enhancing the likelihood that our actions will generate the desired perception. The message is much more convincing if it comes from a local source. Once local inhabitants are broadcasting your message, your chances of success will increase exponentially.

In the same way, seemingly small actions at the tactical level can have a significant influence on local perceptions. How do enemies capitalize on our mistakes in a complex environment? Methods vary, but a common one is to paint the U.S. military as an oppressive and unjust occupation force. Consider this hypothetical scenario:

A Marine unit establishes a Traffic Control Point (TCP) along one of the main exterior roads of a large city in the operational area. The intent was to control insurgent activity by limiting movement during a certain period. The unit does a good job selecting the site for the TCP and establishes good site geometry as well. The operation seems to be going well, with a high volume of traffic being stopped, processed and allowed to advance. As the day wears on, the traffic volume tapers off significantly. Then a car is seen approaching the entrance to the VCP and is traveling a bit fast. The Marines at the entrance to the VCP signal the vehicle to stop. The car seems to speed up. The Marines (according to their escalation of force SOP) fire warning shots in an effort to hail the car—to no avail. Finally, as the car actually begins to enter the outside of the VCP, the Marines fire two rounds into the engine block area of the car and the car stops. The Marines follow their SOP and advance cautiously up to the car. No one in the car was injured. The driver, who is extremely frightened and shaking visibly, manages to communicate to the Marines that he was trying to rush his brother to the hospital. Apparently, they are carpenters and his brother cut his hand using a saw. The Marines see a middle aged man in the back seat with a serious wound to his hand. The Marines are still angry at the driver (and high on adrenaline) from the incident, but they see that the man needs to get to the hospital, so they allow the men to pass the VCP. Unfortunately, the car will not start and has to be abandoned. The men walk away on foot. The Marines report the incident, and a couple hours later, close down their VCP and retire to their Firm Base. The report travels up the chain of command just as all incident reports do. However, rumor of the incident spreads like wildfire throughout the city. Insurgents take video images of the car, which is now full of holes, including a shattered windshield. Blood is everywhere. Obviously someone was killed in this car. The local media shows up to “investigate.” The images they display are pretty graphic. They interview a few local people. One man says he saw the Marines fire into the vehicle. He is not sure if anyone got out of the car alive. The next morning, the insurgents claim that this incident is unjust and shows the brutality and lack of regard the Americans have for the local people. This was a “win” for the insurgents because they got their message out, and undermined the U.S military effort and, indirectly, the host nation government that the U.S. is supporting.

## **Implications for Combat Development**

Developing tactical perception in Marines places new and unique demands on the judgment of Marines at all levels. As such, training and education, leader development and doctrine are the central capability areas for enhancement. Some of the potential combat development initiatives are listed below. These are not equally weighted in terms of difficulty or time to execute. Specific enhancements may include:

- Educate all Marines on the nature and challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century security environment.
- Increase awareness of the power of information and the importance of managing, perceptions.
- Raise collective understanding of informational impact of friendly activities, especially operations “amongst the people.”
- Decentralize authority for select information operations.
- Collect and promulgate lessons learned.

- Train and educate Marines in diverse cultures.
- Promote understanding between Marines and the people and government of the host nation regarding needs, actions, goals, and results.
- Consider the establishment of psychological operations specialists within the active component. This capability should reside in some capacity down to the regimental level. Additionally, training seminars should be conducted with all units that will be operating with a degree of independence.
- Formal school programs of instruction and training exercises should address the role of small unit leaders and individual Marines have in generating perceptions, using dynamic, ambiguous, and complex scenarios involving a population.
- Public affairs personnel should be integrated more thoroughly into planning, execution, and assessment of operations.

### **Planning Considerations**

- Learn the adversaries messages or narratives (organizational scheme expressed in story form) and form counter-messages and counter-narratives. The idea is to counter the insurgent's ideology and for that you must understand the specific culture of that society.
- From John Hershey's *Major Victor Joppolo*: Always be accessible to the public. Don't play favorites. Speak the local lingo whenever possible. Don't lose your temper. When plans fall down, improvise.
- Publicize adversary mistakes.
- Take the adversary's demands and turn them on the adversary. The adversary may seek to profit from internal contradictions (a technique the Communists used to some effect). Identify these honestly, and work with the host nation to resolve them where possible—then communicate any success as a sign of improvement.
- Be willing to admit your mistakes (or mistakes perceived by the people) and explain these mistakes—including mistakes committed by friendly forces or the host nation government.
- Shape expectations of the populace (sometimes people expect too much too soon, and when the government or intervention force is slow to deliver, the people can become disgruntled).
- Create a perception management crisis response team to mitigate mistakes and capitalize on unexpected opportunities. The team needs to beat the adversary to the media and population.

- Ensure subordinate units have a capability to document and collect evidence supporting their actions, particularly when they can be perceived wrong. (e.g.: civilian property or lives injured/destroyed.)
- Give the people some ways and means of voicing their opinions and grievances—even if that activity appears at first to cause short-term friction with friendly efforts. Establish a feedback loop from population to government to ensure needs are identified and to align perceptions.
- Recognize that various factions are communicating amongst themselves, often working to create alliances of convenience (which usually work to the detriment of the government and/or coalition). Seek out communications with the various factions, as they are identified, and work to prevent unhealthy alliances (as defined from the friendly perspective). Treat the factions as singular entities.
- Conduct audience analysis (an ongoing task) and seek to identify key personnel that influence the people at the local, regional and national levels. Seek to determine with great specificity the relevant lines of loyalty of a population.
- Go the extra mile in the professional treatment of detainees—even if that means they have a standard of existence on par with friendly personnel. Arrange for local host nation leaders to visit your detention facility. Show them around. If practicable, consider allowing them to speak to some detainees. When someone is captured, ensure that friendly personnel treat the captured persons professionally throughout the handling process until those persons are turned over to the detention facility personnel.
- In counterinsurgency operations, seek to open up a dialogue with the opposition as soon as practicable. This does not equate to “negotiating with enemy” but rather is an attempt to open the door to mutual understanding and shifting from military to political interaction. Even if this discourse does not succeed, it may provide insight that can be used to friendly advantage.
- There is a certain local nature to legitimacy. That is, what passes for legitimacy varies by location. Moreover, it is not a static thing. It changes over time.

## **Conclusion**

Although much work remains in translating this concept into a viable capability, several key issues assume great prominence. The biggest area for attention is in the realm of education and training Marines at all echelons, because war amongst the people is won at the small unit level, where perceptions are developed. Second, within the framework provided by the campaign plan, information operations must be fully integrated into all operations at every echelon.