In Search of the Art and Science of Strategic Communication

DENNIS M. MURPHY

Strategic communication in the Department of Defense clearly has moved forward under the tutelage of Secretary Robert Gates. In a far-ranging speech at the University of Kansas in November 2007, Dr. Gates bemoaned the inability of the United States to "communicate to the rest of the world what we are about as a society and a culture."[1] Had the discussion ended there, a legitimate impression may have been conveyed that senior officials in the national security and foreign affairs sectors of the US government still were sorting out how to apply the principles of strategic communication.

But on 17 September 2008, Dr. Gates announced a new policy of apologizing for Afghan civilian casualties and offering compensation to survivors even before all the facts were known. There were obvious downfalls to this decision, not the least of which is that the wrong people might be compensated. But perhaps Dr. Gates is demonstrating that he understands the value of a rapid, compassionate response. The policy aim had much less to do with compensation and everything to do with sending a message that the United States cares about the Afghan people.[2] So the Secretary's action closed a proverbial "say-do" gap and made inroads in the elusive battle of ideas. It was a first but important step in this ongoing and generational ideological struggle. Secretary Gates then changed commanders and strategy in Afghanistan, recognizing the importance, in large part, of the perceptions of the Afghan people regarding American military actions and presence.

Strategic communication is, at its essence, the orchestration of actions, words, and images to create cognitive information effects.[3] In the arena of the warfighter, these effects inherently support the achievement of military objectives. It is safe to say that the explosion of information technology and ready availability of communication methods will mean all military operations, across the spectrum of conflict, will depend heavily on the proper distribution of information to support mission success. Con-

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sequently, an understanding of how to incorporate strategic communication into warfighting paradigms to enhance effectiveness is imperative. Secretary Gates's aforementioned policy decisions emphasize this fact by providing an example of the increasing merger of the tactical (collateral civilian casualties) with the strategic in a near-transparent information environment.

The nature of warfare and military decision-making is understood to be both art and science, the combination of which varies according to situational and functional circumstances.[4] Given the importance of strategic communication to current and future warfare, it is essential to consider its application from both perspectives. Such a review will find that US warfighting commanders have the skills honed in current military education and training to employ the "art" of strategic communication, but require a shift in organizational culture to maximize application of that art. On the other hand, they risk failure without expert help when considering the "science" of strategic communication.

The Art of Strategic Communication

The US military's capstone manual, *Joint Publication 1*, states that:

> War is a complex, human undertaking that does not respond to deterministic rules . . . . [There is] a burden on the commander to remain responsive, versatile, and adaptive in real time to seize opportunities and reduce vulnerabilities. This is the art of war.[5]

Warfighting commanders practice this art of war, not in haphazard fashion, but by applying their experience to time-honored processes in the planning and execution of military battles and campaigns. The military decision-making process (campaign planning process at higher levels) is taught to and applied by leaders through all levels of their careers. The planning process is driven, first and foremost, by the commander's intent. Adaptation in the execution of military missions then occurs within an iterative "decide, detect, deliver, and assess" loop paradigm. While all phases of this loop are important, the assessment phase allows the commander to gauge the success of battles and campaigns and determine future actions in light of results. The commander's intent and the assessment phase of execution provide both opportunities and challenges to strategic communication's ability to enable mission success.

Dennis M. Murphy is Director of the Information in Warfare Group at the Center for Strategic Leadership, US Army War College where he teaches information operations and strategic communication elective courses and conducts workshops focused on the information element of power.

Commander's Intent

The commander's intent "articulate(s) the purpose of the campaign being conducted and the . . . commander's vision of the military end-state when military operations are concluded."[6] It serves as the impetus for operational planning.

Senior and mid-level military leaders have evolved in a culture that emphasizes kinetic warfighting skills, both in planning and execution.[7] Anecdotal evidence indicates this background may be influential during the initial months of tours of duty in Afghanistan and Iraq, resulting in slow adaptation to the requirements for the incorporation of the information effects of strategic communication on operations.[8] This cultural propensity toward kinetic action will remain intact without a significant "forcing function" to refocus commanders, staffs, and subordinate units toward an emphasis on information effects. Christine MacNulty, in her monograph *Transformation from the Outside in or Inside out?*, notes that organizational culture change occurs slowly over time: "People do change their mindsets . . . but it usually happens in a fairly slow, evolutionary fashion."[9] Unfortunately, in time of war, slow, evolutionary change is paid for in blood, and so the time gap has to be eliminated.

