

## Soldier Morale: Defending a Core Military Capability

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Can social media strengthen soldier morale? In the spectrum of modern conflict, social media and its democratisation of information distribution has changed the historical character of soldiers' morale or the *will* to fight. Never before has the influence of information on morale been so pronounced. This is a powerful development given strength of *will* is central to victory in armed conflict. If the West is not to lose its *will* to defend democracy's ideals in the face of extremist Islam's onslaught, then information as image and perception must be privileged above information as data and commodity. Proactive use of information is needed to defend and strengthen soldier morale. In the realm of modern conflict, social media and morale; attack is the best form of defence. Rather than being overly shielding we must facilitate and encourage soldiers to take up social media and get deep into the discourse it richly enables.

Within our global Western 'rules-based' democracies, society's *will* to uphold and defend international norms is being challenged by the proliferation of social media and its detribalising effect. In this sense then, the role of the individual within the military institution and its use of social media is ever more important in order to defend the military capability of morale. If we agree with the military axiom that the character of war is constantly changing, then in the spectrum of modern conflict social media has changed and continues to change the character of morale or *the will to win*. To understand why this is so, one must appreciate morale's history, its varied definitions, its determinants and its relationship with strategy. Armed with that information, military institutions will be in a better position to understand social media's impact on morale in the spectrum of modern conflict; and hence expand the discourse on how best to defend it.

### Morale's History

Broadly speaking, morale relates to confidence, enthusiasm and discipline at a given time. That is, the self-assurance to undertake a given task, the level of passion for that task and the degree of will-power in relation to that task. When speaking of morale in the military setting, its attributes take on far greater meaning and relevance—for 'soldier morale' is a core element of military capability. Importantly the use of information to influence morale pervades military history. Morale and attempting to undermine an opponent's morale has always been a key consideration within military operations. One can at least trace the centrality of military morale to the student of Socrates, historian and fourth-century soldier, Xenophon. In his famous work *Anabasis*, Xenophon observed "in action, the sustaining of

morale was an imperative”.<sup>1</sup> Leaping forward to 1512 and Thomas More’s renowned *Utopia*, one sees a lesson on the importance of undermining an opponent’s morale. *Utopia*’s Book Two under the heading of ‘Warfare’ explains that war should be waged “in such a way as to avoid danger, rather than to win fame and glory”.<sup>2</sup> To support the case, *Utopia*’s main protagonist, Hythloday, describes the fictional Utopian state’s rational use of psychological warfare and information operations. “As soon as war is declared ... secret agents set up overnight many placards ... in the most conspicuous places throughout the enemy territory.”<sup>3</sup> The placards which are “bidding for and buying the life of an enemy”<sup>4</sup> are a form of psychological warfare aimed at causing Utopia’s enemies to “quickly come to suspect everyone, particularly one another; and the many perils of their situation lead to panic”.<sup>5</sup> More highlights here the desired psychological effect of targeted realist communication in war by revealing it “enable[s] [the Utopians] to win tremendous wars without fighting any actual battles”.<sup>6</sup> Should incitement to assassination not work, Utopians then turn to information operations external to their enemy’s environment by “rous[ing] up the neighbouring peoples against the enemy, by reviving forgotten claims to dominion”.<sup>7</sup> More here is demonstrating the power of strategic communication to invoke memory to mobilise action. *Utopia*’s psychological warfare and information operations affirm that strategic communication in war is beneficial for degrading an opponent’s morale. It provides the greatest opportunity for targeted audiences to receive, acknowledge, understand, think and act in a way that reduces the cost of war, whilst effectively achieving the desired outcome. Push forward another 300 years to the early nineteenth century and we come to Napoleon’s belief that “the moral outweighs the material by three to one”,<sup>8</sup> and that “a man does not have himself killed for a few half-pence a day or for a petty distinction ... you must speak to the soul in order to electrify the man”.<sup>9</sup> And the list goes on through history to the modern era—from Clausewitz’s belief that the moral elements were “among the most important in war”,<sup>10</sup> Liddel Hart’s observation of “the predominance of moral

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<sup>1</sup> Godfrey Hutchinson, *Xenophon and the Art of Command* (London: Greenhill Books, 2000), p. 60.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas More, *Utopia*, 2nd edn, Robert M. Adams (ed.) (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), p. 60.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Letter from Napoleon to his brother Joseph advising him on how to rule Spain, 27 August 1808. Quoted in Trevor N. Dupuy, ‘Theory of Combat’, in Franklin D. Margiotta (ed.), *Brassey’s Encyclopaedia of Military History and Biography* (London: Brassey, 1994), p. 967.

