

# Information Operations, STRATCOM, and Public Affairs

Lieutenant Colonel Pamela Keeton, U.S. Army Reserve, Retired, and Major Mark McCann, U.S. Army

**I**N 2004, WATERSHED events (successful registration of more than 10 million voters, a successful presidential election, and subsequent inauguration) gave rise to a fledgling democracy in Afghanistan after more than 25 years of war and violence. Replacing the rule of the gun with the rule of law signaled the end of an era and gave hope to millions of Afghans who had lived through years of oppression.

These events also signaled a change in military strategy in Afghanistan from combat operations and counterterrorism to counterinsurgency, reconstruction, and development. This shift required Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan (CFC-A) to rethink how it would meet the challenges of the new political, military, diplomatic, and economic environments. The command's operations required close coordination with Afghan Government agencies, the U.S. Department of State, and NATO. An effective information campaign was critical to the command's success.

The command found itself in a public affairs (PA) campaign to maintain local Afghan and international support for helping rebuild an Afghanistan ravaged by years of war and to help establish the country's new democratic government. Information operations (IO) were critical in discrediting insurgents and what remained of the Taliban to garner support to ensure Afghanistan would never again become a cradle for despots or a haven for international terrorists.

## Theaterwide Interagency Effects

To approach the diverse requirements of running a communication operation in this strategic environment, CFC-A created a new organization called Theaterwide Interagency Effects, or Effects,

to synchronize communications-based PA, IO, psychological operations (PSYOPs), and political-military operations. Effects was designed to generate nonlethal effects in support of coalition military operations. One might compare the organization to the Strategic Communications Office that provides the same type of support for operations in Iraq. Both organizations use nonlethal IO effects to help commanders achieve operations success. Both have generated discussions about a "crisis of credibility" that public affairs might encounter if and when the media discover how closely it is aligned with IO and PSYOP.

An initial challenge for public affairs officers (PAOs) within the Effects organizational structure was to gain access to the commander for guidance and directives. Traditionally, PAOs serve as special staff officers and report directly to the commander. However, within the Effects organization, things can get lost because of additional layers of bureaucracy. The organization was also not without risk because, by aligning PA so closely with IO and PSYOP, there was a chance credibility with the media could be lost.

## The Role of Public Affairs

The importance of strategic communications creates a challenge for commanders who develop strategies, processes, and organizations that lead to effective communications. In Iraq and Afghanistan, commanders created new organizations to better synchronize communications and, hopefully, achieve certain desired effects in operations. Some commanders modeled their communications operations after those the Pentagon envisaged for the Office of Strategic Influence. This stirred debate between the PA, IO, and PSYOP communities about

how to create a synergy that leverages the effects of all three into a coordinated, synchronized, comprehensive communications effort. To do so, three questions must be answered: What, if any, role remains for public affairs? Where should public affairs fall within the organization? How can public affairs be made more effective?

In theory, the idea of merging PA, IO, and PSYOP appears to make sense; in practice, however, the goals of these three functions are quite different. Public affairs is charged with informing the public with factual, truthful information, while IO and PSYOP seek to influence their audiences to change perceptions or behavior.

Doctrinally, IO and PSYOP functions have been aligned with operations within a headquarters. Public affairs has always been an independent special staff section that reports directly to the commander. Public affairs is the voice of the commander and a conduit of information between the command and internal (command information) and external audiences, including, but not limited to, the media. Public affairs' function is to provide factual, timely information, not to affect public opinion by leading grassroots efforts or engaging in lobbying. Public affairs does not exist to create news or overtly influence public opinion; it exists to provide factual information so its audience can make informed opinions.

In the Global War on Terrorism, information is almost as powerful as bullets and bombs. Winning this war is as much about winning the trust and confidence of the people in Afghanistan, Iraq, and throughout the world as it is about winning tactical battles on the ground, so commanders must tailor information operations to achieve desired effects with critical audiences and help ground commanders achieve success in tactical operations. However, they must take care not to use the news media to effect change in people. This is not the media's purpose. But in today's global information market, there is a growing temptation to do just that. The important lesson here is that in attempting to win the information battle, we must ensure we do not lose the strategic war. In trying to win peoples' trust and confidence, we must not lose the people—whether they are the ones we are trying to affect or whether they are the ones we must rely on for support.