To be sure, the military has recognized the importance of information (and other nonlethal) effects as illuminated in the Army and Marine Corps manual on counterinsurgency operations.[10] While progress has been made in that regard, it is interesting to note that Secretary Gates's policy decision regarding compensation for civilian casualties occurred nearly two years after the manual was published, thus reinforcing the pattern of slow, evolutionary change. Add to this challenge the fact that strategic communication is often a misunderstood concept when doctrinal underpinnings are absent, along with the previously mentioned cultural bias toward the kinetic, and it becomes easier to realize why the opportunities to exploit success in the information environment are not yet prevalent.

The path to addressing these problems, if we are to realize the full benefit of strategic communication, lies in having a clearly stated information, end-state to accompany the traditional military end-state. The information end-state is a description of what the information environment will look like at the conclusion of military operations. It should consider the cognitive dimension of the information environment. This cognitive description includes the desired perceptions and attitudes of the intended audience (e.g., the indigenous population or international community).

A properly articulated information end-state will drive the planning and execution of the military operation. Military courses of action will be analyzed against this vision, and subordinate military units will carry out

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the operation in an effort to achieve the described end-state in the commander's intent. Sensitized to this intent, planners "wargame" the courses of action with that end-state in mind. Consequently, planners will consider an enemy's expected reaction to any friendly forces' actions in terms of the required information end-state. This assessment will include recognition that friendly kinetic action may result in an enemy asymmetric information reaction. Planners can then prepare counteractions to blunt the enemy information attack or elect to choose an alternate course of action. Additionally, the information end-state will determine how subordinate units execute their mission. Actions send loud and clear messages to the target audience. Where previously a kinetic solution may have been the preferred choice (driven by inherent organizational culture), the information end-state may dictate a different approach, achieving the stated cognitive effect related to perceptions, attitudes, and ultimately behavior in support of achieving the commander's overarching objectives.

The commander's intent when amplified by the simple inclusion of an information end-state supports the application of the art of war in strategic communication from the outset of planning and execution. It permits that art to mature within the current planning processes and paradigms and, perhaps most importantly, ensures the commander owns this critical enabler.[11]

The inclusion of an information end-state is an important step in proactively managing the information environment in support of military objectives. That same environment, however, guarantees that "wildcards" may occur as unpredictable, disruptive forces, even when an information end-state is available to sensitize the warfighter to cognitive effects. These incidents will significantly impact a military operation, whether the wildcard is the release of a gruesome civilian terrorist video on the Internet, false rumors of collateral damage involving civilians, or stories of friendly forces using a holy book for target practice. While the military response to such events seems necessarily reactive in nature, current planning processes facilitate proactive consideration of such events. In military planning a "branch" is "a contingency option built into the basic plan . . . . It is used to aid success of the operation based on anticipated events, opportunities, or disruptions caused by enemy actions and reactions. It answers the question 'what if?'"[12] As with the commander's intent, however, an organizational cul-

ture shift is required, if we are to successfully apply the existing process to the expected information environment; but the branch process does currently exist and is widely understood. While branch planning cannot account for every possible wildcard, it can anticipate that wildcards will occur and, at a minimum, establish procedures to deal with them.

Assessment: Measures of Effectiveness

The same organizational culture that skews actions toward the kinetic also impacts the assessment of information effects defined by the end-state. Kinetic action, by its nature, provides the instant gratification of measuring effectiveness by physical forensic evidence: a bomb is dropped, a building is destroyed. But, given the unique nature of the human behavior model, measuring the effectiveness of strategic communication efforts on perceptions and attitudes is much more problematic and typically occurs over time. Complicating matters is Dr. Steve Corman's application of the pragmatic complexity theory to strategic communication. Corman implies that a feedback loop is necessary in the application of strategic communication (an accepted part of the military process) but offers that the number of variables portends initial failure of communication efforts. Strategic communication then becomes a series of variations of messages (through actions, images, and words), and selecting and retaining those that work best.[13] This means the "decide, detect, deliver, assess" model is still relevant, but the assessment of results occurs more slowly over time and is more complicated than when the process is applied to kinetic actions.

