

## STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND THE LONG WAR

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Harry Truman was not Yogi Berra, but he did have his quotable moments. In a White House discussion of economic policy, he got fed up as he listened to his economic advisers say “on the one hand...”/ “on the other hand...” Finally, he blurted out: “Find me a one-handed economist!”

My message starts with the “on the one hand”/“on the other hand” drill that drove Harry Truman nuts. On the one hand, the United States government, including the US military, must indeed engage much more vigorously in strategic communication than it has so far in OIF and in the larger GWOT. On the other hand, even much more vigorous strategic communication, *in and of itself*, is not likely to make all that much difference in how OIF and GWOT play out—at least not any time soon. Those two cross-cutting “hands” require explanation and elaboration. After providing that, I’ll bring my hands together to lay out a vector for our operations (and to calm down Harry).

How do I know that the United States needs to engage more vigorously in strategic communication? Not simply because the Defense Science Board said so in its report. And not simply because Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld also said so recently, in his speech to the Council on Foreign Relations and in his op-ed piece in the Los Angeles Times. More telling than emanations from the Beltway is what the patterns of the past reveal about the present. GWOT is the latest in a series of big wars that the United States has waged. By “big wars” I mean wars waged for high stakes, over an extended time, across many theaters of operation, in many military and non-military domains. If you compare such wars in historical perspective, you can see a common pattern of keys to

success. One such key is that the side that wins a big war is the side that does the best job of developing and using in integrated ways all available instruments of military power and non-military influence.

Of course each big war that comes along is different from the ones before it. In World War II, though non-military instruments were important, the joint, combined, and unrestrained use of a wide range of military instruments dominated the outcome. In the Cold War the balance of strategic importance between military and non-military instruments shifted. Once the Soviets had nuclear weapons, the United States could no longer use its military instruments in an unrestrained way. Military operations and military posturing were important in the outcome of the Cold War, but our non-military actions and performance were even more important, though perhaps most important of all was self-defeating Soviet actions. In the Long War of the twenty-first century, the balance of strategic importance between military and non-military instruments has shifted again. Our use of military instruments should be even more restrained than it was in the Cold War. Why? Because the current big war is in large part a transnational insurgency. Insurgencies are struggles for the support of people caught between the two sides—struggles for “hearts and minds,” as the cliché would have it. In such wars, unrestrained military operations usually create more enemies than they kill—not a path to success. If it is wise to use your military instruments more discriminately, it is all the wiser to use your non-military instruments more vigorously.

Al Qaeda and Associated Movements (AQAM) are also limited in their use of military instruments. Our restraint is prudential; their constraint is physical. Their military repertoire as non-state actors is basically limited to suicide bombers and

improvised explosive devices. They hope to achieve much with little. They hope to drive us from the Muslim world, overthrow existing regimes there, and establish an Islamic caliphate. There is a huge gap to fill between their current violent means and their desired political end-state. They are trying to fill that gap with information operations and strategic communication.

Terrorism itself is a form of communication—propaganda of the deed. But AQAM's strategic-communication efforts go far beyond that. Perhaps because necessity has been the mother of invention for them, they have been much more agile and more innovative than we have been in exploiting the diffusion of new communications technology in the Muslim world. Directly or indirectly, AQAM are remarkably active with every new device and in all new media that a lo-tech troglodyte like me can think of: satellite television, hand-held video cameras, DVDs, and everything that the Internet makes possible—websites, blogs, e-mail, chat rooms, video and audio files. They target all kinds of Muslims all over the world. AQAM target non-Muslim audiences as well, including public opinion in European countries and in the United States. To put the counterpoint as kindly as I can, I would say that we have been extraordinarily haphazard in targeting all these audiences that AQAM is trying to target. We have to contest them more seriously in every communications media they use and compete for every target audience they seek to reach. To shun al-Jazeera to the extent that we have is simply self-defeating inaction.

