CHAPTER 12

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION:
WIELDING THE INFORMATION ELEMENT OF POWER

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It is generally accepted in the U.S. Government today that information is an element of national power along with diplomatic, military, and economic power, and that information is woven through the other elements, since their activities will have an informational impact. Interestingly, however, one needs to go back to the Ronald Reagan administration to find the most succinct and pointed mention of information as an element of power in formal government documents.

Subsequent national security documents allude to different aspects of information but without a specific strategy or definition. Given this dearth of official documentation, Drs. Dan Kuehl and Bob Neilson proffered the following definition of the information element: “Use of information content and technology as strategic instruments to shape fundamental political, economic, military, and cultural forces on a long-term basis to affect the global behavior of governments, supra-governmental organizations, and societies to support national security.”

Information as power is wielded in an increasingly complex environment consisting of physical, informational, and cognitive dimensions. This chapter will focus on strategic communication and how the U.S. Government wields power in the cognitive dimension of the information environment. Specifically, it will consider how information is used to engage, inform, educate, persuade, and influence perceptions and attitudes of key audiences in order to ultimately change behavior.

Before addressing strategic communication as a U.S. Government process, it is important to consider the complex environment in which that process occurs. Consequently, the information environment is initially covered in some detail, including a description of “new media” capabilities and their impact. Information as power is both colored and informed in the psyche of Americans through the historical lens of “propaganda,” and so it is also addressed in this section. With this foundational knowledge established, strategic communication is then considered from historical and current perspectives. Finally, recognizing both challenges and opportunities, a way-ahead is offered for future U.S. Government efforts to wield information effectively as power.

THE CHALLENGES OF TODAY’S INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

The current information environment has leveled the playing field for not only nation-states but non-state actors, multinational corporations, and even individuals to affect strategic outcomes with minimal information infrastructure and little capital expenditure. Anyone with a camera cell phone and personal digital device with Internet capability understands this. On the other hand, the U.S. military has increasingly leveraged advances in information infrastructure and technology to gain advantages on the modern battlefield. One example from Operation IRAQI FREEDOM is the significant increase in situational awareness from network-centric operations that enabled coalition forces to swiftly defeat Iraqi forces in major combat operations. Another includes the more prevalent use of visual information to record operations in order to proactively tell an accurate story, or as forensic evidence to refute enemy “disinformation” effectively.

Even a cursory look at advances in technology confirms what most people recognize as a result of their daily routine. The ability to access, collect, and transmit information is clearly decentralized to the lowest level (the individual). The technology is increasingly smaller, faster, and cheaper. Consequently, the ability to control and verify information is much more limited than in the recent past—nor will it get any easier:
In 1965, the physical chemist Gordon Moore, co-founder of Intel, predicted that the number of transistors on an integrated chip would double every 18 months. Moore predicted that this trend would continue for the foreseeable future. Moore and most other experts expect Moore’s Law to remain valid for at least another 2 decades.5

So, if you wish to control (as nation-states, bureaucracies, and militaries tend to wish), the future may appear bleak, since not only is the ability to access, collect, and transmit information decentralized; the capacity to do so continues to increase exponentially. These challenges are readily apparent in the examination of many current information capabilities collectively referred to as “new media.”

The Internet.

The Internet is the obvious start point for any discussion of the impact of today’s new media. It is important to note that the World Wide Web is essentially ungoverned, providing obvious freedoms and cautions. The Web gives the individual a voice, often an anonymous voice, and a potentially vast audience. Websites are easily established, dismantled, and reestablished, making them valuable to extremist movements. Terrorists routinely use the Internet for propaganda, recruiting, training, cybercrime, and fund raising.6 The United States has actively responded. In September 2011, President Barack Obama established the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications, which, in part, “challenges and counters extremist messages online in Arabic and Urdu, including through original video content.”7 The Department of State’s (DoS) broader policy guidance was articulated in a speech on Internet freedom by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in January 2010. That policy explicitly addresses “three fundamental elements: the human rights of free speech, press, and assembly in cyberspace; open markets for digital goods and services to foster innovation, investment, and economic opportunity; and the freedom to connect—promoting access to connection technologies around the world.”8

