

Is Cognitive Warfare Dead on Arrival?

Description

Cognitive warfare is everywhere, but it may already be doomed.

It is hard to read national security literature and social media posts without coming across the term [cognitive warfare](#). The [conflict](#) with Iran. China's [current operations](#). Russia's [way of war](#). North Korea's [nuclear strategy](#). [Reports](#) from NATO's chief scientist. Countless articles from national security experts, including [distinguished scholars](#), renowned [Special Forces officers](#), and [leading think tanks](#). The hype surrounding cognitive warfare has even spread beyond the national security space. The journal *Pastoral Psychology* published an article about [cognitive warfare and religion](#), while *Greater Good Magazine*, a publication [devoted](#) to turning scientific research into tips and tools for a happier life and more compassionate society, has articles about [cog war](#).•

As an Army officer, I have closely examined the technological, institutional, societal, and political components of the military's information and influence activities. While previously serving at Army Futures Command, I authored the Army's Information Advantage concept for 2030 and led the team that wrote the Decision Advantage concept for 2040. I have also spent nearly a decade [researching and writing](#) about how civil-military relations and institutional design shape special operations, with particular attention to information and psychological operations (PSYOP). These experiences have me concerned that cognitive warfare relies on the same flawed foundation that undercut previous efforts in military information and influence activities.

Cognitive warfare is part of a [long lineage](#) of military efforts to influence thinking, decision-making, and behavior rather than a novel concept. And like its predecessors, cognitive warfare is set up to fail in the U.S. military—not because the endeavor is without merit, but because simply [relabeling](#) existing ideas papers over persistent problems with information and influence activities the U.S. military has never honestly confronted. Cognitive warfare faces four specific problems: measurement, norms, politics, and the military's organizational structure. Without understanding and addressing these challenges, there is little reason to believe cognitive warfare will succeed where others have failed.

Cognitive Warfare: Revolution in Information Affairs, or Old Wine in New Bottles?

Two major trends contributed to the recent fascination with cognitive warfare. First is the U.S. military's [shift](#) to refocus on large-scale, conventional wars after nearly two decades of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism. Rather than attempting to win "hearts and minds" of non-combatants (which is far from the [only thing information operations](#) were used for [post-9/11](#)), the target of cognitive warfare in conventional warfighting is largely enemy combatants—especially commanders. U.S. military leaders seek the Holy Grail of "decision dominance" to "stay inside the enemy's decision-making cycle," often referred to as their [OODA loop](#). Our decisions will be bigger, stronger, [faster](#), and more lethal, rendering their decisions slow and impotent.

The search for decision dominance (or the softer "information advantage") gained such salience because of a second trend: the impact of emerging technology on modern warfare. While military theorists have written about a [revolution in military affairs](#) since the 1980s due to the [rise in information technologies](#) in war, artificial intelligence has breathed new life into the technophilic zeitgeist. The fervor is not just hype. The Israeli military used AI-based targeting and decision-support systems called [Lavendar and Gospel](#) to generate, sort, and approve tens of thousands of targets within a [matter of seconds](#). In the opening 24 hours of the U.S. military campaign against Iran, the military used [AI-enabled systems](#) to identify, target, and strike [over 1,000 targets](#)—a staggering figure. The increasing capability of these systems not only for targeting, but also for informing [military planning](#) and decision-making, provides a new urgency for approaches and options that can slow the information processing and decision-making of America's adversaries.

Enter cognitive warfare. To some theorists, cognitive warfare is an entirely [new type of warfare](#) that sits at the intersection of human cognition and information technology. To [others](#), it is nothing more than a rebranding of activities like psychological warfare, political warfare, and information operations. PSYOP has always targeted [adversary decision-making](#). When we apply PSYOP to conventional warfare, it looks almost exactly like what is currently being described as cognitive warfare. Alternatively, if we take the precepts of cognitive warfare and apply them to irregular warfare, they look an awful lot like the psychological operations and influence efforts in the post-9/11 wars.

The question of cognitive warfare's scope and novelty is not purely academic. Congress included a provision in the 2026 [National Defense Authorization Act](#) requiring the Department of Defense to define cognitive warfare and explain its relationship to existing activities and concepts, including "information warfare, psychological operations, and military information support operations." Congress understands that in a department with a budget [over a trillion dollars](#), labels carry tremendous fiscal and operational weight.