<sup>9</sup> David G. Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon* (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 1998), p. 155.

<sup>10</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (London: Everyman’s Library, 1993), p. 216. First published in German in 1832.

factors in all military decisions”<sup>11</sup> and General George S. Patton’s recollection and assertion that in World War Two 80 per cent of a commander’s role was to “arouse morale in his men”.<sup>12</sup>

## **Morale’s Contested Definition**

In the military sense, the definitions of morale are varied. As Steven Motowidlo et al. said in their 1976 study of *Motivation, Satisfaction and Morale in Army Careers*, “there are as many definitions of morale as there are people writing about it”.<sup>13</sup> As a starting point though, it is useful to draw on the work of industrial psychologist Robert Guion who in 1958 tackled industrial morale’s problems of terminology. Guion listed seven different common definitions for morale:

1. the absence of conflict
2. a feeling of happiness
3. a good personal adjustment
4. ego involvement in one’s job
5. the cohesiveness of the group
6. a collection of job related attitudes
7. a personal acceptance of the goals of the group.

There are many more definitions, although the point here is that we can see that traditional notions of morale revolve around affective states and group dynamics, which the King’s College London’s Jonathon Fennell has claimed to be problematic, particularly in the realm of military performance.<sup>14</sup> By way of example, Fennell points out that “there is much evidence to suggest that troops can experience positive affective states while also behaving in manners that are completely contrary to the best interests of the military establishment”.<sup>15</sup> For instance, in the realm of the affective state Fennell proffers that deserting soldiers can feel happy and optimistic because they have run from battle and are now safe or that a soldier might fight with great

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<sup>11</sup> Basil H. Liddell Hart, *The Decisive Wars of History: A Study in Strategy* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1929), p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Rick Atkinson, *An Army at Dawn: The War in North Africa, 1942-1943* (London: Little, Brown, 2003), p. 138.

<sup>13</sup> Stephan J. Motowidlo, Benjamin E. Dowell, Michael A. Hopp, Walter C. Borman, Paul D. Johnson and Marvin D. Dunnette, *Motivation, Satisfaction, and Morale in Army Careers: A Review of Theory and Measurement*, ARI Technical Report TR-76-A7 (Minneapolis: Personnel Decisions, Inc., 1976), pp. 49–52.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Fennell, ‘In Search of the “X” Factor: Morale and the Study of Strategy’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 37, nos. 6-7 (2014), pp. 799-828.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 804.

determination while feeling personally miserable. In the realm of group dynamics, Fennell asserts that “strong group bonds can undermine positive military performance”.<sup>16</sup> Group desertions and mutiny can evidence small group cohesion, yet they are actions contrary to the needs of the military institution.<sup>17</sup> For example, for the United States in Vietnam the importance of group survival often outweighed the need to complete assigned tasks.<sup>18</sup> Fennell’s point here is that to link morale with motivation one must recognise that “motivation does not require the individual or group to be positive about objectives” as soldiers can be “highly motivated to carry out tasks that they are not confident in and not enthusiastic about because they are disciplined or even coerced into action”.<sup>19</sup> As today’s eminent military historian Sir Hew Strachan points out, “coercion is not always given enough recognition as a motivational tool”,<sup>20</sup> while S. L. A. Marshall remarks that soldiers have to accept “the basic philosophy governing human relationships within an army”.<sup>21</sup>

## Morale’s Determinants

Fennell groups the influences on morale into two categories, that of endogenous and exogenous factors. In other words, factors inside and outside of the military organisation. The endogenous category encompasses institutional factors such as command, discipline, training, organisation and supply; social factors in leadership, cohesion and esprit; and individual factors including an individual’s resilience, fear, confidence and fatigue. The exogenous category entails the political which includes propaganda, stated war aims and ideology; the cultural involving values, ethics, rules of engagement and attitude toward the enemy; the economic, for example technology and available equipment; the environment which includes the type of terrain and the weather; and the situational which includes available information, rumours, friction, recent successes and failures.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> John A. Lynn, *The Bayonets of the Republic: Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France* (Oxford: Westview, 1996), pp. 34–5.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen D. Westbrook, ‘The Potential for Military Disintegration’, in Sam C. Sarkessian (ed.), *Combat Effectiveness: Cohesion, Stress, and the Volunteer Military* (London: Sage, 1980), p. 257.