Web logs (blogs) are an example of the power that the Internet provides to individuals along with the dilemma it poses for nation-states. Of the over 150 million blogs in the world as of this writing, most have little effect on the conduct of nation-states or their militaries; but those that gain a following in the national security arena can have a huge impact. President George W. Bush cited Iraqi bloggers to point to progress being made in Iraq,9 having apparently learned both the importance and value of blogs in 2004 when investigative bloggers cleared his name after an infamous CBS airing that questioned his military service.10

Social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter have also skyrocketed in popularity in recent years. The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) has established a policy to allow broad use of social media by military members, recognizing the importance of educating and informing through the dialogue that these media offer. Senior military officers, policymakers, and their organizations and staffs actively engage in these forums, both to inform proactively as well as to counter enemy disinformation immediately. One cannot ignore the value of social media to the political activism that enabled such significant events as the so-called “Arab Spring.” While perhaps not the cause for revolt and uprisings, social media certainly provides a means for like-minded individuals to communicate instantaneously and organize more rapidly than ever before.11 The flip side of these opportunities is the challenge of maintaining operations security in the open, unconstrained environment of the World Wide Web, as well as the ability of authoritarian governments to spy on and manipulate their own people by monitoring and surreptitiously engaging social media forums.12

Video use and dissemination has skyrocketed as the capabilities of the Internet have increased. The YouTube phenomenon’s power and access are evidenced by its purchase for $1.6 billion by
Google only 20 months after its founding. Like blogs, YouTube serves a variety of purposes to include entertainment. But, also like blogs, YouTube can empower individuals to achieve strategic political and military effects where easy upload of their videos (without editorial oversight) allows access to a nearly unlimited audience. Thus, the use of the improvised explosive device (IED) by insurgents shifts from a military tactical weapon to a strategic information weapon when the IED detonator is accompanied by a videographer. Again, like blogs, the U.S. military has recognized the importance of competing in the video medium, using near-real-time streaming video to show ongoing images of U.S. operations in Afghanistan.¹³

While websites, social media, and video proliferate in today’s Internet (“Web 2.0”), the technology of “Web 3.0” (and the “semantic Web”) is rapidly increasing in popularity. Web 3.0 is generally about being inside a three-dimensional (3D) virtual world that is low-cost and emotive. This is the “metaverse,” or virtual universe, of applications like Second Life and others. These metaverses are attractive as opportunities to socialize where there is no need to compete and can be exploited as tools for learning. Multinational corporations are already planning and executing business plans in the 3D Internet world.¹⁴ But, like the other internet based applications, Web 3.0 provides opportunities for darker undertakings. The virtual universes show signs of providing training grounds for terrorist organizations and anonymous locations for criminal money laundering.¹⁵

**Mobile Technologies.**

The Internet clearly is part of the new media phenomenon, but the Internet has not penetrated large areas of the world, especially in the poorest areas of underdeveloped countries. The cell phone, however, as a means of mobile technology, is increasingly available worldwide and deserves discussion as a potentially powerful capability to affect national security and military issues—arguably even more so than the internet.

There are numerous examples of cell phone Short Message Service (SMS text) messaging shaping political campaigns by mobilizing and revolutionizing politics. As previously discussed, it also is used both to call people to popular protests as well as by governments to provide information or misinformation in order to quell such protests. Combine this with the viral nature of social networking sites, and the impact can be significant. Text messaging is the medium of choice in overseas countries. It bypasses mass media and mobilizes an already persuaded populace as a means of lightweight engagement. Cell phones contain the technology to text, provide news, video, sound, voice, radio, and Internet. The number of mobile subscriptions worldwide was scheduled to pass 5 billion in 2010. Recognizing the power of mobile technology, the Obama administration released the President’s Cairo speech to the Muslim world in 13 languages over text message.¹⁶ Like any other new media capability, cell phone technology provides opportunities and challenges. Many young Iranians are turning to cell phones as a means for political protest . . . an opportunity that can be exploited.¹⁷ On the other hand, criminals and terrorists can use cell phones to quickly organize an operation, execute it, and disperse using phone cards to provide cover from being traced. On an international scale, the challenge is often in the same laws that provide individual protections in democratic societies. Witness court battles in the United States regarding eavesdropping on foreign conversations without a court order when those conversations may be routed through a U.S. cell phone service provider.¹⁸

