

## CHAPTER 8

# Themes and Symbols



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Themes and symbols are used in the persuasive PSYOP messages. The distinctive characteristics (theme) of the product are represented through the setting, slogan, and symbols. PSYOP personnel determine—through target audience analysis—how these themes should be represented so the scenario (audio, visual, or audiovisual) is familiar and meaningful to the target audience.

## Themes

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A theme is a subject, topic, or line of persuasion used to achieve a psychological objective. Themes are used to persuade target audiences to follow a particular COA or to adopt a specific behavior. An example of a theme commonly used during military conflicts is the theme “You will be safe.” This theme, printed on safe conduct passes, makes soldiers possessing the pass feel secure in surrendering. Surrender of the troops is the desired COA. PSYOP personnel use this theme to exploit the doubts of opposing soldiers—doubts about safety. The fact that a soldier has doubts is his vulnerability. PSYOP personnel can get this information from testimonies of captured prisoners. EPW interrogations, for example, might reveal that safe conduct passes would have been used had they been accessible to the prisoners. PSYOP personnel use current intelligence and updated TAAWSs to select or develop themes and symbols based on current vulnerabilities and susceptibilities of a target audience.

### Basic Concept

The concept of a PSYOP theme is similar to the concept of commercial advertising. In U.S. advertising, for example, a TV commercial for soft drinks is directed not only to those who are presently thirsty but also to those who may be thirsty in the future. Commercial advertisers do not stop at attacking obvious vulnerabilities. They also help create perceived needs and, therefore, more vulnerabilities. Once a vulnerability is known, the advertiser can play upon it, but only if the target audience is susceptible to influence. The same reasoning applies

to PSYOP efforts. PSYOP personnel should not attack a vulnerability unless the target audience is susceptible. A target audience may not be susceptible for a number of reasons. The persuasive message may have no credibility with that audience. For example, children who do not know Santa Claus will not be susceptible to a man in a red suit telling them to behave. A thorough target audience analysis and complete use of the product development process are, therefore, important in PSYOP.

### **Theme Categories**

PSYOP themes fall into three basic categories: ingroup- outgroup, inevitability, and legitimacy. Selection of a theme that enhances the PSYOP message is critical to the success of the PSYOP mission. Selection of the best theme must be based on a thorough target audience analysis.

**Ingroup-Outgroup Themes.** These themes emphasize differences within or between target groups. PSYOP personnel use these themes when the group can be broken down into two or more factions. By pitting one group against another group, PSYOP personnel can emphasize their differences and create a rift between the groups. As a result, the groups develop a “we-they” situation. Loss of group cohesion weakens the resolve of the target audience.

**Inevitability Themes.** These themes stress that the opponent will inevitably lose and the friendly side will inevitably win. They capitalize on the successful programs or military actions of friendly forces. They also exploit the failure and defeats of the opposing forces (OPFOR). PSYOP personnel use the inevitability theme to convince the target audience that it is futile to support OPFOR but advantageous to support friendly programs and policies. This type of theme is particularly useful when a victory by the friendly forces is inevitable.

**Legitimacy Themes.** These themes advocate the legitimacy of the friendly cause. They use law, tradition, historical continuity, or support of the people as a precedent to induce the target audience to recognize that friendly programs and actions are justified and desired by the target audience.

### **Theme Selection**

Theme selection is based on target audience analysis, policy, timeliness, consistency, credibility, and simplicity. A thorough target audience analysis ensures that selected themes are appropriate for the vulnerabilities of the target audience. Themes must support national PSYOP policy and objectives. Current intelligence must be integrated into the PSYOP program on a continuous basis to ensure that themes are appropriate. Themes identified as inappropriate should not be used. Themes capitalizing on actions or words must be disseminated quickly to take advantage of varying vulnerabilities of the target audience. For example, themes and persuasive messages centering on a recent natural disaster lose their appeal as people become less susceptible. The horror of the event wears off, and people forget their initial impressions. However, certain disasters may be inappropriate for use in a PSYOP program until the event is almost forgotten.

