

VIRTUOUS INFLUENCE: AN IMPERATIVE TO SOLVE U.S. STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION QUANDARY

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U.S.AWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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COMMUNICATION QUANDARY**

by

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ABSTRACT

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VIRTUOUS INFLUENCE: AN IMPERATIVE TO SOLVE U.S. STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION QUANDARY

Despite a misleading choice of words, strategic communication is truly about influence. There is no relevancy anymore to artificially distinguish between information and influence, and the U.S. government and military need to come to terms with the notion of influence. As the organization deploying a massive set of information capabilities, the Department of Defense should examine the potential of virtuous influence in order to resolutely develop two-way communication with foreign audiences, refocus military information specialties, and engage into a true understanding-based communication strategy in order to better support U.S. national objectives.

Definitions Matter

Is there anything such as a non-strategic communication in the era of information and globalization? The always increasing connectivity gives any act or message the power to reach a global audience and to have strategic implications. One early lesson from the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia is the devastating consequences one single act may have: a man setting fire to himself in a remote city.¹ A single act of contestation, relayed, commented, and amplified through Internet channels, was enough to initiate a revolution and topple the regime.

The concept of “strategic communication” suffers from an ironically misleading choice of words, and most studies of strategic communication face the same issue in defining what exactly these words mean. Be they military or civilians, professionals, scholars, and students develop divergent views of the very essence of —strategic communication.”² As stated by an U.S. Army CGSC student, —any of the definitions are too generic or broad to be an effective starting point for planning and discussion.”³

The Department of Defense has led worthy efforts in order to better harness its communication efforts, processes, and capabilities. However, even the DOD definition suffers from being too generic:

Focused United States Government efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of United States Government interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power.⁴

The definition does not state clearly whether this is a specific function led by the strategic level, that is the political decision-makers, or whether this is a process crossing the whole spectrum from strategic to operational to tactical levels. It does however use one particular and important word – “understand”. There is one other use of this verb in military doctrine when defining Public Diplomacy:

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.

But in a rather paradoxical approach, the Department of State, in charge of Public Diplomacy, does not assert the same need to understand audiences. It develops a view of strategic communication narrowed to media engagement:

The Office of strategic communication (SCT) develops and executes the strategic media goals of the Secretary of State. In addition to determining the long-term media goals of the Secretary, the SCT team is responsible for the day-to-day execution of the Secretary's strategic media plans, including the use of other principals to support the Secretary's initiatives. In close coordination with the Secretary's staff, SCT plans and executes all S events with a media component; crafts remarks for all S events with a media component; and, plans and executes the Secretary's travel and related media.⁵

The military would call the divergent statements between the Department of State and the Department of Defense a lack of unity of purpose. Still in 2011, ironic statements about the lack of a common definition throughout the U.S. Government seem relevant: ~~—sk~~ officials from the Departments of State and Defense and each would likely give a different answer because there is no government-wide definition.”⁶ But even the military doctrine struggles with complexity when defining the scope of the main information activities it can conduct. Information operations are meant to ~~—et~~ influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp adversarial human and automated decision making.”⁷ The purpose of psychological operations is ~~—is~~ to induce or reinforce foreign attitudes and behavior favorable to the originator's objectives.”⁸ Public affairs comprise ~~—the~~ public information, command information, and community engagement activities directed toward both the external and internal publics with interest in the Department of Defense.”⁹ The whole strategic communication concept reaches the complexity of the mythical Gordian knot when considering the U.S. Army concept of ~~—information~~ engagement”. It brings at the same level combat camera and U.S.G strategic communication:

The integrated employment of public affairs to inform U.S. and friendly audiences; psychological operations, combat camera, U.S. Government strategic communication and defense support to public diplomacy, and other means necessary to influence foreign audiences; and, leader, and Soldier engagements to support both efforts.¹⁰

This brief review of definitions makes communication policy guidance from the White House an imperative in order to refocus information activities of both State and Defense departments. Most authors attribute the current vagueness of purpose to the absence of a dedicated governmental agency, which could lead to an ironic return to Vietnam era. The administration had then also identified the requirement to bring unity

and consistency in the information process. In 1965, along with the American military build-up, President Johnson had ordered the implementation of the Joint United States Public Affairs Office in Saigon (JUSPAO), heading public affairs matters and providing guidance for psychological operations. The structure respected even the military principle of —centralized conception, decentralized execution”: JUSPAO defined guidance while Military Assistance Command - Vietnam (MACV) was responsible to carry out information operations in the field. But the mix of so diverse information activities caused a blur in the lines leading to the full discredit of JUSPAO on each side of its responsibilities, especially by the news media – The *New York Times* even went up to asking on its editorial page —Truth or Propaganda?”¹¹

There seems to be no current equivalent for the late U.S Information Agency that stopped its activities in 1999 or for the short-lived Office of Strategic Influence established in 2001 under the Bush administration. In 2005 already, —there [was] no single lead agency’ with formal tasking authority responsible for developing an information strategy for promoting and magnifying the U.S.G’s goals and objectives of fostering democratic principles worldwide, and providing targeted global audiences with truthful and factual information on U.S.G activities.”¹²

Two conflicting views require reconciliation. One is a capability-driven perspective requesting more resources. The 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) offers such an approach when asserting the need to —strengthen key supporting capabilities for strategic communication” as a tenet of achieving success in counterinsurgency, stability, and counterterrorism operations.¹³ The document cites the key capabilities and the ways to enhance them.