**Mainstream Media in the Age of New Media.**

Mainstream media certainly takes advantage of technological advances in order to remain competitive. Marvin Kalb in the Harvard Report on the Israeli-Hezbollah War of 2006 (the “Second Lebanon War”) notes that:
To do their jobs, journalists employed both the camera and the computer and with the help of portable satellite dishes and video phones ‘streamed’ or broadcast their reports . . ., as they covered the movement of troops and the rocketing of villages—often, (unintentionally, one assumes) revealing sensitive information to the enemy. Once upon a time, such information was the stuff of military intelligence acquired with considerable effort and risk; now it has become the stuff of everyday journalism. The camera and the computer have become weapons of war.19

This real-time reporting from the field has obvious impacts on the warfighter, but competition with new media for the first and fastest story also means that today’s mainstream media is not your parents’ mainstream media. Because of the plethora of information available today, newspapers, which once competed for knowledge as a scarce resource, today compete for a new scarce resource: the reader’s (or listener’s, in the case of broadcast media) attention.20 Perhaps that is why increasing numbers of young adults turn to Jon Stewart’s “The Daily Show” for their news.21 It should come as no great shock then that “good news” stories about military operations do not appear with regularity in mainstream print and broadcast journalism.22 Good news does not sell . . . because it does not grab the reader’s (or viewer’s) attention.

Of course, in an environment where the speed of breaking news means viewership and thus advertising dollars, accuracy is sometimes sacrificed as well. In a strange twist, mainstream media now turns increasingly to bloggers for their stories, and the most respected bloggers require multiple sources to verify accuracy.23 Consequently, the distinction between new and mainstream media sources becomes blurred, leaving it to the reader, already bombarded with information, to distinguish fact from fiction (or, perhaps more accurately, “spin” from context).

Propaganda and American Attitudes toward Information as Power.

Until recently, propaganda was described by the U.S. Government as “any form of communication in support of national objectives designed to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes, or behavior of any group in order to benefit the sponsor, either directly or indirectly.”24 Certainly propaganda has been used from time immemorial as a tool in warfare. But it is only since the U.S. experience of World War I that this rather innocuously defined term has become pejorative in our national psyche. That historical context included not only the obvious abhorrence of Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin’s propaganda machines, but also an introspective reflection of the way the United States used information as power in both World Wars. The resulting perspective may likely be the reason that information as an element of power remained mostly absent from recent official government strategy documents until the May 2007 publication of a National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication, well over 6 years after September 11, 2001 (9/11). That is not to say that the U.S. Government does not recognize the value and importance of information to wield power—but it appears that the term “propaganda” keeps getting in the way.25

In 2005, the Lincoln Group, a government contractor, paid Iraqi newspapers to print unattributed pro-U.S. stories in an effort to win the war of ideas and counter negative images of the U.S.-led coalition. Their actions were immediately and loudly condemned as propaganda by the mainstream U.S. press, members of Congress, and other government leaders for being contrary to the democratic ideals of a free press.26 The subsequent Pentagon investigation, however, found that no laws had been broken or policies ignored. But even prior to this, the DoD showed both its need to use information as power and its squeamishness toward accusations of propaganda use. The Pentagon established the Office of Strategic Influence (OSI) within weeks of 9/11. Its stated purpose was simple: to flood targeted areas with information. It did not take long for the mainstream media to pick up on the office and complain that disinformation was being planted abroad and would leak back to the U.S. public. These claims of propaganda were all it took to doom OSI,
which was shut down soon thereafter, even though subsequent investigations proved that the
information they provided was, in all cases, truthful. In a similar vein, a 2011 Pentagon investiga-
tion concluded that there were no inappropriate actions on the part of the DoD in establishing a
program to inform military broadcast analysts. The investigation was prompted by *New York Times*
articles questioning the program as “an improper campaign of news media manipulation.”

This conundrum, in which the United States must fight using propaganda but faces internal
criticism and backlash whenever it does, produces an information environment that favors an ad-
versary bent on exploiting it with his own strategic propaganda. Propaganda is the weapon of the
insurgent franchised cell. In a broad sense, terrorist organizations have learned the lessons of pro-
paganda well. Hezbollah integrated an aggressive strategic propaganda effort into all phases of
its 2006 conflict with Israel. “Made in the USA” signs sprung up on Lebanese rubble immediately
after the war, courtesy of an advertising firm hired by the insurgents. There was no doubt who the
intended audience was, since the banners were in English only.

