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# The Problem of Mission Creep: Argumentation Theory meets Military History

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**Abstract:** At the outset ‘mission creep’ is a military phenomenon, denoting uncontrolled and unintended mission development. Even the best-laid plans may become obsolete if they run against the facts on the ground, and mission creep may result. Mission creep also plagues arguments, as when arguments end up in unrelated topics, larger targets, or clusters of topics. Our paper explores possible mutual benefits of applying the resources of argumentation theory and military theory to one another.

**Keywords:** Argumentation, bottom-up, chain of command, exit strategies, facts on the ground, mission creep, top-down

## 1. Introduction

The road to hell may indeed be paved with good intentions but that hardly means we should give up good intentions. Rather, it means we should be prepared to look for exit ramps whenever we find ourselves going down that road. This sage advice is easier to give than follow, and perhaps nowhere is it more important but harder to heed than in military actions. Consider these examples:

## Example 1

- (i) *A NATO military column is transporting a medical officer from headquarters to a forward operating base some distance from the nearest village in a remote, desolate and war-torn countryside. The convoy slows as a burka-dressed mother with a young, apparently lifeless child in her arms approaches. The doctor has a professional obligation to help, so he signals the commander to stop, and the commander agrees. Soldiers are ordered out of the armoured trucks and, mindful of the possibilities for suicide vests and IEDs, establish a cordon at a safe distance around the doctor and the woman.*
- (ii) *The doctor renders a diagnosis of severe de-hydration and provides water. The woman and child are soon on their way and the military personnel return to their vehicles.*
- (iii) *There is a sigh of relief all around because although it was not part of their mission, it was a good deed easily and safely achieved. It involved some risk for the soldiers but it was important for the desperate mother.*
- (iv) *Later, a local informer reports that the mother and child were killed because they had received medical attention from foreign infidels without the permission from the village elder, in contravention of local customs.*

If the villagers' customs or their reaction had been different, this would have been a success story. Unfortunately, it is not.

## Example 2

*(2) In response to the 9-11 terrorist attack, a US-led coalition initiated a military offensive against Al-Qaida strongholds in Afghanistan where the Taliban government had given them safe haven. The Taliban was driven from power, hard-liners fled to Pakistan, and a more US-friendly government was installed. More coalition forces arrived to protect the government, coming under NATO command in 2003.<sup>1</sup>*

*By 2008, political ambitions had broadened and the nations participating in the UN-sanctioned, NATO-led coalition issued a press release identifying four goals (NATO, 2008):*

- (i) Building an enduring, stable, secure, and prosperous democratic state;*
- (ii) Defending such basic values as freedom, democracy, and human rights;*
- (iii) Eliminating terrorism and extremism as threats to stability;*
- (iv) Establishing and maintaining a secure environment and good governance. That vision was presented 6 years after the campaign started – and 12 years ago.*

The first example is a specific and localized incident: the actions of the soldiers were not part of their assigned mission. They were in response to the specific circumstances and conditions in which the soldiers found themselves. The second example is more global: the actions of the military forces shifted into a more defensive posture from its initial offense-minded orientation, but that change was not in response to any specific incidents or military strategy. Rather, it was part of a larger transformation of their mission that was mainly dictated by governmental policy.

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<sup>1</sup> The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was established on Dec. 20, 2001 with UN SC mandate 1386.

These two examples sit at opposite ends of a spectrum of phenomena that fall under the rubric “Mission Creep” – the unintended but almost inexorable tendency of military actions to broaden beyond their original scope. A military force that sets out on a humanitarian intervention to build schools may become embroiled in a civil war when it defends those schools from attack; carefully delineated attempts at temporarily stabilizing a weak government slowly evolve into wholesale nation building if the institutional supports fail to take root; when the conditions allow it, there is little to stop a military action that begins as part of a retaliation from turning into an opportunistic war of conquest (see Tierney, 2017).