It is not hard to understand why the military commander, expecting the immediate results that his kinetic experience provides, and ingrained to focus on rapid success, may question the value of strategic communication to mission accomplishment. This is especially true when valuable resources are applied against the effort. (Do you put a combat cameraman or a machine gunner on a helicopter flying into the battle zone?)[14] In much the same manner as an information end-state offers an opportunity to overcome cultural reticence, informational measures of effectiveness need to be developed with organizational culture in mind. Typical measurements for strategic communication are costly in terms of time, money, and manpower and usually require a special expertise. These measurements can include polling, focus groups, and media analysis. To reduce the associated expense, the military would be well-served to develop "field expedient" measures of effectiveness. Colonel Ralph Baker described his experience using such methods as a brigade combat team commander in Iraq. The number and categories of people waving as a patrol moved through a village and the

amount, type, or lack of graffiti on village walls acted as metrics to determine attitudes and perceptions reflective of changes in behavior. Soldiers within the brigade became some of the primary sources of information, and Baker evaluated their collection efforts in terms of the doctrinally accepted commander's critical information requirements.[15] Before dismissing this example as only applicable to tactical situations, it is well to remember that tactical action in the information realm has long- and short-term operational and strategic implications. While Baker's use of these measures was necessarily a commonsense approach in a combat zone, social scientists may just as readily codify a list of measures that are easily and efficiently available to field commanders.

The commander also needs to overcome the false need for instant gratification that is the expected norm for kinetic measures of effectiveness. Consequently, identification and formulation of intermediate information effects reflecting progress toward achieving the ultimate information end-state can be of equal or greater value. Evidence of the impact of strategic communication efforts is a more near-term reality, and commanders will gain confidence over time that the cost of the effort is providing benefits in support of mission accomplishment.

The art of strategic communication, with appropriate changes to accommodate the inherent military culture, is fully achievable within the current military processes described in this article. But even this discussion has hinted at the complexity of the human behavior model and the requirement that science be stringently applied to the model to ensure expected results.

The Science of Strategic Communication

While the art of war is, by its nature, a function of experience applied within codified processes, the science of war takes that experience and provides rigor to the analysis driven by those processes. As such, science verifies or questions art. In this manner science often ensures that specific actions taken to execute the military plan produce the anticipated results. (The science of ballistics and Newtonian physics come to mind in the kinetic warfight.) As previously noted, the US military's joint doctrine related to operations fully embraces this concept when it notes that "decision-making is both art and science."[16]

Science is particularly important in the conduct of strategic communication as a means of producing the intended information effects. Consider an information end-state that requires the population of a village to remain neutral in their attitude toward a US military presence at the conclusion of an operation. What are the actions, images, and words that ensure the appro-

priate effect? The answer is, "it depends." What it depends upon is how those actions, images, and words are perceived by the local inhabitants. A deep understanding of the human behavior model, specifically culture and how it informs emotion, is critical to obtaining behavior change that is driven by perception and attitude, thus ensuring the desired information end-state.[17]

The difficulty with cultural understanding is that culture is, by its very nature, a local phenomenon. As MacNulty notes:

> The society in which we live—in this context not the national culture . . . but the fairly small area in which we grow up . . . results in different culture, values, beliefs, religion, and views about money, work, marriage, gender roles, and so on.[18]

Neighborhoods take on their own personalities, driven by such considerations as socio-economic factors and ethnic and racial identity. Value sets are different among communities that form the integrated society of a large US city.[19] Transfer this reality to a foreign country where the US military is conducting operations. It should not be difficult to understand how challenging it is to influence perceptions among audiences with a "one-size-fits all" set of actions and messages.