Technological Seduction

It is important to situate cognitive warfare within the context of similar activities that already exist in the Department of War. But debates over novelty are largely a distraction. The real issue is that cognitive warfare is drawing attention to exciting, technology-centric possibilities while quietly burying the failures of the concept's predecessors.

The [American way of war](#) prefers sophisticated technological solutions that promise to avoid the messy human and political realities of warfare. [Airpower](#) and [precision strike](#) are perfect examples. They seemingly offer ways to achieve policy ends with little cost in American blood and treasure. But as the military campaign against Iran is [showing](#), technologically enabled military operations alone cannot achieve political goals. Cognitive warfare is seductive because it works alongside established preferences, promising that technological innovation will fix the woes of information and psychological operations that preceded it.

Unfortunately, we have started running full speed with cognitive warfare without having a conversation about what held back its precursors. Without that conversation, we will find ourselves doing the same thing the [Red Queen](#) told Alice: doing all the running we can do just to stay in the same place.

The Four Fatal Flaws for Cognitive Warfare

If we accept that cognitive warfare has at least some elements in common with previous attempts at information operations, then current debates about cognitive warfare are focused on the wrong issue. Rather than asking precisely [what cognitive warfare is](#) and how it differs from other concepts, we should be asking whether it will work and what might hold it back. A starting point for this discussion should be a full post-mortem of the past two and a half decades of information and influence operations.

The Measurement Problem

Over a century ago, retailer John Wanamaker famously remarked, "Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted; the trouble is I don't know which half." Wanamaker's observation endures. Even in an age of more precise digital targeting and measurement, [research suggests](#) a substantial share (sometimes [upwards of 95%](#)) of advertising dollars are still wasted. The challenge is even more acute in influence operations like PSYOP, which often lack clear metrics and access required to gather data about adversary behavior. If major corporations cannot precisely track the effectiveness of their advertising efforts, it is unrealistic to expect militaries to precisely track how their influence efforts alter adversary behavior.

Cognitive warfare, which claims to affect *decision-making*, faces greater hurdles. Some analysts have made valuable contributions by calling for cognitive warfare to move past measures of performance, such as the number of social media posts an organization made, or indicators of success, such as the number of impressions (likes, shares, etc.) on those posts. Proposed metrics like [decision latency and decision error](#) are improvements over social media engagement, but during actual warfighting, the variables are so numerous and so tangled that attributing adversary decision outcomes to our actions, especially in the information space, is effectively impossible. Even if actors sat in an operational command center and observed everything going on, they would still not be able to usefully measure decision latency because it would be impossible to separate psychological, organizational, and exogenous variables and assign causality in “latency” to one particular set of decisions or determine the degree of “decision error” relative to an unobservable counterfactual. While the instinct to move beyond simple measures of performance is right, measuring change in cognitive processes of adversary commanders will be all but impossible.

The [measurement problem](#) is not an argument that cognitive warfare is ineffective. It’s an argument that we will *never* be able to [perfectly or precisely measure](#) how effective it is. When compared with lethal actions that lend themselves to easy measurements like body counts, ships destroyed, and missile launchers neutralized, cognitive warfare will never appear to make as significant a contribution to warfighting, which in turn affects policymaker perceptions, resource allocations, doctrine, and planning. Cognitive warfare could make greater headway if we accept the impossibility of the measurement task rather than trying to convince ourselves that better measurement is just around the corner.

The Normative Problem

Cognitive warfare—whether through disinformation, algorithm manipulation, data corruption, or other means—requires doing things the American public [broadly disapproves](#) of. Despite high baseline trust in the military, the public has not granted the Pentagon a special exemption. Even in the aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attacks, when [public support of military action](#) was near [all-time highs](#), there was deep discomfort with military-led information campaigns. Shortly after the attacks, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld established a new policy office known as the [Office of Strategic Influence](#) to coordinate all DOD information and psychological operations. But a single unsubstantiated allegation that the office would conduct disinformation and plant stories in foreign media created a firestorm, forcing Rumsfeld to [shutter the office](#) before it was fully functional.

[Public opinion polls](#) from the years after 9/11 reveal just how negatively Americans view military and government-run propaganda, even compared to other unsavory activities. A February 2002 CBS News poll found that 74% of Americans disapproved of the government using any sort of disinformation or

false stories. For comparison, [other polls](#) taken at the same time show that only 24% disapproved of attacks against terrorists where there was a high likelihood of civilian casualties; 68% disapproved of placing Arab Americans under special surveillance; and 53% opposed government-sanctioned torture of suspected terrorists. More Americans were more comfortable with civilian casualties, stripping specific ethnic groups of their civil liberties, and using torture than lying to foreign audiences.