<sup>19</sup> Fennell, ‘In Search of the “X” Factor’, p. 805.

<sup>20</sup> Hew Strachan, ‘The Soldier’s Experience in Two World Wars: Some Historiographical Comparisons’, in Paul Addison and Angus Calder (eds), *Time to Kill: The Soldier’s Experience of War in the West 1939–1945* (London: Pimlico, 1997), pp. 374–5.

<sup>21</sup> S. L. A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War* (New York: Morrow, 1966), p. 165.

## What is the Relationship between Morale, Strategy and Social Media?

Clausewitz's dictum that "war is an act of force to compel our enemy to do our *will*"<sup>22</sup> is taken to mean that belligerents mostly fight for a goal or an *end* and try to impose that *end* on their enemy. To achieve that *end* requires strategy, which fundamentally relates to the threat or use of force to achieve a policy outcome—it is *the means and ends*. What is most important here in the realm of morale is the fact that Clausewitz went on to posit that to achieve policy by use of violent means the belligerent must match effort against the enemy's 'power of resistance'. Clausewitz tells us this is "the product of two inseparable factors ... the total *means* at [the belligerent's] disposal and the strength of [the belligerent's] *will*".<sup>23</sup> In the realm of social media and the spectrum of modern conflict and more specifically soldier morale, *strength of will* is the crux of the matter. In other words, "military *means* are a product of the interplay between the material capability to fight and *the will to fight*".<sup>24</sup> Put simply, when an enemy's capability has been sufficiently reduced or when its *will to fight* no longer exists it must engage in the strategic process. It must alter its policy so that the reality of its *means* reflect its *ends*. In other words, provided rationality prevails, the enemy surrenders or enters into negotiations for a cessation to hostilities. As Colin Gray and others have observed, "strategic history demonstrates the prevalence of the loss of the enemy's *will* in deciding military outcomes".<sup>25</sup>

In the spectrum of modern conflict, social media and its democratisation of information distribution plays an integral role in influencing *the will to win*. Even more important is that its greatest influence in this spectrum is on morale's exogenous categories of the political, social and cultural. This is because of two interrelated reasons. First, because the political, social and cultural are the result of dynamic human relations and discourse; and their attendant frailties, vagaries and contested ideas. Secondly, because today's newest generation of the West's soldiers are and will continue to be Digital Natives,<sup>26</sup> immersed and fluent in the use of social media, and who "think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors".<sup>27</sup> In other words, the West's modern soldiers are Netizens<sup>28</sup> who are instantly digitally connectable, hence enabled to "contribute to the whole intellectual and social value and possibilities"<sup>29</sup> that social media presents in relation to

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<sup>22</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 83.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>24</sup> Fennell, 'In Search of the "X" Factor', p. 812.

<sup>25</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 18-19.

<sup>26</sup> M. Prensky, 'Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants Part 1', *On the Horizon*, vol. 9, no. 5 (2001), p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Michael and Ronda Hauben, *Netizens: On the Impact and History of Usenet and the Internet*, 1993), e-book, <[www.columbia.edu/~rh120/](http://www.columbia.edu/~rh120/)> [Accessed 3 November 2015].

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

the factors and agendas that influence *the will to win*. This is a significant change compared to the media's traditional role in the communication model. White, in his paper 'The Gate Keeper', postulated that news published in traditional media is determined by those with the power to decide, whether that be the journalist, the editor or the publication's owner.<sup>30</sup> No such power model exists with social media. McCombs and Shaw, in their paper 'The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media', demonstrated that the media heavily influences what the public (hence soldiers) consider to be the leading topics within a society.<sup>31</sup> The use of social media means there is no need for these traditional models. Netizens are able to bypass the gate-keeper and create their own agenda-setting inertia.

So how can social media potentially erode morale in the spectrum of modern conflict? To answer that question let us limit our enquiry to morale's exogenous factors of the political (stated war aim) and the situational within the contemporary international security threat of Daesh.<sup>32</sup> The political is examined through the theory of social media's detribalising effect, while the practicalities of the situational factor are examined from the aspect of force protection. When imagining these scenarios it is important not to limit the application to soldiers only but to extend it to the body politic, which is an important distinction in the spectrum of modern conflict given the absence of the *levee en masse*. The West's soldiers are predominantly volunteers and like the body politic they vote.<sup>33</sup> Strategy within Western democracies is ultimately driven by *the will* of the electorate.