Military leaders, typically having served several tours of duty in Iraq or Afghanistan, find themselves in different positions in terms of leadership and geographic locations than on previous tours. Because culture is a localized phenomenon, the culture that these leaders are expected to understand in the new environment may have dramatically changed. Commanders have become more adept over time in recognizing the importance of cultural differences and sensitivities impacting mission success. But the truth of the matter is little changed; cultural understanding of local audiences remains a major challenge for most military leaders. The fact remains that an intuitive understanding of or an advanced education in psychology, sociology, or cultural anthropology will not broadly occur among America's warfighting commanders. In fact, exposure to these concepts leaves most military commanders with two overarching reactions: Cultural understanding is important, and cultural understanding is difficult. Instead, the military should attempt to increase the general knowledge of its leaders and enlist external sources to provide specifics on the inward or hidden nature of cultural expertise.

Language Education and Staff Expertise

Studying a language by its very nature exposes the student to a greater understanding of regional culture. In recognition of the critical role that language skills play in cultural understanding and sensitivity, the Department of Defense published a "Defense Language Transformation Roadmap"

in early 2005. The goals of the roadmap are admirable, but the proposals outlined have met with mixed results.[20] A critical omission in the roadmap is that it lacks a requirement linking language proficiency with accession of military leaders. Prescribed military operational and educational requirements fully describe an individual's progression during his or her military career. Adding a language requirement for military officers will succeed for specific specialties where that type of education is important to their military job performance (e.g., foreign area officers). But such a program will only touch a small percentage of officers. Instead, language requirements need to be included in Reserve Officer Training Corps scholarships and reemphasized at the military academies. The language to be studied need not be specified in this pre-accession stage. The key is to gain a general understanding of cultural differences achieved through language education for the maximum number of future leaders. The United States, as a global military power, finds itself involved in operations across the spectrum of conflict. This circumstance will continue into the future. Is Urdu the language du jour? Farsi? Mandarin? Without question, there will be a need for a language "surge" capability designed for specific conflicts. Such requirements can be addressed through incentives for pre-accessions and codified to draw support from the general population.[21] The broad requirement of language skills tied to accession, however, will ensure that future military commanders are exposed to the importance culture portends for warfighting.

Beyond the general cultural sensitivity language education provides, inherent military staff expertise in social sciences such as cultural anthropology is critical to identifying local cues to issues that enhance warfighting success. Once again, the military has recognized this fact and deployed "human terrain teams" (HTT) to work on brigade-level staffs in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Army's Combined Arms Center published a handbook in 2008 on the functions of these teams that begins with insight by then-Lieutenant General Peter Chiarelli:

> Understanding the effect of operations as seen through the lens of the local culture and psyche is the foremost planning consideration for every operation.[22]

Despite accolades provided by commanders regarding the value of these teams,[23] the number of HTTs is limited, and a great deal of their expertise is in fact provided by nonuniformed team members. These civilian experts typically have advanced degrees in the social sciences. But the limited number of teams, coupled with their acknowledged success, demonstrates a need for military staffs to have similar expertise. Not every staff can have an HTT; not every situation is prioritized for HTT deployment. (Consider US

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combatant command theater engagement activities in the shaping or deterrent phases of military operations.)

The military would do well to develop and assign a cultural skill set to existing uniformed staff sections.[24] Greater educational opportunities in the appropriate social sciences would support such a decision (both in advanced civilian and professional military education). Psychological operations (PSYOP) and civil affairs specialists seem best suited to assume these roles and functions. PSYOP professionals tend to be more adept at understanding the nuances of segmented audience research and analysis. But even they would need additional education in anthropological cues that ensure appropriate information effects are achieved. Civil affairs practitioners work on a variety of civic projects, interacting with leaders and the general population of a village or region. Given that interaction, they are perhaps the appropriate staff members to evaluate and determine the cultural nuances of the local population. Again, a more in-depth education related to the general nature of these signals is required.

The value of this approach goes beyond simply manning each staff with cultural experts, although accomplishing such steps is critically important. It is the military member who shares the organizational culture of his command. He understands the commander's intent, along with its stated information end-state, and how it is designed to support the accomplishment of the military objective. He is the individual who can look for those cultural cues impacting military success and then appropriately translate them to other staff members and the commander. The relationship of the information end-state and cultural understanding now has the potential of becoming synergistic. The commander specifies the behavior change that is intended through actions, images, and words (the art). The cultural expert on the staff applies the human behavior model (the science) against the intended audience to ensure these actions, images, and words result in success. The cultural expert then continues his observations within the community to determine the effectiveness of the information effort, providing feedback that can be used to modify future strategic communication efforts.