I have now shown you one hand. It is time to show you the other hand. Why do I say that we should not expect too much of strategic communication in and of itself, at

least not any time soon? One reason is that wars are such complicated human phenomena that it is problematic, even with the benefit of hindsight, to highlight the importance of just one type of action. Another important reason why we should not expect much result any time soon is that when we engage in strategic communication, we do not start with a blank page. We as the senders of messages already possess an established reputation—not, by and large, a reputation that has improved since 9/11. The receivers of our messages--Muslims, especially Arab Muslims--already possess cultural lenses or blinders through which they interpret the messages that we try to send to them. An especially conspicuous scratch on the minds of many Arabs is the proclivity to believe in conspiracy theories. What we know to be incoherence or incompetence or impulsiveness on our part, many of them interpret as deep-seated malevolence. We say “engagement”; they see “encroachment.” We say “trade”; they see “theft.” We say “liberation”; they see “invasion” and “colonization.” We say “terrorists”; they see “freedom fighters.” We say “peace with Israel”; they see the Protocol of the Elders of Zion and a combined Crusader/Zionist conspiracy. We say “democracy”; they see “chaos.” We say “freedom”; they see license, especially sexual licentiousness.

Yet another reason why the result of any strategic-communication campaign will be slow to develop is because it can have no good equivalent to a “center of gravity” in conventional military campaigns. To be sure, when American social scientists first began studying communication in a systematic way in the mid-twentieth century, they posited the existence of opinion leaders or opinion elites in a given population; this concept popped up again in Secretary Rumsfeld’s recent speech. The assumption is that if you can identify and sway these opinion elites in your favor, they in turn can sway the masses in

the same direction. Who, outside the enemy camp, might these opinion leaders be in Iraq and in the greater Middle East? Given the heightened religiosity of our time, Muslim clerics would be first and foremost. Some of them are willing to speak out against AQAM; but few of them are willing to listen to us. In Iraq, Sistani has made it possible for us to implant the rudiments of democracy in the short term. But he despises what we stand for in the long run. A second group of opinion elites are traditional non-clerical types: tribal sheiks, warlords, or other figures of authority in the countryside. Enterprising American military commanders have had some success in developing relationships with sheiks. But many sheiks in Iraq (like warlords in Afghanistan) play with both sides to advance tribal or personal interests; it is hard to get them to think in terms of the nation as a whole. The third group is what we used to call “third force” types in other areas of the world during the Cold War: relatively well-educated, relatively secular professionals and intelligentsia. These are the more modern-minded people whom we most like to target with our strategic communication. Before Saddam, they were a group of rising importance in Iraq. Political repression, economic deprivation, and emigration have diminished their numbers. Terrorist intimidation has dampened their willingness to speak out. But this group probably represents our best long-term hope. The operative words, though, are “long-term.”

Thus, as we embark on strategic communication, we start with big disadvantages. AQAM proceeds with big advantages. They speak the language of their primary audience. Indeed, scholars of the Arab world report that Bin Laden is a master of traditional Arabic rhetoric. AQAM share the religion of their primary audience, even if they try to twist that religion’s teachings to serve their political purposes. They do not

need to work through interpreters, through intermediaries, through “opinion leaders.” . They speak directly to broad Muslim audiences with a message more comprehensible than ours is to those audiences. They say that Islam is the solution to whatever ails the Muslim world, without being pressed for details of how a caliphate could work in the modern world. Given the existing image of Americans as invaders, AQAM can select passages from the Koran and other religious texts that appear to legitimate the extreme ways that they use violence in putative defense of the faith. They can exaggerate the past to show that the United States is not only malevolent but also weak-willed, ready to run away when the going gets tough, as in Lebanon or Somalia. Above all, whereas our messages to Muslim audiences are based on reason as we understand it, AQAM appeals not just to their perversion of reason, but to raw passions in the Muslim world—passions for revenge in the short term, passions for the restoration of political greatness in the long term. Those passions are very powerful.

Even in less-impassioned circumstances, cross-cultural communication hardly ever proceeds smoothly. You may have noted from my biography that I started my academic career as a would-be expert on the interaction between the West and East Asia. As I studied Chinese and Japanese, I was struck by how words, ideas, images, and institutions transmitted across the Pacific would, in the process of translation, end up with quite different meanings or connotations or functions on the other side of the cultural divide. As a humorous example, I found that stock phrases of Maoist propaganda, e.g., “imperialist running dogs,” did not sound as ridiculous in Chinese as in English!

Because I have studied the difficulties of cross-cultural communication and because I also have learned how buzzwords run riot inside the Beltway, I worry that the United States will go from one extreme to another, from using too much military force and too little strategic communication, to pulling back too much on military force and relying too much on strategic communication. Strategic communication is not a substitute for military action in the Long War; it is a supplement to it. The two must work hand in hand.