It is in this challenging environment of both new media capabilities and a cautionary American
attitude toward propaganda that the United States finds itself attempting to compete and win.
Given these challenges, it may become increasingly difficult to gain and maintain information
superiority or even information dominance; however, the U.S. Government should be expected
to manage that environment effectively. It does that through the use of strategic communication.

**STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION: AN OVERVIEW**

The executive branch of the U.S. Government has the responsibility to develop and sustain
an information strategy that ensures that strategic communication occurs consistent with and in
support of policy development and implementation. This strategy should guide and direct inform-
ation activities across the geostrategic environment. Effective strategic communication supports
the national security strategy by identifying and responding to strategic threats and opportuni-
ties with information-related activities. It is focused U.S. Government efforts to understand and
engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement
of U.S. Government interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs,
plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of nation-
al power, whose primary supporting capabilities are Public Affairs, Military Information Opera-
tions, and Public Diplomacy.

Public Affairs within the DoD is defined as “those public information, command information,
and community relations activities directed toward both the external and internal publics with in-
terest in the Department. . . .” The definition of public affairs in the DoS more broadly discusses
providing information on the goals, policies, and activities of the U.S. Government. While the
DoS sees a role for public affairs with both domestic and international audiences, the thrust of its
effort is to inform the domestic audience.

Information Operations (IO) are “the integrated employment, during military operations, of
information-related capabilities in concert with other lines of operation to influence, disrupt, cor-
rupt, or usurp the decisionmaking of adversaries and potential adversaries while protecting our
own.” The DoD recognizes that the primary IO capability in support of strategic communication
is military information support operations (formerly called psychological operations).

Public diplomacy is primarily practiced by the DoS. It is defined as “those overt international
public information activities of the United States Government designed to promote United States
foreign policy objectives by seeking to understand, inform, and influence foreign audiences and
opinion makers, and by broadening the dialogue between American citizens and institutions and
their counterparts abroad.”
International broadcasting services are cited as a strategic communication means in some definitions. The Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) includes all U.S. civilian international broadcasting. This includes Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, Radio and TV Marti, and the Middle East Broadcasting Networks (Radio Sawa and Alhurra Television). VOA increasingly uses the Internet, mobile devices, social media, and other digital platforms.36

Unfortunately, this list limits the perceived means available to communications (emphasis intentionally added) based activities and so reinforces the lexicon of the term (strategic “communication”) itself. Therein lies a rub with current interpretations of strategic communication by many leaders. Considering strategic communication as a menu of self-limiting communications capabilities will significantly lessen its impact. Instead, interpretation of the definition itself must serve as the basis of understanding by practitioners who plan and implement it.

Strategists use a model of “ends, ways, and means” to describe all aspects of a national or military strategy. Strategy is about how (the way) leaders will use the capabilities (means) available to achieve objectives (ends).37 Understanding and engaging key audiences is meant to change perceptions, attitudes, and ultimately behaviors to help achieve military (and, in turn, policy) objectives. Thus, parsing the definition, it is apparent that strategic communication is a “way” to achieve an information effect on the cognitive dimension of the information environment (the required “end”).38 Strategic communication employs multiple “means,” and these means should be restricted only by the requirement to achieve the desired information effect on the intended audience.

Messages are certainly sent by verbal and visual communications means, but they are also sent by actions. (Note that the definition specifically includes “actions.”) In fact, senior officials point out that strategic communication is “80% actions and 20% words.”39 Specifically, how policies are implemented and supporting military operations are conducted affect the information environment by impacting perceptions and attitudes. Examples include use of U.S. Navy hospital ships in regional engagement and Pakistani earthquake relief efforts in permissive environments.40 But operations in hostile environments like Afghanistan also provide opportunities to positively shape the information environment. This clarification and expanded understanding of the definition is critical in order to fully exploit strategic communication to support U.S. Government policy and military operations. Fully integrated actions, images, and words are necessary. Key to success is an organizational culture that values, understands, and thus considers strategic communication means as important capabilities to be integrated within established development and planning processes. Strategic communication must be considered at the beginning of the planning process and not as a reactive crisis response when something goes wrong.