## **Coordinating PA, IO, and PSYOP Functions**

The challenge is to coordinate PA, IO, and PSYOP functions so each maintains its own integrity while maintaining credibility with the media.

A problem arises, however, when public affairs and information operations are aligned too closely. The basis of information used for IO purposes might be truthful, but it might also be manipulated to achieve an outcome. And, if the altered information cannot be substantiated with verifiable facts, credibility comes into question. For instance, while in Afghanistan, an IO officer claimed through the news media that the Taliban was "fracturing." The media asked for specific facts to substantiate the claim, but the substantiating facts were not releasable and, therefore, not verifiable. When the Taliban denied the claims, the media became incredulous, and the people were left to decide whom to believe. This is only one example, but if this action is repeated multiple times, the result could be the perception that the United States is no more credible than the bad guys.

To avoid a crisis of credibility and to maintain the command's integrity, the PAO should always report directly to the commander and be free from outside influence. Rather than create new structures to combine PAO, IO, and PSYOP, it is best to adhere to established, proven doctrine. While PAO maintains integrity by reporting directly to the commander, IO and PSYOP should remain in the realm of the operators.

U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) headquarters appears to be creating a synergy between the three functions without upsetting the natural balance. Rather than creating a new organization to coordinate and synchronize communications, CENTCOM is using a committee approach to bring the right people together to develop plans and coordinate efforts.

For most PAOs, the debate would end here. But for those who have lived during "real world" operations, separating PA, IO, and PSYOP will not solve the challenge of communicating strategically using all the resources available to the commander. So how do commanders better synchronize all of the communications assets at their disposal? One way is to study and emulate industry.

Leading a strategic communications operation takes educated, experienced, seasoned communicators. In the civilian world, whether for political campaigns or for consulting or conducting business, those looking for leaders for important or strategic communications programs seek seasoned communications professionals with the requisite education, industry contacts, and years of experience. The Army tends to label senior PA and communications personnel as generalists and assigns people with virtually no communications education, training,



DOD

*U.S. Army SFC Jill Chalfant, left, from the 362d PSYOP Battalion, and WO3 Michael Squillini, from the 173d Airborne Brigade, drop leaflets from a Blackhawk helicopter near the villages of Shirin and Adam Khan, Afghanistan, 29 August 2005.*

experience, or contacts to lead the Army's communications operations.<sup>1</sup>

A report from the Defense Science Board on strategic communications notes that "strategic communications requires a sophisticated method that maps perceptions and influence[s] networks, identifies policy priorities, formulates objectives, focuses on 'doable tasks,' develops themes and messages, employs relevant channels, leverages new strategic and tactical dynamics, and monitors success."<sup>2</sup> A generalist, even with U.S. Department of Defense schooling or training with industry (TWI) experience, is not qualified to lead a strategic communications effort. Becoming a strategic operator/communicator takes time, training, and years of practical, relevant experience, and it requires officers who seek nontraditional tracks in the military in which to be groomed and promoted. To this end, the Army PA community has not achieved the level of respect afforded other specialists and might soon find itself subsumed within the larger, nebulous community of strategic communications.

### **Training Skilled Communicators**

A second key point is that one or two jobs in public affairs does not make one a strategic communicator. Commanders quickly become frustrated when their PAOs do not have the experience, skills, and knowledge to run PA operations in a strategic

environment. Understanding cause and effect, building effective international press operations, dealing with multinational and international agencies, and managing a large PA staff requires an officer's leadership qualities, a campaign manager's political acumen, and a senior executive's vision.

Creating a career model for PAOs based on competencies inevitably leads to dealing with a rigid Army culture. Public affairs officers simply have not achieved the level of importance bestowed on lawyers, doctors, nurses, or even signal officers. Their perceived inferiority perpetuates the erroneous idea that any officer from any background can do the job of strategic communications.

