Strategic Communications: How to Make it Work?

By Marshall V. Ecklund, Major, USA

Editorial Abstract: *Major Ecklund's essay is the 2005 winner of the United States Army Command and General Staff College's 2004/2005 Excellence in Joint Command, Control, Communications, Computers and Intelligence (JC4I)/Information Operations (IO) Writing Award, jointly sponsored by the Armed Forces Communications and Electronics Association (AFCEA) and the CGSC Department of Joint and Multinational Operations.*

"United States strategic communication lacks sustained Presidential direction, effective interagency coordination, optimal private sector partnerships, and adequate resources. Tactical message coordination does not equate with strategic planning and evaluation. Personal commitment by top leaders has not been matched by needed changes in the organizations they lead or in a dysfunctional interagency process."

- Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication

Few Americans would argue that the U.S. is not currently experiencing the result of a gradual decline in its global image, especially with regard to the Middle East and countries that are predominantly Muslim. LTC Stephen M. Tanous attributes this resentment of the U.S. government (USG), and more specifically its foreign policies, to poorly articulated and inconsistently applied foreign policies, poor cultural understanding of foreign values and beliefs, and a pervasiveness of American power constantly on display.[1]

An underlying cause for the USG's cumulative failures at articulating persuasively its values, beliefs, and policies in ways that encourage support from ambivalent foreign nations and attain acceptance from hostile nations has been its inability to harness the informational (psychological) instrument of national power. This essay will prescribe a new paradigm for managing strategic communications within the framework of information as an instrument of statecraft.

Informational power refers to a country's ability to control and influence world opinion through informational channels. Facets of this influence include the collection and dissemination of critical information and intelligence to strategic decision makers, protecting information and information systems from attack and unauthorized access, and countering hostile propaganda by disseminating truthful information to both domestic and foreign populations. In theory, the USG should have a mechanism to provide its decision makers an integrated, comprehensive, and complete strategy to pursue national interests vis-à-vis the interdependent capabilities of the combined instruments of national power. However, unlike the diplomatic, military, and economic instruments of national power, no single government agency is responsible for providing the strong leadership and strategic direction necessary to operationalize the nation's vast portfolio of informational assets.

200,000 anti-war on Iraq demonstrators in Rabat, Morocco (AN)

The implementation of a national information strategy will require a separate standing bureaucracy to coordinate information dissemination across the USG. "Centralized control is essential for the top-down direction required for the development of prioritized, coherent, consistent themes and messages based on current U.S. interests and positions on key issues, and coordinated across agency lines.[2]" Historically, the strongest periods of USG strategic influence had several common features, including "permanent, rather than ad hoc organizations; specific charters outlining roles and responsibilities for all agencies; top-level interest, guidance, and cover; and full-time staffs.[3]"

(First World War.com)

George Creel (1876-1953) headed the U.S. information effort during World War One

Furthermore, these successful organizations had dedicated full-time staffs with direct access to critical policy decision makers. The Committee of Public Information and the Office of War Information (OWI) are two examples of organizations that avoided interagency rivalries with the support of the White House.

President Woodrow Wilson authorized the formation of the Committee of Public Information, more popularly known as the "Creel Committee" in 1917. With the committee's objectives of encouraging domestic loyalty and unity, and promoting understanding and support for U.S. foreign policy objectives abroad, George Creel used every means of communication available to shape opinion, as well as to control, centralize, and even censor information until 1919. This was the last time that any government organization controlled both the foreign and domestic media, had adequate funding to complete its informational mandate, and possessed an approval authority to further U.S. national goals and objectives.[4]

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Similarly, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the OWI in June 1942 to consolidate wartime information and psychological warfare activities into one agency with a full-time focus on strategic communications, and to coordinate better with the increasing number of agencies involved in wartime propaganda. The OWI reported directly to the president, and had the responsibility for both domestic and overt psychological warfare. With its overseas and domestic operations branches, the OWI designed, prepared, and executed information programs to promote an understanding of the status and progress of USG war efforts, and the policies, activities, and aims of the USG at home and abroad.[5] Both the OWI and the Committee of Public Information illustrate what is possible from organizations that have a permanent staff, have sufficient authority to direct the coordination and implementation of policy decisions, and are able to rise above interagency rivalry to direct, coordinate, and provide strategic communication guidance to all USG departments.