THE HISTORY OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

While “strategic communication” is a fairly new term in the U.S. Government lexicon, the concept, theory, and practice behind it is not. Winfield Scott recognized the importance of strategic communication at the theater level at Veracruz, Mexico, in 1847. Realizing the influence of the Catholic Church on Mexican society, Scott attended Mass with his staff at the Veracruz Cathedral to display the respect of U.S. forces. He further ordered U.S. Soldiers to salute Mexican priests in the streets. Each of these measures was “part of a calculated campaign to win the friendship of the Mexicans.”41

The more recent history of national strategic communication shows concerted efforts to portray the U.S. story positively in order to persuade and influence. The Committee on Public Information (CPI) (1917), also known as the Creel Committee after its chief newspaperman, George Creel, sought to rally U.S. public opinion behind World War I on behalf of the Woodrow Wilson administration.
The committee’s focus was the domestic audience, as such, the committee used public speakers, advertising, pamphlets, periodicals, and the burgeoning American motion picture industry.

The CPI’s domestic efforts during the war met with high success: Draft registration—the first since the tumultuous call-up of the Civil War—occurred peacefully, bond drives were over-subscribed, and the American population was generally behind the war effort. CPI operations in foreign capitals enabled Wilson to relate his war ideals and aims to the world audience. Indeed, Wilson was taken aback by this effective dissemination of his peace aims and the world’s reaction to it. He remarked to George Creel in December 1918, “I am wondering whether you have not unconsciously spun a net for me from which there is no escape.”

The post-war appraisal of the CPI was darker. George Creel compiled his official report on the Committee’s activities in June 1919 and soon after authored his public account, *How We Advertised America*, in 1920. But at home and overseas, the reality of the peace lagged behind Wilsonian aspirations. The Allies forged a treaty that many Americans and others believed unfair and incomplete. Americans also started to reflect on an ugly side to the war enthusiasm in the United States. Germans and German culture had been vilified; sauerkraut had become liberty cabbage, hamburger was Salisbury steak, but, more seriously, teaching the German language and subject matter in schools became viewed as disloyal, and authorities banned it in some states. There were incidents of physical attacks and even lynchings of suspected German sympathizers and war dissenters. The attorney general enlisted volunteer “loyalty enforcers” who carried official-looking badges and who were encouraged to report which of their neighbors who spoke out against the war.

World War II saw the establishment of The Office of War Information (OWI), which focused both domestically and overseas, with broadcasts sent in German to Nazi Germany. The VOA began its first broadcast with the statement, “Here speaks a voice from America. Every day at this time we will bring you the news of the war. The news may be good. The news may be bad. We shall tell you the truth.”

There were several significant differences between the the OWI and its CPI predecessor of 23 years earlier. Some of these were by design, but others reflected the style of the President. Franklin Roosevelt was highly adept at communicating to the public, doing so directly over radio via his addresses and “Fireside Chats.” In 1941, 60 million radio receivers reached 90 percent of the U.S. population in their homes. Roosevelt was, however, not entirely comfortable with a formal propaganda apparatus, and the leadership of the OWI, unlike Creel, did not have direct access to the President. Unlike Wilson, Roosevelt, preferring to be ambiguous regarding policy guidance, provided little political cover for the OWI in its skirmishes with the Congress.

Operating in the absence of such policy guidance the OWI staff, particularly in the Foreign Branch, sometimes got out ahead of stated government pronouncements, or it responded with what its members thought American policy should be. Some OWI techniques came under very pointed criticism. The use of pseudonyms by some OWI authors in their articles was denounced by prominent newspapermen, such as Arthur Krock of *The New York Times*. *The New York World Telegram* said the practice “smells of dishonesty.” President Harry Truman disbanded the OWI in 1945.

The Smith-Mundt Act (1948) (formally, “The U.S. Information and Educational Exchange Act” [Public Law 402; 80th Congress]), established a statutory information agency for the first time during a period of peace, with a mission to “promote a better understanding of the United States in other countries and to increase mutual understanding” between Americans and foreigners. The act also forbade the Voice of America to transmit to an American audience (based on the experiences of the World Wars). It is worth noting that Smith-Mundt is often cited today as the basis to limit the use of government information activities, since they may result in propagandizing the
American public. This, of course, is complicated by the inevitable “blowback” or “bleedover” of foreign influence activities based on the global information environment, as previously described.46

The United States Information Agency (USIA) (1953) was established by President Dwight Eisenhower as authorized by the Smith-Mundt Act. USIA encompassed all the information programs including VOA (its largest element), that were previously in the DoS, except for the educational exchange programs that remained at State. The USIA Director reported to the President through the National Security Council and received complete, day-to-day guidance on U.S. foreign policy from the Secretary of State.

