The B-52 is an Unsung Information Operations Workhorse

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The United States military uses multiple information related capabilities to perform information operations (IO). Some of these instruments are ground-based systems, some are maritime-based, and some are airborne platforms. One of these airborne platforms, the B-52, has been used as an IO platform for decades, yet it does not get the credit it deserves for the amount of decision makers that have been influenced to achieve desired battlefield objectives.

Joint Publication 3-13 Information Operations defines IO as “the integrated employment, during military operations, of information-related capabilities in concert with other lines of operation to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp the decision-making of adversaries and potential adversaries while protecting our own.” The Joint Pub defines information-related capabilities (IRCs) as “a tool, technique, or activity employed within a dimension of the information environment that can be used to create effects and operationally desirable conditions.” The B-52 has showcased many IRCs throughout its illustrious history.

One IRC employed by the B-52 is dropping leaflets to influence the decisions of enemy combatants.
The B-52 can carry 36 M-129 leaflet “bombs.” That is more than any other aircraft in the U.S. military inventory. Dr. Daniel Haulman with the Air Force Historical Research Agency has said each leaflet bomb can hold 80,000 leaflets. That means the B-52 can drop 2.88 million leaflets during one flight. Leaflet bombs are usually planned so the leaflets are dispersed over a large area to influence as many people as possible. Imagine how many people 2.88 million leaflets could influence! According to the former American representative to the international Psychological Warfare Society and psychological warfare expert Herb Friedman, in Kosovo on May 29, 1999, two B-52s dropped leaflet bombs in Kosovo prior to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) bombings. The intent of these leaflets was to inform civilians and Yugoslav troops of the reason for the NATO bombings and to influence the Yugoslav troops to leave Kosovo to survive with their families.

The dropping of leaflets is not the only way the B-52 is part of the leaflet enterprise.

B-52s have also been the message on the leaflets. Herb Friedman has written that leaflets warning of B-52 attacks influenced North Vietnamese soldiers to stop fighting and/or leave a particular area. One leaflet had a picture of a B-52 and said, “Your death will bring much grief to your family back home in the North.” Due to the death and destruction caused by B-52s during the Vietnam War, using the B-52 in this message was a good way to inflict fear into North Vietnamese soldiers. Leaflets dropped during OPERATION DESSERT STORM also featured the B-52 and were dropped before and after traditional bombings. The leaflets dropped before a bombing warned Iraqi troops of the upcoming bombing and told them to flee the area. The leaflets dropped after the bombing said the United States “kept our promise” with the bombing and that the bombings would continue.

Outside of leaflets, the B-52 has been used in other ways to send a message.

The physical presence of B-52s have been used as an IRC. In January 2016, AP journalist Foster Klug writing for Military Times reported that a B-52 flew over South Korea in formation with South Korean F-15s four days after a nuclear test by North Korea. There were multiple target audiences for this show of force from the B-52. According to Adm. Harry Harris Jr., commander U.S. Pacific Command, “This was a demonstration of the ironclad U.S. commitment to our allies in South Korea, in Japan, and to the defense of the American homeland”. North Korea was also in the target audience for the flight. The United States sent a message that the United States has a strong military force in the region with the allies mentioned above. Therefore, North Korea needs to understand that there may be significant consequences if North Korea does not follow international resolutions.

Another IRC employed by the B-52 is electronic warfare (EW).
Joint Publication 3-13 defines EW as “the mission area ultimately responsible for securing and maintaining freedom of action in the [electromagnetic spectrum (EMS)] for friendly forces while exploiting or denying it to adversary’s.” Jon Lake in his book *B-52 Stratofortress Units In Operation Desert Storm* talks about a false target generation system as part of the B-52’s defense suite. Generating false targets on an adversaries’ display is an example of how the B-52 uses EW to deny adversary freedom of action in the EMS.

If you are thinking to yourself that the U.S. military has many aircraft that can use the IRCs listed above, you would be correct. However, no aircraft in the inventory can use all the IRCs mentioned above, nor can those aircraft have the same effect as the B-52 when they use the IRCs. An EC-130 can perform EW, but would not be an effective message on a leaflet to get soldiers to leave an area in fear for their lives. An F-18 carries significantly fewer leaflet bombs than the B-52. The same F-18 could be used on a leaflet to scare soldiers on the battlefield, but the smaller F-18, with fewer weapons than the B-52 would not have the same psychological impact as a B-52 on the leaflet.

While the B-52 is usually thought of as an instrument to kill people and break their stuff, military professionals at all levels need to wake up and realize there is more to the B-52 than raining hate. The B-52 is capable of employing multiple IRCs to effectively influence the decision making of our adversaries. People need to realize, understand, and appreciate all B-52 capabilities to prevent missing its IO potential in future conflicts.

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