While writing this article, I solicited opinions about public affairs from others, including senior officers. The attitudes I encountered were often surprising. When the topic of growing PA leaders among PAOs arose, one senior officer replied bluntly that one does not normally find the Army's best and brightest officers in public affairs so they normally do not make good leaders. He also said the best PA chiefs have come from outside the ranks of PAOs. He might be right, which is why it is incumbent on the PA community to develop officers who have the skills, acumen, and experience to lead the Army's strategic-communications efforts.

Producing leaders for strategic communications during the Information Age requires more and varied training opportunities, improvement in leader

development, and better resourcing of all communications-related operations to produce the right skills at the right levels and to ensure PAOs can be leaders in the strategic communications arena. The PA community must take a greater role in providing opportunities for its officers to grow and develop into seasoned, experienced communicators. Public affairs officers must have the opportunity to serve in positions that provide increased levels of challenge and experience—from division through corps and up to major command. The Army can provide such opportunity by alternating PAOs through operational jobs like command of a PA detachment or a mobile PA detachment, service as division or corps staff PAOs, and duty in major theater commands. Deployments as PAOs are essential to understanding how the system works and where it can be improved.

### Training with Industry

Public affairs officers also must have greater opportunities to work with larger media organizations and with firms that have broader PA practices, not just straight public relations. This would require rethinking and opening up the TWI program to a larger pool of officers, not just the four or five people selected each year. Training with industry should focus on giving officers a broader understanding of strategic communications and how they can apply it in support of organizational goals.

Officers' TWI experience will provide better benefit if they focus more on selling ideas and issues to important constituencies than selling cans of cola to teens or in learning how the media operate. Officers attending advanced civil schooling should focus on mass communications, journalism, advertising, and political science to better help them understand the areas that make up the broad spectrum of communications and to gain the insights they will need to deal with the myriad challenges strategic communicators face. While this might be too much to ask, it is still worth considering if the trend continues toward better

strategic communications operations Armywide.

Another radical approach might be for the Secretary of the Army to appoint a civilian PA chief and a military deputy, similar to the organizational construct of the Army's Acquisition, Logistics, and Technology Office. The civilian chief should be an experienced communicator who can develop and lead the overall program while the uniformed deputy leads the schools and serves as the branch proponent. A combination of uniformed military, Department of Army civilians, and consultants from the public relations industry would carry out the functions within public affairs, provide valuable strategic and tactical counsel, and be the arms and legs needed to reach the various audiences interested in defense.

While organization and training are important in strategic communications, another critical point should be its focus. Any strategic communications effort should begin with a plan that clearly states communications goals, strategies, and tactics and assigns roles and responsibilities among the staff and supporting elements.

If commanders are frustrated by communications, they should take the longer view, as well as a few lessons from industry, rather than create new bureaucracies and chase after experimental processes. We believe that to win the information and communications war, the Army must maintain doctrinally sound structures while improving processes and investing in a new generation of smart, experienced communications leaders who are able to tap into outside resources as missions dictate. **MR**

---

## NOTES

1. Harry J. Thie, Margaret C. Harrell, and Robert M. Emmerichs, *Interagency and International Assignments and Officer Career Management* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1999).

2. U.S. Department of Defense, report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communications, Washington, D.C., Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics, September 2004, 2, on-line at <[www.acq.osd.mil/dsb/reports/2004-09-Strategic\\_Communication.pdf](http://www.acq.osd.mil/dsb/reports/2004-09-Strategic_Communication.pdf)>, accessed 28 October 2005.

---

*Lieutenant Colonel Pamela Keeton, U.S. Army Reserve, Retired, is the Director of Public Affairs and Communications at the U.S. Institute of Peace, Washington, D.C. She received a B.A. from Ripon College, an M.S. from Virginia Commonwealth University, and is a graduate of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC). Her service includes two combat tours as a public affairs officer in Active and Reserve components of the U.S. Army. During her last deployment she served as the director of public affairs for Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan.*

*Major Mark McCann, U.S. Army, is the Public Affairs Officer for the 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne), Fort Carson, Colorado. He received a B.A. from St. Bonaventure University, an M.A. from Kent State University, and is a graduate of CGSC. He recently completed a 6-month tour as the public affairs plans officer and command spokesman for Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan.*