## **Social Media's Impact on Morale's Exogenous Factors and Daesh**

Australia and the West's soldiers of today are part of a globalised information age which is resulting in the West's continued detribalisation.<sup>34</sup> In other words, by today's soldiers accessing and processing knowledge from across the world they are facilitating for themselves more diverse views and opinions that challenge dominant Western paradigms and which serve to erode a consensus. Put another way, their actions potentially serve to erode *the will to fight*, a *will* which relies on a "sense of identity, belonging and

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<sup>30</sup> David Manning White, 'The "Gate Keeper": A Case Study in the Selection of News', *Journalism Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 4 (1950), <[www.aejmc.org/home/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Journalism-Quarterly-1950-White-383-90.pdf](http://www.aejmc.org/home/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Journalism-Quarterly-1950-White-383-90.pdf)> [Accessed 3 November 2015].

<sup>31</sup> Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, 'The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 36 (Summer, 1972), pp. 176-87.

<sup>32</sup> Daesh, an iteration of extremist Islam, is also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or, as they call themselves, the Islamic State.

<sup>33</sup> A minority of Western nations require compulsory military service (e.g. Denmark and Switzerland) while nations such as Turkey and Israel also require compulsory military service.

<sup>34</sup> Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *War and Peace in The Global Village* (San Francisco: Hardwired, 1997), p. 374.



cause”.<sup>35</sup> Quite simply, the already dynamic process of human relations and discourse is becoming even more dynamic. Daesh, seizing on the phenomenon, is making expert use of social media in its propaganda efforts by using it as an information weapon, and in the realm of stated war aims, social media is extenuating the strategic debate. The main allegation commentators level against the international coalition’s fight against Daesh in Iraq and Syria is its lack of strategy or, to put it another way, the purpose of its stated war aims. This is in the context of perceived previous politico-military failures in the Middle East, which many argue have resulted in the rise of Daesh. In a theoretical sense, what this means is that an already detribalising West along with its soldiers are afforded access via social media to an ever expanding, dissenting discourse which serves to lower morale. The important effect social media has here stems from the realm of memory studies and the way in which meaning is created. Put simply, meaning is created in the space between history and imagination, which in the present spectrum of modern conflict is a recipe for a decrease in the West’s *will* to fight for their ideals and values. In other words, the history of past failures coupled with proliferated online content makes for the questioning of the *ends* and a greater potential for dissent, with all of its attendant consequences. For example, the potential drop in voluntary military recruitment numbers and increase in military separations (people quitting or worse, dissenting). Social media’s detribalising effect in the spectrum of modern conflict certainly requires further research.

Turning to morale’s exogenous situational factor one can argue that in the spectrum of modern conflict social media has the greatest practical impact. Well before the notion of social media was fathomable, David Galula, a leading military and academic figure of counterinsurgency warfare, provided a prescient warning in 1968 which typifies the threat to morale posed by Daesh’s use of social media today when he said, “the insurgent [is] judged by what he promises, not by what he does ... the counterinsurgent [is] judged on what he does, not on what he says”.<sup>36</sup> Certainly the increase in the amount of information available is synonymous with the information age and social media. Certainly also the quality and authenticity of much of that information is questionable—all of which feeds the potentiality of rumour and friction in the context of success and failure.

From the Australian Defence Force’s force protection perspective, two practical examples of social media’s likely impact on the morale of the men and women of its Air Task Group (ATG) conducting combat operations against Daesh in Iraq and Syria are available. I say likely as this is an area also requiring further research. Force protection relates to the identification

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<sup>35</sup> David Betz, ‘The Virtual Dimension of Contemporary Insurgency and Counterinsurgency’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 19, no. 4 (2008), p. 515.

<sup>36</sup> David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2006), p. 9.

of threats to the force, and the mitigation and control of those threats, which is a process of risk management. In this sense then, it is not difficult to appreciate that defending morale falls within the remit of force protection. First, take the horrifically barbaric February 2015 burning-alive of the caged and conscious Jordanian pilot by Daesh in Syria, subsequently disseminated by social media and widely reported on by the Western media. That, more than likely, had a material impact on the ATG's exogenous situational factor of morale. In an already heightened force protection state it is not hard to imagine that social media's transmission of the act would have caused a high degree of increased 'home-front' friction for the families of the ATG's aircrews. In other words, an increase in the ATG's families' associated levels of concern and worry. The impact too in turn potentially feeds back into morale's political factor of the stated war aim, spurring the debate surrounding the question of 'is this really worth risking lives for an apparently uncertain end?' Daesh's use of social media in this case, as with their media content from their victories in Mosul and Ramadi, is an example of degrading the West's situational factor of morale by highlighting their perceived victory and the coalition's failure.