A 1998 State Department reorganization occurred in response to calls by some to reduce the size of the U.S. foreign affairs establishment. (This is considered the State Department’s “peace dividend” following the Cold War.) The act folded the USIA into the DoS. It pulled the Broadcasting Board of Governors out of the USIA and made it a separate organization. The USIA slots were distributed throughout the State Department, and its mission was given to the Bureau of International Information Programs.

CURRENT STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION PROCESSES

The demise of the USIA is often regarded (in retrospect) as diluting the ability of the United States to effectively promulgate a national communication strategy, coordinate and integrate strategic themes and messages, and support public diplomacy efforts worldwide.47 Additionally, organizations and processes have experienced great flux in recent years. Strategic communication efforts under the George W. Bush administration provided mixed results. While some interagency committees and offices were ineffective or became dormant, there was some notable progress under Ambassador Karen Hughes (who assumed duties as the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs in the early fall of 2005 and departed in late 2007). The Under Secretary helps ensure that public diplomacy (described as engaging, informing, and influencing key international audiences) is practiced in harmony with public affairs (outreach to Americans) and traditional diplomacy to advance U.S. interests and security and to provide the moral basis for U.S. leadership in the world.48 Ambassador Hughes provided specific guidance to public affairs officers at embassies throughout the world that either cut short or eliminated the bureaucratic clearances needed to speak to the international press. She established a rapid-response unit in the DoS to monitor and respond to world and domestic events. She reinvigorated a once-dormant Strategic Communication Policy Coordinating Committee and established communication plans for key pilot countries. She established processes to disseminate coordinated U.S. themes and messages laterally and horizontally in the government. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a long awaited National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication was published under her leadership in May 2007.

The Obama administration’s efforts to advance strategic communication appear to be reaching a steady state as of this writing. While the national strategy developed under the previous administration is no longer an active document, President Obama has issued a “National Framework for Strategic Communication” in response to a congressional requirement. While not a strategy per se, this document provides the first U.S. Government definition of strategic communication and outlines the organizations and processes to implement it at the national level. A Global Engagement and Strategic Communication Interagency Policy Committee was initially active but has recently become dormant—with a shift of focus on very specific and localized grass-roots efforts to combat violent extremism overseas. In light of this shift, a Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communication (CSCC) was formally codified by Presidential Executive Order to:
coordinate, orient, and inform Government-wide public communications activities directed at audiences abroad and targeted against violent extremists and terrorist organizations, especially al-Qa’ida and its affiliates and adherents, with the goal of using communication tools to reduce radicalization by terrorists and extremist violence and terrorism that threaten the interests and national security of the United States.49

The CSCC replaces the operational level Global Strategic Engagement Center at the DoS.

Judith McHale was sworn in as Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs on May 26, 2009. McHale published her own strategic framework for public diplomacy entitled “Strengthening U.S. Engagement with the World.” That document calls for the linkage of public diplomacy efforts to foreign policy objectives. It directs the redistribution of funding based on national priorities and the assignment of Deputy Assistant Secretaries of State for Public Diplomacy in each of the regional bureaus, among other initiatives. Under Secretary McHale resigned her position to return to the private sector in July 2011. Assistant Secretary Ann Stock assumed the authorities of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs on July 8, 2011. She had previously led the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs in McHale’s office. (As of this writing Tara Sonenshine has been nominated, but not yet confirmed, to succeed McHale.)

The DoD has responded to the challenges posed by the current information environment, but also with mixed results. The 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) conducted a spin-off study on strategic communication that resulted in a roadmap addressing planning, resources, and coordination.50 Actions to achieve roadmap milestones are no longer formally monitored. However, in response to the same congressional directive that produced the “National Framework for Strategic Communication,” the DoD produced a “Report on Strategic Communication” in December 2009. The report significantly noted that “Emergent thinking is coalescing around the notion that strategic communication should be viewed as a process, rather than as a set of capabilities, organizations, or discrete activities.”51 Still enduring are “Principles of Strategic Communication” published by the office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs) in 2008.52

The Joint Staff has moved forward with a first draft of strategic communication doctrine. As of this writing, however, it appears that the progress of that document will be delayed until a Department of Defense Instruction (DoDI) is completed, thus providing a policy basis for the subordinate doctrinal manual. This DoDI is still in an embryonic stage.