Themes must be consistent throughout the PSYOP program. Consistency prevents dissemination of contradictory messages. In a strategic program, the actual

wording of the persuasive message can change as long as the theme stays the same. For example, U.S. consumers see many versions of Coke commercials; however, the actual theme is the same—"Buy Coke." Because the United States Air Force (USAF) and the United States Navy (USN) also have PSYOP assets, a target audience may be the joint target of U.S. PSYOP; therefore, the services should coordinate the use of themes.

Maintaining credibility is of paramount importance. Target audiences will believe themes that relate to their needs and aspirations. They will also believe themes that are within their frames of reference and that originate from credible sources. Loss of credibility amounts to a loss of trust that may never be repaired.

PSYOP themes should be as simple as possible. Unknowingly, PSYOP personnel may inaccurately portray complex themes, thereby misrepresenting the PSYOP message. Misrepresentation may also occur when dealing with foreign languages.

## Symbols

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A symbol is something that stands for or suggests something else by reason of association. A symbol is a means of conveying a theme. Symbols are signs that over a period of time have accumulated emotional meaning in a culture. They may be visual, such as printed words, statues, pictures, actions, gestures, and personalities, or they may be aural, such as music. The U.S. national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner," for example, stands not only for the nation's flag but also for the wars successfully fought by U.S. soldiers. "America the Beautiful," another song, symbolizes the beauty and peace that can be found throughout America.

### Symbol Selection

PSYOP personnel use the same criteria for symbol selection as for theme selection. PSYOP personnel should pay close attention to detail when reproducing symbols. What seems like a minor detail may be of great consequence for the target audience. The color, size, placement and medium chosen are considerations in symbol selection. A color, for example, does not hold universal connotation; therefore a red heart may not always have a positive meaning. Americans may immediately associate it with Valentine's Day, but other cultures may see it in a negative way or as having no meaning at all. For this reason, PSYOP personnel should use indigenous personnel to pretest PSYOP products for cultural prejudices.

### Use of Themes and Symbols

Themes and symbols used together must be clear and compatible. If a symbol is used for visual stimulation and the meaning detracts or adds too much to the theme, then the symbol is not useful. The target audience should easily realize the action PSYOP units want them to take.

## Selection Versus Development

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PSYOP personnel use current intelligence to select or develop themes. They research and record information from a particular geographic area. PSYOP

personnel should identify the target audiences already formed in their particular area. They also need to know what audiences might form in response to different world events, such as wars, natural disasters, political struggles, and anniversaries of past events. PSYOP personnel should know the past and current themes and symbols used within various target audiences.

A PSYOP unit must adapt to changing target audiences and to changing needs of target audiences; therefore, themes and symbols may need to be developed. Desecrating a symbol may insult the target audience. A symbol may be too emotion- or meaning-laden for PSYOP purposes; therefore, a new symbol may need to be invented. Pretesting all symbols and themes should prevent improper use.

Before final selection or development of a theme or a symbol, the types of media available should be considered. For example, if the national anthem is chosen as a theme for a particular audience yet the only medium available is print, then PSYOP personnel must consider how effective a song is when written on paper. Likewise, choosing a visual symbol when only audio media are available is ineffective.

## Summary

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Selecting themes and symbols is an important step when developing PSYOP products. During this step, PSYOP personnel select or develop themes and symbols based upon current intelligence, target audience analysis, policy, timeliness, consistency, credibility, and simplicity. Using the theme categories (ingroup-outgroup, inevitability, and legitimacy), PSYOP personnel can develop themes and symbols that exploit the vulnerabilities and susceptibilities of the target audience. Themes and symbols should be consistent, credible, and simple to prevent misrepresentation of the PSYOP message. Attention to detail is important. If PSYOP personnel do not know the past and current themes and symbols used within the target audience, they may develop an ineffective product. Therefore, PSYOP personnel should use indigenous personnel to pretest all developed or selected themes and symbols.