Because strategic influence transcends organizational boundaries and functional disciplines, it is an inherently difficult process to manage. This notwithstanding, the Commander-in-Chief must take charge of his information agenda and articulate a national informational strategy with vision as broad and encompassing as the Cold War's strategy of containment.[6] Currently, there is no single "lead agency" with formal tasking authority responsible for developing an information strategy for promoting and magnifying the USG's goals and objectives of fostering democratic principles worldwide, and providing targeted global audiences with truthful and factual information on USG activities. Additionally, no interagency organization currently conducts adequate target audience analysis, or counters hostile disinformation, misinformation, and hostile propaganda directed at the USG.[7] However, in stark contrast to the majority of recommendations made by numerous committees and boards studying the issues of strategic communications and the Department of Defense's (DoD) Information Operations (IO) since 9/11, this essay argues that a new paradigm will be necessary to harness the potential of the informational element of national power. While recent writings hazily discuss strategic communications in terms of anything dealing with information or communications, one should limit such broad generalizations to the instrument of national power itself.

From this author's analysis of the issue, strategic communication is actually one of two components of the informational instrument of national power. One could refer to the other component as "information activities," including the use of psychological effects and information as a weapon—as with IO. The DoD-recommended change to the definition of IO from the classified Information Operations Roadmap is "(U) The integrated employment of the core capabilities of Electronic Warfare [EW], Computer Network Operations [CNO], Psychological Operations [PSYOP], Military Deception and Operations Security [OPSEC], in concert with specified supporting and related activities [including Public Affairs and Civil Military Operations], to influence, disrupt, corrupt or usurp adversarial human and automated decision-making while protecting our own."[8] DoD's joint IO goal is to attain information superiority, or a capability to collect, process, and disseminate an uninterrupted flow of information while exploiting or denying an adversary's ability to do the same.

The most significant differences between the two components of an informational strategy are time, effects, and perceptions of truth. The results of a liberally-applied notion of

communication in the conduct of information activities usually involve actions or deeds, and are typically short-term in focus and duration. For example, a one-week PSYOP campaign that successfully persuades an enemy unit to capitulate does little to change long-term behaviors and attitudes concerning USG policies in the region. This is not to say that PSYOP cannot have a strategic impact, rather the result of IO are typically not strategic in terms of winning the "war of ideas"—the heart of strategic communication. Nonetheless, a tactical action that contradicts USG-espoused values such as respect for human rights can have a grave impact on the USG's credibility, legitimacy, and public support as it did with the recent scandal at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. When the USG's deeds and actions are inconsistent with its words, the success of strategic communications is highly improbable.

Which image is perceived as communicating the real USG message?

wikipedia.org

The image of Abu Ghraib

Defense Link

U.S. Marine Staff Sgt. W.P. Ybarra plays with a young Iraqi while his fellow Marines provide food and water to the family during a patrol in Fallujah.

DoD IO, and the similar tactical and operational information activities conducted by the other instruments of national power, typically focuses on hostile audiences and targets. Information-specific effects-based operations sought by such activities could include degrade, deceive, counter, protect, deny, and collect. Inherent in achieving many of these effects against an adversary or short-term interest are matters of truth and perception. PSYOP, grey and black propaganda, covert actions, and deception operations conducted by the USG could all potentially employ varying degrees of misdirection, half-truths, misleading information, negative propaganda, and out-right lies. While the most effective deception and PSYOP operations include mostly elements of truth, the mere association with the purposeful manipulation of facts in the realm of strategic communication is politically unsound. This same rationale arguably explains the fundamental concern that has plagued the majority of the USG's previous efforts at managing strategic influence, such as DoD's internally sabotaged the Office of Strategic Influence (OSI).

DoD

Former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Douglas Feith

On 30 October 2001, DoD established the OSI under the direct supervision of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (USD-P). The OSI provided DoD with a series of information policy options and programs based on worldwide and target-specific analysis and opinion polls. The OSI also initiated programs to counter hostile propaganda, misinformation, and disinformation directed by foreign nations against the USG and its allies.[9] As OSI executed pro-USG influence programs abroad, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs (ASD-PA) lobbied the USD-P for the authority to approve the OSI's PSYOP themes and related overt IO activities.