THE WAY AHEAD

The current information environment, the American attitude toward propaganda, bureaucratic processes that are—by their very nature—cumbersome and slow, all combine to make effective strategic communication difficult indeed, but not impossible. Along with the challenges are opportunities. Overcoming the challenges while exploiting the opportunities, however, requires procedural and cultural change and the leadership necessary to force that change.

Procedurally, the United States must approach strategic communication as an integral part of policy development. To do otherwise will doom the United States to always remain on the defensive in an effort to gain trust and credibility—and that certainly has not worked well to date. Incorporation of such a plan in the policy development process allows for both cautions to policy developers regarding potentially negative foreign reactions and the proactive ability to explain the policy with messages to all audiences. On the other hand, understand that poor policy will not be salvaged by any messages or themes that attempt to explain it. (“You can put a lot of lipstick on a pig, but it’s still a pig.”53)
Failure to react quickly and accurately to adversary propaganda cedes the international information environment to the enemy. “Quickly” here is often measured in minutes, not hours, days, or weeks. The reality of instant communications means that individuals on the ground at the lowest tactical levels must be empowered to respond to enemy propaganda to the best of their ability. This requires a cultural change on the part of both individual “messengers” and their leaders. Training and education can provide the baseline competencies to equip American officials (be they Soldiers, diplomats, or others) to respond appropriately to propaganda. But the driving force in allowing the freedom to do so will come from leaders who are willing to delegate the authority to communicate publicly. This comes with an understanding that “information fratricide” may occur, but also with an acceptance that to do otherwise takes the United States out of the information fight. A culture of information empowerment to the lowest levels must be inculcated among U.S. Government officials, with clear guidance provided to subordinates, risk mitigation procedures established and, perhaps most importantly, acceptance that this will not be a zero-defect undertaking.

Winning hearts, minds, trust, and credibility, in the end, requires a local approach. Consider a major U.S. metropolitan area. Neighborhoods take on their own personalities driven by socioeconomic factors and ethnic and racial identity, among other considerations. Value sets are different among the diversity of communities that make up the melting pot that is a large U.S. city. It should not be difficult, then, to understand how it is nearly impossible to influence perceptions among audiences in a foreign nation with a “one size fits all” set of messages and actions. Long-term U.S. presence and engagement on the ground in foreign nations allows for a deep understanding of cultural differences within communities. These cultural underpinnings, combined with the hard work of relationship building, allow for effective tailoring of messages and successful identification of key influencers. Engagement is the key, whether it is by U.S. soldiers in their area of operations, diplomats in Provincial Reconstruction Teams, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) workers, or Nongovernmental Organizations. Where no U.S. presence exists, efforts must include recruiting key influencers for U.S. exchange programs such that they will tell the story for the nation upon their return home.

The National Framework for Strategic Communication notes that “every action that the United States Government takes sends a message.” The U.S. hospital ship Mercy completed a 5-month humanitarian mission to South and Southeast Asia, resulting in improved public opinion of the United States in those predominately Muslim nations where the missions took place. Similar increases in favorability ratings occurred following the U.S. response to the Indonesian tsunami and Pakistani earthquake. These low-cost, high-visibility efforts pay significant dividends in improving the image of the United States. Leaders need to understand that strategic communication is more than programs, themes, and messages; it is, perhaps most importantly, actions as well.

