



Cognitive Warfare: Donald Trump's Battlefield

By: Agostinho Paiva da Cunha, Colonel, Ph.D

Lisbon, January 23, 2026

The United States, under the aegis of Donald Trump and the MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement, have inaugurated a new era of conflict that compares to a state of war. This is not a war based on kinetic force, even though its military power remains an ever-present shadow. It is, rather, a **Cognitive War**. This strategy has been widely used both internally and in relations with allies and international partners, aiming for hegemony through the colonization of thought.

A New Domain of Warfare

Unlike missile attacks that annihilate adversaries and destroy physical infrastructure, Cognitive Warfare acts on the subconscious. It is a disguised, insidious, and permanent combat. Its targets - whether heads of state, politicians, military personnel, or ordinary citizens - rarely perceive the manipulation, genuinely believing their conclusions are the result of free will and their own logical reasoning.

Due to its importance, Cognitive Warfare tends to constitute the **sixth domain of war**, elevating the battle in the human brain to the same strategic status as land, sea, air, space, and cyberspace. This domain does not seek only to control information, but rather to shape the very biology of decision-making. The target is not just public opinion, but the neural processes of individuals, using knowledge of how the brain makes decisions to create states of distrust, confusion, or paralysis. This involves a process of eroding trust to undermine an individual's faith and beliefs in democratic institutions, science, the media, or others. It promotes social polarization by fragmenting society into hostile groups to paralyze the political processes of a country or adversary.

The objective is to win without having to fight, achieving geopolitical goals without the need for armed conflicts, which are costly and involve casualties. It is the modern application of Sun Tzu's principle of winning without fighting by paralyzing the adversary through fear and mental disorientation.

Thought Manipulation: "How" instead of "What"

Through the exploitation of neurobiological vulnerabilities and advances in neuroscience, Cognitive Warfare alters how an individual processes reality. The goal is not a fleeting change of opinion, but a deep and lasting behavioral and cognitive alteration.

The fundamental distinction between traditional propaganda and Cognitive Warfare lies in the method. While propaganda tries to dictate *what* people think (the content), Cognitive Warfare focuses on *how* people think (the process). It does not fixate on what the individual hears, reads, or sees, but rather on how the individual processes that information. This represents a transition from external persuasion to **internal reconfiguration**, where the battlefield shifts from the media to the mechanisms of cognition themselves, making manipulation invisible and, therefore, irrefutable.

The MAGA Laboratory: The Use of Fear

Donald Trump transformed the American political system into a laboratory for cognitive experimentation, which he then extended to partners and allies. The use of emerging technologies such as Big Data and Artificial Intelligence (AI) allowed for an unprecedented level of precision, enabling the micro-targeting of personalized messages to hit specific groups at their most sensitive points.

Psychological Micro-targeting, based on data from the political consultancy firm Cambridge Analytica, is a typical example of the current digital cognitive warfare used by Trump. In 2016, his campaign used data from 50 million Facebook users to create detailed psychological profiles for use in the MAGA movement's Cognitive War. Instead of sending the same propaganda to all voters, the campaign sent personalized ads based on these profiles. By segmenting voters by personality traits, the campaign activated specific fear triggers in each individual, directly attacking the neural predisposition of each segment of the electorate. For instance:

- If the system identified a voter with a neurotic profile or one prone to fear, they received ads about the dangers of immigration.
- If the voter presented a conscientious profile, they received data about the economy instead.

The effect was nevertheless the same: activating specific fear triggers in each individual.

Control Mechanisms: Emotion over Reason

Trump's primary strategy has consisted of exploiting intrinsic flaws in the human brain, consistently utilizing various cognitive biases:

- **Confirmation Bias:** Relies on the human tendency to accept only what reinforces existing beliefs. If these beliefs did not yet exist, Trump used his disinformation machine and the erosion of truth to create new ones. As an example, by popularizing the term "Fake News" to describe traditional media, he executed a cognitive isolation maneuver to invalidate external information sources, creating a "bubble" where only his narrative is processed as true. The brains of his followers begin to automatically **reject any contrary facts**, making them immune to logical arguments, reality, and truth. This was a primary tactic used by Trump during the pandemic and after the 2020 elections. His administration created alternative narratives to maintain his base in a state of constant alert and skepticism toward institutions, fueled by persistent doubts regarding the legitimacy of the voting system and the actions of health agencies during COVID.
- **Availability Heuristics:** The use of short, repetitive, and emotionally charged messages ensures this information is the first remembered by the brain, shaping perceptions of safety or danger. Donald Trump's knack for invention often leans on the **availability heuristic**, a mental shortcut where we judge the likelihood of something happening by how easily a similar memory comes to mind. For instance, if you're asked if your city is safe, you instinctively search your memory for past incidents of crime to weigh the risk. We rely on this mental judgment to make sense of our surroundings. However, by prioritizing certain facts - or even **implanted 'pseudo-info'**, especially if it's recent - it creates an instant emotional surge. This can spark feelings like fear or rage, which in turn skew a person's ability to judge
- **Cognitive Dissonance:** is the anxiety, tension, or guilt that arises from holding two conflicting beliefs, attitudes, or actions - for example, smoking (an action) while knowing it is harmful to one's health (a belief). To ease this mental unease, the mind creates excuses for the harmful action. We might convince ourselves that smoking isn't actually that bad, or tell ourselves stories about people who smoked their whole lives and lived to be 100. Trump often generates mental discomfort by presenting contradictory narratives, **forcing followers** to create internal justifications that lead them to accept the leader's "truth" to relieve psychological tension.
- **Polarization:** Used as a weapon of paralysis through highly emotional language. "Us versus them" discourse activates brain areas linked to fear and survival, inhibiting the prefrontal cortex responsible for rational thought. This transforms political debate into an instinctive defensive reaction, making the base immune to logic. In doing so, Trump aims to **polarize society**, casting internal opponents and international allies alike as **existential threats**.

The Era of Generative AI and Deepfakes: The Erosion of Truth

Cognitive Warfare reached its peak with the rise of Generative AI. This technology introduced a level of unprecedented hyper-realism, where the sophisticated manipulation of images, video, and sound - **deepfakes** - blurs the line between the factual and the forged, making veracity irre recognizable.

Fabricated images - such as Trump raising the American flag in Greenland or redesigning the map of the Americas including Canada, Greenland and Venezuela, function as visual stimuli that the brain processes emotionally, even when the conscious mind knows they are false. The repetition of these

images builds a mythical figure in the subconscious, overriding factual reality. Trump's disinformation machine uses social media, especially its Truth Social, ironically called "Truth", **to spread manufactured deception**.

In this way, truth is no longer a cornerstone of democracy but a **disposable accessory**, letting digital simulation set the rules for a new political order built on faith instead of facts. By **weaponizing synthetic falsehoods** on a massive scale, Trump isn't just trying to persuade his followers; he is establishing an alternative reality where hard evidence is completely overwhelmed by emotional loyalty.

Conclusion: Combating Silent Manipulation

The rise of Cognitive Warfare under the MAGA movement reveals that modern democracies face a threat for which they are not prepared and have not yet suitable defenses. The conclusions are alarming:

- **Individual Sovereignty at Risk:** The ability to make independent decisions is being eroded by invisible algorithmic methods that exploit biology to promote deep behavioral changes.
- **Social Fragmentation as a Goal:** Polarization is a deliberate weapon to paralyze institutions and fragment alliances, such as NATO or the EU, turning partners into "existential enemies".
- **Truth as an Obsolete Concept:** Factual reality becomes secondary to emotional impact. Trump's success proves that once the thinking process is controlled, facts lose all relevance, regardless of how **far-fetched** or **despicable** they are.

Cognitive Warfare is a reconfiguration of global power where the territory to be conquered is the human mind. The challenge of the 21st century will be developing **cognitive immunity** to protect the integrity of thought against technological and political manipulation.

Institutionalizing the cognitive domain alongside traditional kinetic conflict is a strategic imperative for an integrated approach to warfare in the 21st century.

This recognition is the necessary starting point **to mitigate new vulnerabilities** that transcend the physical boundaries of Land, Sea, Air, Space, and Cyberspace.