There is another advantage to having a single uniformed staff function focused on local cultural understanding. Currently, units rotate into combat areas for a period of 12 months. During the initial deployment phase

the PSYOP or civil affairs officer assigned to cultural duties may possess a general understanding of various social science principles but not the specific details associated with the local area of operation. Over time, however, that type of data will be developed into a general framework of information and knowledge. Critical factors such as key influencers, demographics, employment, and history, among others, will allow for a broader understanding. Such factors can be captured in a transferable database for any replacement units or new staff officers. In this manner a general expertise of the various social sciences can be translated over time and unit rotations into a detailed, long-term understanding of local culture in support of strategic communication efforts. Consequently, when the next unit arrives, there will be significantly less time spent in determining the local cultural mosaic.

External Cultural Expertise

It is safe to say that the US military cannot accurately determine where the next crisis may occur. Predicting the next conflict (or disaster requiring humanitarian support) is an educated guess at best. How then can the military proactively adopt the science of strategic communication without being entirely reactive?[25] The answer lies in the development of a prioritized database containing cultural experts and key cultural factors, capable of supporting the requirements of geographic combatant commands. Is Nagorno-Karabakh, for example, a potential location of future US military engagement? If so, the US European Command should cultivate and enlist experts who possess a deep understanding of that regional culture and local nuances. Those experts may already exist within the intelligence community and diplomatic corps.[26] Allies and friendly nations, nongovernmental organizations, and academia are also potential sources. Where possible the geographic combatant command should define the output parameters of any desired database, ensuring that it encompasses cultural makeup. These output parameters and requirements need to be linked to potential or current (in the case of theater security plans) military objectives. Key influencers, the people within a culture most likely to be credible and trusted messengers, would be an essential part of any database. Proactive development of prioritized cultural databases provides a good start for any military operation where information effects are certain to impact success.

Conclusion

The Prussian military strategist Carl von Clausewitz noted that "the first, the supreme, most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and the commander have to make is to establish the kind of war on which they

are embarking."[27] It is safe to say that, given the recent increases in access to information, information effects driven by strategic communication processes will remain key to military success.[28] With that in mind, it is critical that the military understand how to plan and execute strategic communication in their effort to effectively and efficiently support desired outcomes. This approach requires a greater understanding of both the art and science in the application of strategic communication.

Instituting an explicit change to military doctrine in the form of an information end-state contained within the commander's intent will place information as a warfighting function on the same level as maneuver, enhancing the art of command. Streamlining measures of effectiveness to ensure a more rapid feedback mechanism is essential. Emphasis on foreign language skills as part of accession requirements for military leaders; developing and resourcing specific branches or specialties with a deeper understanding of cultural anthropology; and creating databases of cultural experts prioritized to meet the needs of combatant commands will provide immeasurable advantages in tomorrow's uncertain geostrategic environment. Taking these steps now will ensure that, in the end, strategic communication will be an inherent and critical part of any military operation, supported by the necessary expertise required to be effective in achieving military objectives.

NOTES

1. Robert M. Gates, "Landon Lecture" (Manhattan: Kansas State Univ., 26 November 2007), http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1199.

2. Thom Shanker, "Gates Tries to Ease Tension in Afghan Civilian Deaths," *The New York Times*, 18 September 2008, A16.

3. The Department of Defense defined strategic communication in its 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review as "focused United States Government processes and efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable to advance national interests and objectives through the use of coordinated information, themes, plans, programs, and actions synchronized with other element of national power." It has since parsed this rather obfuscated definition to its essential parts as described here to achieve clarity.

4. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 13 February 2008), III-3.

5. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* (Washington: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 20 March 2009), I-1.

6. Department of Military Strategy, Planning, and Operations, "Campaign Planning Primer" (Carlisle, Pa.: US Army War College, 2007), 13.

7. Todd C. Helmus, Christopher Paul, and Russell W. Glenn, *Enlisting Madison Avenue: The Marketing Approach to Earning Popular Support in Theaters of Operation* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2007), 27.