More recently, the [surge of public support](#) for Anthropic after it severed ties with the Pentagon following a dispute illustrates the continued distrust of government-led information programs. While it is easy to think that military leaders do not and should not take public opinion into account when planning military operations, extensive [academic research](#) demonstrates that public sentiment and clear norms curb military behavior.

The Political Problem

The measurement problem and the normative problem combine to create a political problem that cognitive warfare will inevitably confront. When you cannot clearly demonstrate effectiveness *and* the public has reservations about the activity, sustained political support is difficult to build or maintain. Congress controls budgets and authorities. Oversight committees ask for results, which will be difficult, if not impossible, to demonstrate for cognitive warfare. Without measurable outcomes and public support, cognitive warfare programs will remain underfunded and perpetually vulnerable to cancellation, just as [PSYOP and information operations have been](#) before them.

Because cognitive warfare has no clear military constituency, it will become an easy pawn politicians use when bargaining and horse trading. Military PSYOP and information operations were subject to these dynamics even during the height of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. From 2009 to 2015, Congress [slashed the military's information operations budget](#) by 74%. This figure did not track with overall operational spending, which increased over the same period. Instead, [Congress argued](#) that the military's information operations were not "traditional or appropriate military roles" and pointed to the difficulty of tracking spending effectively.

Even though military leaders advocated for the programs and their total cost was a mere rounding error for military spending, their lack of clear measurement and low popularity made them easy to trade away. A Congressional staff member likened information operations programs to "weak gazelles" that were easy to pick off from the herd because they had no clear institutional champion to protect them. When Pentagon officials or members of Congress need a bargaining chip in the future, few people in a position of power will be willing to go to the mat to defend cognitive warfare.

The Organizational Problem

The lack of institutional champions of information-related activities points to a final persistent barrier for cognitive operations: organizational dysfunction. As with many military activities, cognitive warfare requires sustained investment in personnel, training, doctrinal development, and interagency coordination. Though the execution of cognitive warfare should be decentralized as much as possible, the military needs a [central organization](#) to oversee its institutional development and protect its resources. Lack of agreement on the nature of the activity and misplaced beliefs that information activities function the same way as maneuver, fires, or even cyber have prevented establishing an institutional home for previous information efforts. Cognitive warfare is on the same path.

Without a central organization to oversee cognitive warfare's development, institutional development will struggle. Before we know it, the rebranding will begin again. For example, it may not be too long before the cognitive warfare hype is replaced by the promise of "synthetic reality warfare" or "algorithmic affective warfare."

Step One: Admitting You Have a Problem

Cognitive warfare is not doomed because the idea is wrong. It is doomed because we obscure previous failures by relabeling old ideas rather than seriously confronting why they failed.

The four problems that will inevitably cause headaches for cognitive warfare practitioners and policymakers are not independent; they form a reinforcing system. Measurement difficulty feeds political vulnerability; political vulnerability contributes to institutional instability; instability prevents the long-term investment needed to even begin addressing the normative problem. The social taboo makes honest public debate about the limits and potential contributions of cognitive warfare nearly impossible.

This reinforcing system cannot be overcome with a new name or the incorporation of new technology. It is deeply rooted in American political culture, civil-military relations, and bureaucratic incentives.

Progress will require honest assessment of previous psychological and information operations failures. It will require public dialogue about what "cognitive operations" can and cannot do, leaving open the very real possibility that the activities have significant operational effects that we will *never* be able to measure. It will require creating new incentive structures by assigning clear organizational responsibilities for cognitive warfare and empowering the leaders of those organizations to engage directly with policymakers.

Without these dialogues, cognitive warfare may continue to receive public hype, but it will die a slow institutional death inside the Pentagon.

[Cole Livieratos](#) is the Editorial Director of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, the Army Advisor in the Office of Net Assessment, and author of a book manuscript currently under review about civil-military relations and the evolution of U.S. special operations.

The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, Princeton University's Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, the Modern War Institute at West Point, Department of the Army, Department of War, or the United States Government.

Main image created using Gemini (April 2026).

If you value reading the Irregular Warfare Initiative, please consider [supporting our work](#). And for the best gear, check out the [IWI store](#) for mugs, coasters, apparel, and other items.

Date Created
2026/06/03