Although the specific term mission creep is relatively new,<sup>2</sup> the phenomenon itself is not. Nor is its usage confined to military operations, finding footholds in the languages of non-profit organizations, politics, education, and law enforcement. Surprisingly, it has not entered into the discourse of argumentation theory. We say “surprisingly” for two reasons: first, there are quite obvious counterparts to the phenomenon in argumentation; and second, the constellation of concepts associated with the military is routinely paired with the constellation of concepts associated with argumentation because of the ubiquity of the argument-is-war metaphor and the Dominant Adversarial Models (“DAM accounts”) for argumentation (see Cohen, 1995; Rooney, 2010, for the former; see Bailin & Battersby, 2017; Stevens & Cohen, 2018, for the latter). While it would certainly be feasible and very likely be fruitful to deploy the resources of argumentation theory to explore and explain the phenomenon – perhaps as the dangerous result of chasing a Red Herring down a Slippery Slope – in this paper, we will reverse directions and exploit the resources of military theory to identify the sources of mission creep in argumentation and, ultimately, strategies for controlling it.

## 2. Mission creep

The two examples above offer a full range of comparisons and contrasts. The common points are manifest: both examples include actions that are *re*-actions rather than deliberate, pro-active decisions; both are motivated by good intentions; and both examples end with unintended and unwanted results. It is their contrasts, however, that are most instructive. The example of the doctor and the convoy is so localized that it hardly affects the overall mission; it only barely qualifies as mission creep, but it could be a first step in that direction. In contrast, the change from retaliation to nation-building is much more global in scope and amounts to a wholesale make-over of the mission. The first incident involves what was potentially a one-off, isolated incident while the second case entails a permanent change with long-term consequences. The first involves a minor change in tactics; the second operates at the level of strategy.

For our purposes, however, the most important contrast is between the *causes* of those changes because that is where lessons for argumentation can be gleaned. The strategic change was largely dictated *from above* by policy changes while it was unexpected *facts on the ground* that were the occasion for the tactical improvisation. As a first approximation, we will characterize the contrast as the difference between “top-down” and “bottom-up” causation. That is, however, only a first approximation because the lines of influence go both ways. It is, of course, entirely possible for there to be some tension between the dictates arising from the specific situation in the field and the strategic mandates emanating from policy considerations.

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<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mission\\_creep](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mission_creep)) dates the term to 1993 and the UN military operations in Somalia; Merriam-Webster (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/time-traveler>) puts the first occurrence in 1991.

However, it is also possible that the tactical dictates from below and the strategic mandates from above complement and reinforce one another. When that sort of harmonic resonance occurs, incremental mission creep risks accelerating into an all-out mission stampede. This description conforms reasonably well to the series of historical events that began with the assassination of an archduke in June of 1914 and within a month became the Great War to End All Wars. Sadly, we also think this description comfortably fits the all-too-common pattern of small differences in standpoint leading to disagreements that grow into disputes before spiralling out of control into full-blown and very *uncomfortable* arguments in the most pejorative sense of the term.

### **3. Mission creep from the bottom up**

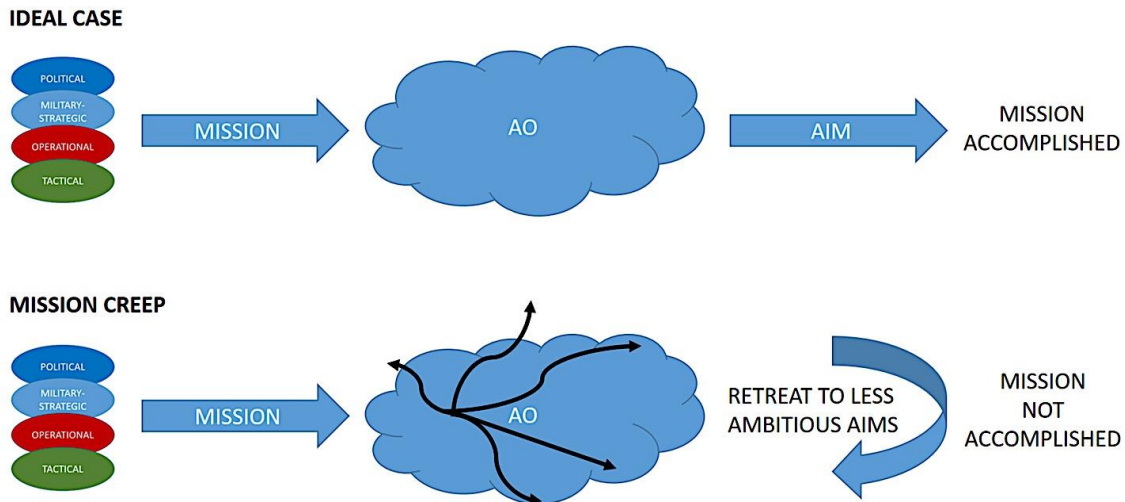
The first incident illustrates one of the major sources of mission change. The decision to stop was triggered by the specific situation. What initially looked like a good thing to do resulted in a terrible outcome. The column commander should not have stopped, even though the doctor, who also out-ranked him, insisted. The column leader's orders were simple enough. So was the good doctor's obligation to help. Analysing the story gives us some important aspects; the order was formulated based on cultural, demographically and situational awareness, and signed by an officer in charge. The road ahead included multiple threats, and even though the mother looked innocent enough, a remote-controlled explosive device could have been used, with an equally devastating outcome.