Here is where I bring my two hands together and point out a vector for future operations. There are three means available for strategic communication: words, pictures, and deeds. We need to use them all, in a coherent package. There are many ways, many channels, many media or domains through which we can send messages with words, pictures, and deeds. We need to exploit them all. Since we have no ideal target audience of “opinion leaders” in the Muslim world, our message should be much the same to everyone in that world. We do not need to hire private-sector consultants to come up with slogans. Marine General Jim Mattis has already supplied us with our message: “no better friend, no worse enemy.” I do not speak Arabic, but I imagine that Mattis’s message is simple enough to make idiomatic sense across even a wide cultural divide. The message is easy to elaborate: we help Muslims who want to be helped, and we can help them in many ways—politically, economically, militarily, and intellectually. AQAM kill innocent Muslims indiscriminately. We try our best to kill or capture Muslims who kill or intimidate innocent Muslims. In the process, we sometimes kill or mistreat innocent Muslims. We should admit it when we do it. At the same time, we should point out how we try hard to avoid doing it. We should relentlessly point out that AQAM--and Iraqi

insurgents as well--kill innocents, more Muslim innocents than any other kind. They also kill many, many, more Muslims than American troops; and they do so as part and parcel of a deliberate, indiscriminate terrorist strategy.

The key is to align words and pictures with deeds as tightly as possible. The deeds come first. Words and pictures follow. They show, interpret, and hence reinforce the deeds in a straightforward manner. The deeds can come in many forms. Outside the Middle East, we have already seen that military operations to provide humanitarian assistance to tsunami victims and earthquake victims can help get Muslims in Southeast Asia and South Asia to reconsider their views of the United States. In Iraq, and elsewhere, American and allied troops can provide military security and public services for the people in their area of operations. That can lead to reinforcing pictures and words. In support of the message “no better friend.” Military commanders, meanwhile, can develop personal relationships with local leaders. Speaking words to such leaders in the absence of personal relationships in Iraq and elsewhere is just spitting in the wind. Personal relationships make for more effective two-way communication. Information arising from two-way communication can lead to intelligence that allows for more reliable identification of bad guys. Killing the bad guys can be highlighted in pictures and words in support of the message “no worse enemy.”

We should not just highlight, more vigorously than we have so far, the positive things we do. We should also highlight, more vigorously than we have so far, the negative things that the bad guys do. This brings me to the main reason why I think we should not put military strategy in the background as we try to put strategic communications in the foreground. Our military strategy should be designed to cause

AQAM to engage in self-defeating action. The outcome of big wars usually turns on one side engaging in self-defeating action while the other side avoids doing so. The art of getting the other side to fall into the trap of self-defeating action involves operations that I call “interaction games.” Not enough of our military operators have been playing interaction games. Our military default setting, a second-best approach, is simply to put unrelenting military pressure on the bad guys in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. Under such pressure, AQAM tends to react in self-defeating ways—killing Muslims rather than Americans.

There is good news and bad news here. Those Muslims whose support we seek have shown some tendency to turn against AQAM for killing innocent Muslims. But they may also turn against the governments that we have helped to establish in Iraq and Afghanistan, or against the governments that we support elsewhere, for not being able to protect innocent Muslims against terrorist attack. A key for strategic communications is to make sure that the bad guys get the full blame that they deserve.

We need more than a tightly-focused message in the here-and-now that aligns words and pictures with American deeds in a positive way and with AQAM deeds in a negative way. We also have to tell a big-picture, long-term story that links our past with the Muslim future. Social scientists who study communications nowadays tell us that the best way to get a big point across is to embed it in such a story.

What’s our story? The United States in the twentieth century played a major role, with military and non-military instruments, in helping to bring about a transformation of two major regions—Europe and East Asia. That transformation, over several decades, led

to remarkable stability, unprecedented prosperity, and genuine democracy in much of both regions. It required the defeat or discrediting of totalitarian regimes and movements and the emergence or reemergence of moderate European and East Asian leaders in partnership with the United States. If the Muslim world truly wishes to recover its long-lost position as a major and respected region, it is much more likely to do so in association with the United States and its allies than it is with the ascendancy of a totalitarian caliphate. The Arab areas of the Muslim world have already tried some of the bad ideas from the West in the twentieth century. Islamic regimes and movements, where they have taken root in recent years, have yielded only greater misery and repression. It is time for the Greater Middle East to try in the twenty-first century the ideas that have best stood the test of historical experience elsewhere. That is the really big story that the United States should be telling with greater vigor than it has up till now.