Probably fearing that the OSI would plant false messages and misinformation in overseas media, which would

subsequently be reported in the U.S. as fact, the ASD-PA wanted to make certain that it would not be given the unenviable job of rebuilding trust and support with a hostile public, or regaining the USG's damaged credibility. On 20 February 2002, a series of coordinated press releases containing intentionally leading disinformation about the OSI's charter fueled a media frenzy. The damage the media controversy and exposure caused was too great to overcome, so DoD opted to close the OSI on 26 February rather than counter the internally-spread and unsubstantiated disinformation, or take action against the source of the leaks.[10] The only remaining organization involved with strategic influence in OSD is the small Office of Information Activities (OIA) that retained responsibility for policy oversight of military PSYOP under the direction of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (ASD-SOLIC).[11]

The ASD-PA's concern over possible perception of media manipulation through public affairs channels illustrates the most critical, yet least recognized, nuance of strategic communication—the consequences of transmitting anything other than truths destroys the USG's credibility, erodes vital public support, strengthens the enemy's IO, and complicates future attempts at successfully communicating. A strategic communication strategy is a "coordinated plan for disseminating accurate information about the United States, designed to communicate our nation's goals and intentions clearly, truthfully, and deliberately to audiences around the world and at home."[12] Strategic communication is not an opportunity to politicize a message or intentionally lead a target audience to believe something that is not accurate; it allows the USG to tell its story, set the record straight, and correct misinformation. Additionally, strategic communication provide truthful and timely information in order to overcome a target audience's information deficit, or in some cases, to counteract anti-USG propaganda from hostile regimes. By providing nothing less than accurate information, allies and adversaries alike can make informed decisions with regard to USG policies and actions.[13]

Rumsfeld Kills Pentagon Propaganda Unit

News Reports Decried As Damaging, Inaccurate

By Thomas E. Ricks
Washington Post Staff Writer
Wednesday, February 27, 2002; Page A21

Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld emphatically killed the Pentagon's new Office of Strategic Influence, saying yesterday that inaccurate news reports had damaged the new propaganda coordination office beyond repair.

Strategic communication describes a variety of instruments used to "understand global attitudes and cultures, engage in a dialogue of ideas between people and institutions, advise policy makers, diplomats, and military leaders on the public opinion implications of policy choices, and influence attitudes and behavior through communications strategies."[14] A strategic communication strategy should clearly link national interests and objectives with themes and messages that will guide all departments' independent and coordinated strategies of influence and support to public diplomacy. Objectives should include adversarial and hostile audiences as well as the audiences of allied and neutral countries. The strategy should concentrate equally on 1) changing the long-term attitudes and behaviors of target audiences and 2) explaining USG policies to foreign audiences.[15]

Referring again to the differences between the two components of the informational instrument of national power—time, effects, and perceptions of truth—strategic communication optimally results in either a transfer and acceptance of ideas, or a change in beliefs or attitude vis-à-vis a long-term, proactive approach. The effects sought through strategic communications might include inform, persuade, influence, disseminate, legitimize, and build. Additionally, "policies, conflicts of interest, cultural differences, memories, time, dependence on mediated information, and other factors all shape perceptions and limit the effectiveness of strategic communication."[16]

This effectiveness also depends on the USG's ability to communicate effectively with many different audiences, including enemies, friends, coalition partners, disinterested masses, and the American public. Since each USG agency has its own mission, each habitually targets different audiences, with different messages, through different channels. By communicating different messages to multiple audiences at home and abroad, the USG risks the perception of being seen as disingenuous. However, policy actions ultimately speak louder than any words in a communications strategy, but both should be mutually supportive given that policy mistakes can quickly negate even the best-planned strategic communication strategy.[17] Trust and credibility is the basis for effective strategic communication, so the USG must never compromise this most basic tenet of the nation's values. Once compromised, no amount of strategic communicating will be able to deliver a message representative of genuine USG objectives.

The primary tools of a strategic communication strategy are public diplomacy, formal diplomacy, foreign policy, the national security strategy, and public affairs. Through the exchange of people and ideas, public diplomacy seeks to influence attitudes and mobilize publics in ways that support policies and interests by building lasting relationships and acceptance for a nation's culture, values, and policies.[18] In 1998, the Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act disestablished the formerly independent United States Information Agency (USIA) and merged its functions and missions into the Department of State (DOS), under the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. Since

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inheriting the USIA, the DOS has become the nominal lead in the USG's strategic communications with foreign audiences, including public diplomacy.[19] Additionally; DOS is still responsible for practicing formal diplomacy, or those traditional diplomatic interactions between governments.

DOS and DoD both employ public affairs to facilitate the free flow of information needed to communicate timely and accurate information relating to government goals, policies, and actions—primarily to inform and influence the U.S. media, American public, and select internal audiences. Both explain the rationale behind the USG's foreign affairs and policies. While public affairs focus primarily on the domestic media, their advocacy activities reach allies and adversaries around the globe. The conceptual distinction between the target audiences of public affairs and public diplomacy is losing validity in the world of global media, global audiences, and porous borders.[20]

Defense Link

President Bush and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld

Finally, nothing shapes USG policies and global perceptions of U.S. foreign and national security objectives more powerfully than the direction and leadership inherent in the President's statements and actions, and those of the USG's senior officials.