The facts on the ground matter, and unexpected facts matter in unexpected ways. When we refer to facts on the ground, that can be taken so literally as to mean the local topography – hills, ravines, marshes, etc. – but can also take the form of a woman with a sick child, bad weather, logistical snafus, an outbreak of the flu, or shifts in alliances.

The facts matter in both argumentation and military actions, and so do *changes* in the facts. In military operations, changes in the facts on the ground dictate changes in tactics – as well they should – but the more that the facts on the ground dictate tactical responses the more they can become detached from strategic considerations of long-term consequences and how specific actions will contribute to or detract from the mission's overall goals. Here is an illustration showing ideal cases and cases of mission creep.

#### **Figure 1**

Mission creep



Missions are closely related to war narratives (see Kvernbekk & Bøe-Hansen, 2017). A war narrative represents an existential, vitally important vision of what is to be achieved. It provides the framework for policy, the foundation of “truths” that the populace can accept. Furthermore, it presents a war logic thought to be beyond dispute; a “handbook” for why the mission is to be undertaken and how to be argued for. The term Area of Operations (AO) is a generic term in military operations for the conduct of combat and non-combat activities. The AO is an area within the Joint Operations Area (JOA) defined by the joint force commander for conducting operations (NATO, 2019). It describes most often the specific area assigned to a subordinate commander for a specific mission. The AO is where the facts on the ground are to be found, at least a certain set of them. They may prove to be amenable to the mission, or they may function as obstacles or hindrances that thwart or prevent the course of the original mission, or make the target of original mission unattainable altogether.

The most egregious case would be forces operating in the total absence of any orders founded on a clear and consistent mission statement or, what amounts to about the same thing, in the absence of any discipline. They would in effect be rogue forces. Something similar will result if there is no single, coherent voice at the top of the chain of command, which is often the case since so many modern military operations are carried out by coalitions whose constituent countries have their own political agendas. A vacuum at the top opens the door for mission creep from the bottom. Of course, the mere existence of an articulated, univocal statement offers no guarantees of success: it also has to be effectively communicated throughout the chain of command and its implementation among the strategic, operational, and tactical levels needs to be well-integrated (see Taw & Peters, 1995). Otherwise, the results are again likely to be the same.

Things might have worked out differently in our example of the convoy, the doctor, and the woman with her child, but we cannot know how the story would have played out in the event that, say, the village elder had decided that forgiveness or perhaps even gratitude was an appropriate and acceptable response. We can imagine that the mission accomplishing its task and reaching closure, but we can just as easily imagine the local success story leading to greater commitment with disastrous results. It’s precisely that uncertainty that is salient and so

dangerous. It is why all NATO operational orders explicitly state: “Avoid Mission Creep”. But equally salient is that mission creep is only something to “avoid” rather than something that is “strictly forbidden” (see Siegel, 2000). The phenomenon is too complex for a simple prohibition, too inevitable to be completely eradicated, and too unpredictable to be effectively controlled; sometimes it even surprises us and works out for the best. It is, in a word, too *human*.

So, too, is argumentation. Arguments often take us in unintended directions.

