

## Fact-checking psychological ops

By Roshan Nebhrajani | March 10, 2011



The RollingStone story by Michael Hastings.

Rolling Stone journalist Michael Hastings recently published an [article](#) accusing Lt. Gen. William Caldwell of illegal conduct. According to the story, Caldwell ordered Lt. Col. Michael Holmes to use psychological operations to influence U.S. senators visiting Afghanistan to support increased funding for the war.

Since its publication late February, the story has been hotly debated. Critics, both from within the military and outside of it, accuse Hastings of sensationalism and inaccuracy. Noah Shachtman and Spencer Ackerman of [Wired.com](#) as well as Thom Shanker of the [New York Times](#) wrote articles claiming the operation was not a psychological one, nor was it deemed illegal by Army lawyers.

### What are PSYOPs?

Picking apart fact from fantasy requires an understanding of what psychological operations – PSYOPs – can do. While the name can conjure up images of “Manchurian Candidate” brainwashing, these operations employ the same tactics as marketing, advertising or public relations, according to John Pike, director of the national security forum [globalsecurity.org](#). “Synonyms of PSYOPs include propaganda, perception management or information operations,” Pike said.

The Department of Defense defined psychological operations as “planned operations to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals” in the May 2010 Consolidated Report on Strategic Communication and Information Operations.

U.S. military forces have used these operations against enemies since World War II. “The Americans used deception and psychological operations to convince the German high command that the D-Day invasion was not going to be launched at Normandy but at Calais,” according to an article by retired Maj. Ed Rouse, a PSYOPs specialist.

They continue to do so in Afghanistan.

“In a contemporary military context we’re talking about trying to persuade

the Taliban that we're going to remain in Afghanistan so there's no prospect of them waiting us out," Pike said.

"The original name of [PSYOPs] was propaganda [...but then...] propaganda got a bad reputation. So they changed it to psychological warfare, using the art of psychological operations to help win war battles," said Herbert Friedman, a retired sergeant major and PSYOP expert. "Now it's called MISO (Military Information Support and/to Operations.)"

PSYOP specialists collect information that will enable them to reach the hearts and minds of the enemy. After understanding the target population, U.S. specialists utilize media to persuade the enemy to support and promote U.S. national interests.

"The job is writing. You write radio and television scripts and you produce leaflets and posters," Friedman said. "What you're basically trying to do is convince people to do what is best from the standpoint of the U.S."

To become trained in the specialty field of PSYOPs, military officials must complete a PSYOPs course that consists of five skill levels. It is undetermined if Holmes, the colonel who accused Caldwell of misusing PSYOPs, was PSYOP-trained.

"What this fellow is claiming that he was an expert and was used improperly. He was not an expert, he was sent to Afghanistan to train troops and he did not like that [...] and the funniest part of the article is that he claims that he was going to use his powers to brainwash congressmen and senators to mold their minds," Friedman said. "You can't even do what he claimed."

"It's not like these PSYOP people have microwave devices that could influence people's brainwaves," Pike said.

What PSYOP does is create messages that are designed to "corrupt and disrupt," according to Mike German, policy counsel on national security, immigration and privacy at the American Civil Liberties Union. "It could be comments on a blog. It could be commentary in a newspaper or just influencing reporters themselves."

### **Legality**

While PSYOPs does not have high-tech mind control devices, they do have the capacity to mold people's perceptions, to make them more vulnerable to believing a targeting message. As a result, the use of PSYOPs is bound by particular legalities.

The materials PSYOPs produce must be truthful. "The insistence [...] may be a nod to U.S. law [...] because of] the concern over propaganda going astray

If nothing else, the story pointed to the need to take careful measures when  
filling a website targeted at a foreign audience may also be viewed

by a domestic audience,” according to a report by the Center for International Media Assistance. “There are people who do government affairs and there are people who do propaganda,” Pike said. “Generally, we don’t want our government affairs to be conducted by specialists who cannot target U.S. citizens at any time, operationally, to likely propagate any particular propaganda according to the psychological operations field manual.”

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Assessing whether Caldwell broke the law depends upon how PSYOPs were used.

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“It’s clear to me that people who had training in PSYOPs helped prepare the military for visiting senators. It’s not clear to me whether or not they used PSYOPs on the senators,” said Benjamin Friedman, a research fellow in defense and homeland security studies at the Cato institute, a conservative think tank.

This distinction defines whether or not the actions committed were in violation of the law. If a PSYOP officer used his expertise to create propaganda materials for visiting senators, then it is possible that this would have been a violation of the law. If a PSYOP officer did a basic search and simply prepared a briefing for Caldwell, that would not have violated the law.

“People always try to persuade people of their particular perspective and there’s nothing inherently wrong with that. It’s a naive idea to think the military in Afghanistan is not going to convince senators of a particular point of view,” Benjamin Friedman said.

### The way forward

The Caldwell incident is being investigated by the Defense Department. The ACLU has submitted a [request](#) to Congress to investigate the military use of PSYOPs on members of Congress.

“I’m grateful that the DoD is investigating but it seems that it would be hard to accept an internal investigation,” German said. “We think Congress itself should investigate to reach a just and well-informed conclusion so we’re sure we retain civilian control of the military.”

U.S. media outlets including the [Wall Street Journal](#) and [The New York Times](#) have published pieces countering the Rolling Stone Story.

“You haven’t gotten Gen. Caldwell fired yet. It is undetermined to what extent people were being fast and loose with using PSYOP techniques where they shouldn’t,” Benjamin Friedman said. “Beyond that it can have some negative effects on civil-military relations, there’s probably a lot of people in the military who feel like Rolling Stone and Hastings are demonizing them.”