Countering the inherent national aversion to the inflammatory term “propaganda” again lies in both process and culture driven by leadership. A U.S. Government organization paying to have articles printed (under Iraqi pseudonyms) in Iraqi newspapers, regardless of whether it is ultimately found to be legal, is simply asking for trouble in today’s information environment. Supporting the government of Iraq to tell its own story is a better way to go. Leading from the rear in the information environment still gets the message told while avoiding direct confrontations with democratic ideals. On the other hand, an “Office of Strategic Influence” had the potential to provide focus, resources, and potentially significant results; but a few misguided articles in the mainstream press were all it took to bring about its quick demise. So, ultimately countering American angst over perceptions of propaganda requires strong national leadership. National leaders must admit that the United States actually does want to (truthfully) influence foreign audiences. To do anything less abrogates the information environment to our adversaries. Attempts to influence foreign audi-
ences, however, will almost certainly produce some bleed over to American audiences. That must be accepted and, with knowledge of forethought, preparations must be made to both educate the media proactively regarding information efforts and to respond to any potential media backlash. The recent initiatives to incorporate strategic communication into the policy development process as previously described are encouraging in this regard.

CONCLUSION

The National Framework for Strategic Communication appears to be a step in the right direction to allow the United States to compete in the information environment and proactively tell its story. Defeating an enemy whose center of gravity is extremist ideology requires nothing less than an all-out effort in this regard. But changing perceptions, attitudes, and ultimately behavior is a generational endeavor. It remains to be seen whether processes can be adopted that endure beyond political cycles, and whether national leadership can step forward to lead a charge to change the current culture of reticence to apply information as power while competing in an increasingly challenging information environment. Only then can the information battlefield be leveled and the battle of ideas won.

ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 12

1. Emergent North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) doctrine on Information Operations cites Diplomatic, Military, and Economic activities as “Instruments of Power.” It further states that Information, while not an instrument of power, forms a foundation, since all activity has an informational backdrop. See Allied Joint Pamphlet (AJP)-4, Allied Joint Logistic Doctrine, Brussels, Belgium: NATO, December 2003.


14. The author attended a conference on “New Media” sponsored by the Open Source Center at the Meridian House in Washington, DC, in April 2007. The referenced comments reflect panelists’ presentations. IBM already has a presence in Second Life with over 7,000 associates meeting and conducting business there. The conference was held under Chatham House rules allowing free and open dialogue while ensuring the anonymity of speakers.


22. J. D. Johannes, “How Al Qaeda is Winning Even as it is Losing,” *TCS Daily*, July 11, 2007. The author provides a statistical analysis using “gross rating points” to convey that 65 percent of coverage of the Iraq war is pessimistic.


24. Apropos to the discussion above, the DoD recently changed the definition of propaganda from that shown in this article to “any form of adversary communication, especially of a biased or misleading nature, designed to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes, or behavior of any group in order to benefit the sponsor, either directly or indirectly.” See *DOD Dictionary of Military Terms*, Washington, DC: Department of Defense, November 15, 2011, available from www.dtic.mil/doctrine/dod_dictionary.

25. Interestingly, the U.S. Government avoids using the term “propaganda” in any of its official publications, short of the DoD definition. Instead, the terms “military information support operations (formerly psychological operations),” “information operations,” “public diplomacy” and “strategic communication” are found, apparently as an ironic twist to change American perceptions favorably toward the use of information to influence foreign audiences.


30. Various definitions of strategic communication exist. The one shown here is taken from the *DoD Dictionary of Military Terms*.


33. *DoD Dictionary of Military Terms*.


38. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication (JP) 3-13, Information Operations*, February 13, 2006, p. I-1. This publication indicates that the information environment consists of three interrelated dimensions: physical, informational, and cognitive.

39. The author has attended numerous briefings by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Joint Communication (DASD, JC) and his staff, where this has been stated. Note: The DASD, JC is responsible for the DoD Strategic Communication Roadmap.


46. The Smith-Mundt Act is still in effect to include the requirement not to “target” U.S. audiences. The current information environment—with ubiquitous, worldwide media outlets, satellite communications, and real-time reporting—makes it difficult to target foreign audiences without exposing U.S. audiences to the message. This is a fact not envisioned in 1948 when the act became effective, and one that continues to cause friction between the military and media.


50. QDR Strategic Communication Execution Roadmap, p. 3.


53. Torie Clark, Lipstick on a Pig, New York: Free Press, 2006, p. 1. Clark was the chief spokesperson for the Pentagon during the first George W. Bush administration. The quote is the title of the first chapter of her book.

54. An excellent overview of the effectiveness of a local military approach can be found in an article written by Colonel Ralph Baker, U.S. Army, on his application of information operations as a brigade commander in Baghdad, Iraq. The article appears in the May-June 2006 issue of Military Review.

55. Bawa, p. 15.