#### 4. Mission creep from the top down

The second case is more in line with the common conception of mission creep due to military or political overreach, and for which some measure of culpability needs to be assigned. Nobody signed on to 18 years in Afghanistan, so should not someone be held accountable for creating this Frankenstein’s monster?<sup>3</sup>

Part of the felt need to assign blame is because we (speaking now as Westerners from NATO countries) have to share in the responsibility for the current political, military, and humanitarian quagmire but we were supposed to be “the good guys” there. The coalition forces in Afghanistan are under UN and NATO auspices for humanitarian purposes, so it was easy for the soldiers to be thought of, and not just by themselves, as a “force for good.” The finger of blame has to point somewhere else, and there are not many options besides higher up the command chain. A case in point is the Norwegian military presence in Afghanistan, 2001-2014. In 2016 an evaluation was published; the gist of which is as follows: In the big picture Norway did little of significance. At the outset the Norwegian government had three main objectives for the Afghanistan engagement; theirs was an effort *with* the US and NATO, *against* international terror and *for* a better Afghanistan – a stable and democratic Afghan state through long-term development aid and peace diplomacy. In the end the most important objective was the alliance dimension; supporting the US and secure NATO’s relevance – which is considered achieved. The second objective was partly achieved while the third is still not achieved (NOU 2016).

In general outline, the good-guy characterization applies to most international operations since the end of the Cold War. They have been charged with promoting peace, peace-keeping, or security assistance, often in conjunction with a variety of broadly humanitarian goals from building schools and hospitals to vaccinating children and drilling water wells. They are indeed “forces for good,” at least according to the contributing nations as a designation for internal political consumption. Where, then, is the culpability?

Only in rare cases will culpability for a mission creep gone awry lie with a specific individual. The fault is often embedded in the entire chain of command because the problem of mission creep often arises from interactions between different levels of command when planning and executing a military campaign rather than from a single level. On the other hand, it might not be the plan or the orders that lead to mission creep, but the people and their interpretation of the order. Or it could be neither of the above: It could be due to cultural problems spiced with religious divisions and different languages, history and traditions.

The realization of political ambitions into military operations takes place through a chain of command where each level has its own roles and functions – and its own responsibilities (NATO, 2019). A brief, schematic account of the levels of command will identify four

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<sup>3</sup> Or as Clausewitz formulated it: “No one starts a war – or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so – without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it.”

components: (1) the political and governmental institutions, (2) the high-level military-strategic command, (3) the mid-level operational command, and (4) the tactical level making decisions for the soldiers on the ground.

**Figure 2:**  
Levels of Command



While some parts are unique to each command level, there is a need to have some overlap with the next level to ensure the effective transfer of tasks between the levels. There is also some shared responsibility for those tasks, in the sense of shared *duties* to see they are accomplished, which, if things go awry in the end, become a shared *responsibility*, in the sense of *culpability*.

Through the political-strategic dialogue, the military-strategic command level conveys the strategic goals and ambitions as a campaign plan or a strategic directive. The operational command level translates the strategic goals into an operational plan with concrete tasks for subordinate tactical units. To a far greater extent than the political level, the interactions between the strategic, operational, and tactical levels are dynamic and go both ways. Any level can, and should, open lines of communication between representatives from subordinate and higher levels, to coordinate planning and ensure that implementation is in accordance with higher level intentions. Because each and every link in the chain of command can be an occasion for poor communication or miscommunication, mis-relayed or modified orders, or failures of execution of various sorts, each interface represents an opening for a shift in the mission.

Even the best command cannot eliminate all possibilities for mission creep from below. There are too many factors to take into account, especially when the campaign is waged on foreign soil: climate, meteorology, geography, topography and demography may be relatively easy to prepare for because the range of possibilities is limited and it identifies what can be expected. The same cannot always be said for complications arising from cultural dynamics, political reactions, religious influences, and social structures.

What the best command can control, however, is the internal dynamics that allow for mission creep from above. This applies to both the planning and execution stages of the operation. The problems in execution fall into three categories: failures of communication, inadequately drawn lines of responsibility, and operational inefficiencies. While these may be exceedingly difficult to eradicate or control, or even just identify, in practice, they do not pose any insuperable obstacles for theory.