8. The author has taught on the topic of strategic communication at the US Army War College for the past four years. Over that period senior military leader-students have increasingly recognized the importance of information effects to warfighting success. They anecdotally offer, however, that even with successive tours of duty in combat zones, it takes an initial four months on average to put into place effective tactics, techniques, and procedures to compete in the information environment.

9. Christine A. R. MacNulty, *Transformation from the Outside in or the Inside out?* (Carlisle, Pa.: US Army War College, Center for Strategic Leadership, 2008), 22.

10. US Army, Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington: Headquarters Department of the Army, 2006). This manual cites in a number of sections the importance of information effects to counterinsurgency success, to include the use of the appropriate level of force to avoid collateral damage (see section 1-141). Having

noted that, the fact that Gates's policy regarding the same issue was top-driven speaks to a lack of cultural inculcation of the concepts.

11. In 2008 the Department of Defense published "Principles of Strategic Communication" that listed enduring concepts defining this topic. The overarching principle states that strategic communication is "leadership driven." See Robert Hastings, "Principles of Strategic Communication Guide," memorandum for Secretaries of the Military Departments, et al., 15 August 2008.

12. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning* (Washington: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 26 December 2006), IV-31.

13. Steven R. Corman, Angela Trethewey, and Bud Goodall, "A 21st Century Model for Communication in the Global War of Ideas: From Simplistic Influence to Pragmatic Complexity" (Tempe: Arizona State Univ., Consortium for Strategic Communication, 3 April 2007), 13.

14. Weighing resource allocation against the beneficial gains of information effects goes well beyond the realm of the warfighter. The US Congress expressed similar concerns about increased funding for military information programs in the fall of 2009 without what they felt were appropriate oversight and progress measures. See, for example, Walter Pincus, "Congressional Committees Raise Concerns over Pentagon's Strategic Communications," *The Washington Post*, 28 July 2009, A15.

15. Ralph O. Baker, "The Decisive Weapon: A Brigade Combat Team Commander's Perspective on Information Operations," *Military Review*, 86 (May/June 2006), 30.

16. Joint Publication 3-0, III-3.

17. The author attended a conference in October 2009 on strategic communication where, in a briefing on "Future Marketing and Advertising," Dr. Julie Edell Britton indicated that more than 70 percent of attitudinal change is based on feelings. Dr. Britton is an associate professor at Duke University.

18. MacNulty, 21.

19. This is perhaps most evident in the micro-targeting that occurs in political campaigns in the United States today. For a fascinating example that points to the local nature of culture see Associated Press, "Bloomberg Tailors Calls According to Voter Styles," *USA Today*, 27 October 2009, 6A.

20. Based on discussions with Mr. Jim Diffell of the National Intelligence University's Language Program Office. See Department of Defense, "Defense Language Transformation Roadmap" (Washington: Department of Defense, January 2005).

21. Note that the Defense Language Transformation Roadmap cited previously recognizes this need and articulates it in several of the goals within that document.

22. Nathan Finney, "Human Terrain Team Handbook" (Fort Leavenworth, Kans.: US Army Combined Arms Center, September 2008), 2.

23. Ibid., 119-20.

24. The US Air Force has a small cadre of behavioral scientists in uniform that it is trying to expand. These small numbers can provide general support to the force but little, if any, on the ground day-to-day expertise and advice.

25. The US military launched the "Afghan Hands" initiative in October 2009 to deal in large part with the cultural difficulties of the counterinsurgency effort in Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan and gain a better knowledge of its people. It is important to note that while an admirable effort, it comes eight years into that war. See Yochi J. Dreazen, "Afghan War Units Begin Two New Efforts," *The Wall Street Journal*, 6 October 2009, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB125479517717366539.html, A6.

26. The author served as a senior Army fellow at the Foreign Service Institute in 1999 where he worked with experts on the Caucasus on future foreign policy scenarios. The intelligence community in particular has experts with deep understanding of key influencers and the cultures that drive them. Members of the diplomatic corps focus regionally and spend large parts of their career living and working in nations in their specific region of expertise.

27. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 100.

28. The August 2009 strategic assessment of Afghanistan by General Stanley McChrystal devotes an entire annex of the report exclusively to strategic communication that states explicitly, "Strategic communication makes a vital contribution to the overall effort."