Separately, although related in the realm of morale, was Daesh's so called 'Hacking Division's' August 2015 publication via social media of a "hit list" containing, supposedly, around 1,400 peoples' details, including mobile phone numbers, credit card details, online passwords and private emails. Of those 1,400 the Australian Government confirmed the leak included the personal information of Australian Defence Force (ADF) employees.<sup>37</sup> If the ATG and their families were not already overly apprehensive, one imagines their perception of Daesh's domestic threat and potential reach increased somewhat if not dramatically.

### **How does the ADF Presently Defend and How Might It Better Defend against Social Media's Threat to Morale?**

From a force protection perspective, the ADF has measures in place to defend against social media's threat to morale. Personnel are educated on the use of social media and on what personal security measures should be followed and what operational security (OPSEC) measures must be followed. These are important and necessary requirements for defending the military capability of morale. From a technical perspective, however, there is not a lot else one may implement short of banning social media's use,<sup>38</sup> which like our existing approach would fall within the realm of

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<sup>37</sup> 'Islamic State Hacking Division: At Least Eight Australians Named on Internet "Hit List"', ABC News, 13 August 2015, <[www.abc.net.au/news/2015-08-13/australians-reportedly-on-islamic-state-hit-list/6693374](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-08-13/australians-reportedly-on-islamic-state-hit-list/6693374)> [Accessed 11 November 2015].

<sup>38</sup> It is important to note that this is not an option being considered by the ADF.



information as data and commodity.<sup>39</sup> Put another way, this relates to the military's traditional approach to OPSEC and "the information security triad of confidentiality, integrity and availability".<sup>40</sup> The important point here is that that approach, although important, fails to acknowledge the greater power of information as image and perception in the world of social media.<sup>41</sup>

Information as image and perception means information must be seen as a resource for shaping perception and imagination, which in turn is a more potent way of defending and, more importantly, strengthening morale.<sup>42</sup> In the realm of modern conflict, social media and morale; attack is the best form of defence. Rather than being overly shielding we must facilitate and encourage soldiers to take up social media and get deep into the discourse it richly enables. Soldiers must go 'waist-deep', get personal, communicate the reality, create bonds, expand networks and proactively contribute to the collective shaping of perception and image. Our soldiers need to be out-front. With clarity, simplicity, common intelligibility and realistic interpretation,<sup>43</sup> their authentic first-hand social media content should evoke identities and perceptions that create meanings, which in turn serve to boost morale. Such an approach's strength lies in the content's authenticity. In this way, akin to a constructivist approach within security studies, the *will* can be positively influenced through "behaviour [which] is always socially constructed, historically determined, and culturally contingent".<sup>44</sup> Conversely, a weakness of such an approach will stem from the tension between the opportunity for the soldier to engage independently and the strategic imperative dictated by policy, which is inherently political.

## **Conclusion**

Social media has and will continue to change the character of morale or *the will* to fight in the spectrum of modern conflict. More significantly, the West's 'rules-based' democracies and their body politics' *will* to uphold and defend international norms is being challenged by the proliferation of social media and its detribalising effect. What this means is that the role of the individual within the military institution and its use of social media is vital in order to defend the military capability of morale. Crucially, information as image and perception must be privileged above the twentieth-century's mentality of information as data and commodity. Information is the resource for shaping

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<sup>39</sup> Sean Lawson, 'The US Military's Social Media Civil War: Technology as Antagonism in Discourses of Information-Age Conflict', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 27, no. 2 (2014), p. 232.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.

<sup>43</sup> Kevin V. Mulcahy, 'The Cultural Policy of the Counter-Reformation: The Case of St. Peter's', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, vol. 17, no. 2 (2011), p. 133.

<sup>44</sup> Eric Langenbacher and Yossi Shain, *Power and the Past: Collective Memory and International Relations* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2006), p. 21.

perception and imagination, and is the most potent way of defending and strengthening morale.

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