We are tempted to say that the situation is reversed with respect to planning – that the theoretical obstacles are insuperable while the practical problems are more or less routine – except for the fact that when it comes to military operations, *nothing is ever routine*. Still, the temptation is there because there is a grain of truth in it: since execution is never routine, the very idea of perfect planning is either an aspirational ideal or a delusion for political propaganda. No amount of planning can prepare for all the possible contingencies. If the planning stages were able to issue a complete flow-chart or algorithm with instructions for every situation that could arise, life would be easy for those at the operational level. It is not. Planning is an open-ended process. The more contingencies accommodated, the better the plans are and the better-off the operation will be. To that end, wise planners will facilitate the inclusion of all relevant perspectives, from the grandest, most global political goals to that of the individual soldier on the ground. They will assess as many relevant factors as intelligence, time, and resources permit in order to optimize the balance between political goals and military capabilities. This is where the construction of possible scenarios and hypothetical reasoning is useful; it yields guidelines of the forms: “If x happens, use plan B, but if y happens, use plan C, etc.” There is of course a limit to how many alternative plans of action are possible and feasible to make. Moreover, plans B and C could contain ideas that in the case of x or y would make it advisable for us to alleviate, forestall, reinforce, repair, or otherwise alter the overall goals, albeit leaving as much of the original target intact and attainable. That is, the best planning will take as input all the foreseeable contingencies and yield as output a clear mission statement with realistic, achievable, and well-defined goals.

And one more thing: because the range of possible contingencies inevitably outstrips even the best laid plans of politicians and soldiers, no mission statement should be regarded as complete, or, for that matter, even minimally acceptable, if it does not explicitly include attention to an *end* state and *exit strategies*. Otherwise, we will be at the mercy of whatever mission creep comes our way. The example of Afghanistan is Exhibit A and a prime cautionary tale: Even though it has reduced its footprint and focused its resources just on Kabul, the capital, NATO *still* operates in Afghanistan. Does NATO even have an exit strategy? Did it ever? An endemic problem for war narratives is that their rhetorical function in justifying action often precludes any space for articulating any exit strategies.

We will leave it to historians and military theorists to argue about how many well-intentioned campaigns have come a-cropper for want of an exit strategy and ended up as unmitigated disasters. We want to raise the same question about arguments:

*How many arguments have gone off the rails as the arguers have dug in their heels, changed the “mission”, and lost control of the narrative to disastrous ends, all because surrender was unacceptable and no other exit strategy was envisioned?*

Planning has to include taking contingencies into account; contingencies can change the mission; operations can go bad; so high among the contingencies that need to be considered are those that concern first, a mission’s ends – its goals – and second, the end of the mission, including both situations in which the goals have been met and outcomes in which they have not. It is, perhaps, understandable why arguers pay little attention to this; it is less understandable why argumentation theorists pay so little attention to it.

#### 4. Mission creep in arguments

Arguments, in the relevant sense, are complex and dynamic series of events that unfold over time. They can seem to have lives of their own that include growth and change. If they were just static sequences of timeless propositions to be assessed wholly on the basis of their inferential relations, we would not have to worry about mission creep. Instead, we need to consider the variety of changes that can occur in the course of an argument, like the following:

- (1) We start arguing for one thesis but end up arguing for another. Again, this could be either positive or negative: negative, if the new thesis is “a bridge too far“, an unjustifiable or unsuccessful over-reach; a positive if the new thesis is an improvement over the original one in response to the push-back – i.e., the *feedback* in the form of objections and questions – from the opposition, arguing in order to establish T, but continue arguing in order to further explore and understand the thesis and all its ramifications (benign enthusiasm?).
- (2) We begin by arguing *against* an opponent’s thesis, but find ourselves arguing *for* a thesis of our own, or, conversely, we start out arguing *for* something but soon find ourselves on the defensive, perhaps regarding the thesis in question but perhaps in defense of what was thought to be a safe or even unacknowledged prior assumption.

Both examples involve the targeted conclusion or standpoint in the argument and both are in response to the dialectical engagement, the counterpart to tactical changes dictated from below. Arguments also change in ways that are more policy-driven, like the top-down cases:

- (3) We start arguing about one topic but end up arguing about something else. As in military mission creep, this could be either a negative development, if we end following a Red Herring, or a positive one, if the earlier engagement reveals what we really should have been pursuing all along.
- (4) We start arguing about topic A, but because of “clustering” (see Dascal & Knoll 2011), we end up arguing about topics B, C, and D – opening new “fronts” but making progress on none of them. Even if the direct conceptual connections between, say, gay rights and abortion or between climate change and national security are weak and indirect, the contingent political, psychological, and social connections are more than enough to entangle us.