Interests, not public opinion, should drive foreign policies and national security strategy formulation; however, one can never separate policies and strategic communications.[21] This notwithstanding, Tanous cites a troubling statement from the 2002 Report of the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy: "U.S. foreign policy has been weakened by a failure to systematically include public diplomacy in the formulation and implementation of policy."[22] Without an interagency public diplomacy strategy, the risk of making communication mistakes damaging to USG public diplomacy efforts is high; a lack of strategy diminishes the efficiency of public diplomacy efforts across all departments of government.[23]

In today's "Information Age," the president needs someone that he can assign overall responsibility for the strategic communication and the portfolio of information activities in order to have a single point of contact to hold accountable for managing the informational instrument of national power. Whether referred to as a Special Assistant to the President for Information Activities, a National Information Adviser (NIA), or a Strategic Communication Advisor to the President, this advisor requires a full-time staff with experts from all agencies dealing with strategic communication.[24] By combining the existing Policy Coordinating Committees at the National Security Council (NSC), the NSC could establish an Executive Secretariat to manage execution oversight for short-term strategic communications interests, while simultaneously maintaining a focus on long-term strategic communications planning.

Top leadership for the USG's strategic communication architecture would likely be a political appointment, and closely affiliated with the President's agenda, however the Executive Secretariat must be a nonpartisan fusion team able to provide continuity of purpose regardless of the changing political administrations.[25] If established in a manner similar to the OWI, this organization would be less likely to become distracted by other important strategic information needs, and would have a favorable opportunity to secure interagency acceptance and support. This would increase the overall probability of its success in communicating the USG's intentions, policies, and actions to the world.

With a centrally controlled strategic communication mechanism to focus and integrate all strategic communication assets into a holistic strategic communication strategy, the USG could finally leverage all instruments of national power through

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the NSC and the Special Advisor to the President. Furthermore, with adequate resources, sustained effort, and talent from the private sector, a nationally directed strategic communication strategy can finally move past parochial interests and interagency rivalries by removing those information activities out from under the strategic communication umbrella. By removing all activities from strategic communication that could possibly tarnish its truth-based strategy to influence world opinion, strategic communication can better foster democratic principles worldwide, and provide targeted global audiences with truthful and factual information on USG activities without concern for chance miscues with information activities.

Endnotes:

[1] Lt Col Stephen M. Tanous (USAF), "Building a Psychological Strategy for the U.S.: Leveraging the Informational Element of National Power," U.S. Army War College Strategy Research Project, 7 April 2003, 2.

[2] Ibid., 25.

[3] LTC Susan L. Gough (USA), "The Evolution of Strategic Influence," U.S. Army War College Strategy Research Project, 7 April 2003, 34.

[4] COL Brad M. Ward, "Strategic Influence Operations – The Information Connection," U.S. Army War College Strategy Research Project, 7 April 2003, 3-4, 25.

[5] Ellen K. Haddock, "Winning with Words: Strategic Communications and the War on Terrorism," National Defense University, National War College Paper, 2002, 31; also Gough, 2003, 4.

[6] Gough, 2003, 34-35; also Arnold J. Abraham (OSD), "The Strategic Communications Process-How to Get Our Message Out More Effectively," National Defense University, National War College Paper, 2004, 11.

[7] Ward, 2003, 16-17.

[8] Donald H. Rumsfeld, "Department of Defense Information Operations Roadmap," 30 October 2003, 22.

[9] Ward, 2003, 12.

[10] Ibid., 13; also Gough, 2003, 31

[11] Gough, 2003, 31.

[12] Haddock, 2002, 4.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics, "Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication," September 2004, 11. Hereafter referred to as the DSB Report.

[15] Gough, 2003, 35.

[16] DSB Report, 2004, 15.

[17] Haddock, 2002, 11-12, 14.

[18] DSB Report, 2004, 12.

[19] Gough, 2003, 26.

[20] DSB Report, 2004, 12.

[21] Ibid., 30.

[22] Tanous, 2003, 9.

[23] Jess T. Ford, Director International Affairs and Trade, statement in "U.S. Public Diplomacy: State Department and Broadcasting Board of Governors Expand Post-9/11 Efforts but Challenges Remain," 23 August 2004, 9.

[24] Gough, 2003, 34; also Haddock, 2002.

[25] Abraham, 2004, 11