In these examples, the entire argument has veered off-course as the subject matter of the argument, and not just the concluding thesis, has changed. The next two examples might concern the *arguers* more than the subject matter:

- (5) After getting the opponents to *accede* to our initial thesis or proposal, we continue arguing in an attempt to *persuade* and then to *convince* them. The *kind* of victory has come to matter, and that means somehow changing or transforming our opponents.

Victory in an argument that does not entail any cognitive change in the arguers, like military victories without any political change, will never last for very long (even if you've "got them by the balls"<sup>4</sup>).

- (6) Similarly, but less benignly, we may start arguing in order to win an argument by defeating the opponents but end up trying to trounce, convert, or even *humiliate* them. Competitive excess makes it personal.

From one perspective, these do fit the pattern of mission creep: incremental changes in the goals in response to the opportunities that present themselves. However, the difference between targeting an argument and targeting an arguer has far too much significance for argumentation theory to conflate the cases.

Finally, let us offer one more example to illustrate another important phenomenon in argumentation: a change in the dialog type, i.e., a change in *kind* of argument itself.

- (7) We may enter an adversarial argument in order to establish a thesis, say, or get a proposed course of action accepted, but in the course of arguing we turn to less confrontational *negotiating* or something even more cooperative like joint *deliberating* in order to make some progress towards a resolution.

Unfortunately, belligerence tends to ratchet up, so that things more often move in the opposite direction, but we find some comfort in the idea that ratcheting down the adversariality is at least a possibility (For recent discussions, see Rooney, 2010; Stevens & Cohen, 2018; Casey, 2020).

Ubiquitous as it may be, mission creep in argumentation is not inevitable, and this is where we can take our cue from military theory. The military analogies provide some guidance. The distinction between mission creep arising from tactical maneuvering and top-down changes due to policy and strategy evolution has counterparts in argumentation, so it provides an especially helpful lens for viewing the phenomena.

Most obviously, multi-party argumentation in practice is almost entirely a matter of tactical responses in response to reasons, objections, questions, and replies. If we have a clear and articulate standpoint, we can prepare lines of reasoning in advance, anticipate some objections, and have a stock of answers ready (like plan B and plan C). Thus, the first thing needed is the same kind of advance planning that results in a clear and articulate mission statement for military actions and a defined exit strategy. And the second thing needed is, just as before, the right kind of *discipline* to stay on message. We might not think of discipline as a particularly argumentative virtue, but there is an art to finding and staying focused on the mean between completely rigid tunnel vision and overreacting to every goad and provocation in an argument.

The pattern of top-down mission creep is less immediately applicable because there are no exact counterparts to the four-part chain of command but the general lessons still hold: even if it is not a matter of communication between distinct, independent entities, it is important to have a coherent and integrated game plan for staying on track; there may be no need to draw lines demarcating different areas of responsibility, but arguers do need to take responsibility for their argumentation, and "operational inefficiencies" in execution can still gum the works. In a word,

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<sup>4</sup> This runs counter to the wisdom embodied in the quotation, "If you've got them by the balls, their hearts and minds will follow," popularized during the Vietnam War, and variously attributed to President Lyndon Johnson and General William Westmoreland, as well as, probably apocryphally, President Theodore Roosevelt.

that the upper echelons of the argumentative chain of command need to control mission creep is a kind of wisdom: the wisdom to know when and how to argue, but for the specific problem of mission creep it is the wisdom not to enter arguments without exit strategies for all the foreseeable contingencies.

## 5. Conclusion

We hope that this exercise in comparing military actions and argumentation has succeeded in three things: first, simply identifying the phenomenon of mission creep in argumentation, recognizing its significance, and bringing it to the attention of argumentation theorists for further theorizing; second, using the military model as a diagnostic tool both for understanding the causes for different kinds of mission creep and for bringing such ameliorative virtues as preparedness and the discipline to stay on topic into focus; and third, revealing just how important, and how difficult, it is to consider exit strategies in argumentation.

Where this exercise admittedly falls short is that having come to the recognition of how important exit strategies are for argumentation – and an appreciation for why it is most important precisely when the appropriateness of a covering “war narrative for arguing” makes formulating exit strategies most difficult – we have not made any headway at all on that problem. In part, it is a failure due to the absence of a well-developed body of military theorizing on the subject to serve as a template. But we like to think that it is also at least in part because we are trying to model the focus and discipline needed to resist what would be a rather appalling example of mission creep.

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