Effective strategic communication also requires the orchestration of multiple lines of operation. Chief among these are policy implementation, force employment, information operations, public affairs, civil affairs, and public diplomacy and engagement. Together, the effects of these activities support national objectives.¹⁴

On the other hand, DOD also asserts that —~~em~~ergent 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.”¹⁵ Even though the idea of strategic communication as a process sounds seductive, there is a need for a clear purpose and a stated goal. Both the DOD definition and the QDR quotation point at the means, but they do not explicitly state the ends or the ways, save for the somewhat vague notion of U.S. interests that got lost through the bureaucratic spiral. Admiral Michael Mullen in 2009 regretted that too bureaucratic a process to organize and structure strategic communication has allowed it to become —~~a~~abstract thought instead of a way of thinking.”¹⁶ Focusing the communication efforts has led to a lack of focus about what strategic communication is truly about: influence.

Ends: Influence As A Virtue

A more comprehensive way to grasp the strategic communication concept is to define the ends as —~~infl~~uence” and the ways as —~~pe~~rsuasion”, as stated by Richard Halloran in a simple and efficient way:

Strategic communication means persuading allies and friends to stand with you. It means persuading neutrals to come over to your side or at least stay neutral. In the best of all worlds, it means persuading adversaries that you have the power and the will to prevail over them. Vitally important, strategic communication means persuading the nation’s citizens to support the policies of their leaders so that a national will is forged to accomplish national objectives.¹⁷

The notion of influence has not totally deserted DOD doctrine but has not found the attention it deserves. In the predoctrinal document *Commander's Handbook for strategic communication and Communication Strategy*, the Joint Forces Command authors do assert that preserving influence is the first challenge to be met. But they discuss influence principles only in one of the latest annex of the document.¹⁸

Besides, the U.S. military draws an artificial line between information and influence, denying itself the possibility to be more efficient when communicating. In February 2011, a scandal erupted based on alleged use of influence techniques by U.S. military against U.S. distinguished visitors in Afghanistan.¹⁹ It echoed a complaint by a U.S. senator in 2007 to have been the topic of a military information campaign when visiting troops in Iraq. The chairman for House Armed Services subcommittee on terrorism and unconventional threats Armed Forces then asserted —“people think they are manipulated...it can undermine the ability of the State Department or the military to carry out the mission.”²⁰ How does —influence” get such a pejorative meaning in the U.S. where lobbying is a normal way of running business and an integral part of political life?

By an interesting cultural bias, the U.S. government and military draw a virtuous line among information capabilities between the good ones destined to inform the American people and the not-so-good ones oriented to influence foreign audiences. The previous comment by the subcommittee chairman is applicable for every audience, including non-U.S. ones. The Christian Science Monitor asked a relevant question: —U.S. Army may have used PSYOP against senators. How is that different from PR?”²¹ The journalist reported that distinctions are blurred. Amusing then is the fact that information activities are actually meant to influence whereas public affairs and public

diplomacy are meant to inform. Reconciling these discrepancies could consist in stating influence as the one and virtuous purpose of every single information activity – and not making it a synonym to manipulation.

Reasoning influence effects conducts to the study of the phasing of a current military operation. The U.S. joint doctrine identifies five to six notional phases where phases one to three (shaping, seizing the initiative, and dominating) correspond to what historically the U.S. military is used to do and what it still trains to do.²² But the increasing trend of current operations is to place the military directly into contact with the local population, upon which the ultimate success of the operation will rest. British General Sir Rupert Smith has discussed the new paradigm for modern conflicts where armies and soldiers have to wage other actions than —kill and destroy,” which are their traditional core activities.²³ Smith characterizes these 21st Century conflicts "war among the people" as opposed to the previous —industrial wars” where success was obtained through the application of military means, mainly. Nowadays, he asserts, the classic military success of defeating the enemy army is no longer relevant. Even if there might still be some pure military action, that kind of success is only a step to the global desired end state.

The doctrine community has placed a greater emphasis on information strategies and produced a deeper reflection about the effects, as noted by Lindsay J. Borg.²⁴ There is now a military planning process dedicated to information effects in order to support the military strategy and to contribute to the achievement of the political end state. The comprehensive set of tools of strategic communication makes it also a

potential offensive resource that can be thrown against the adversary as a combination of kinetic and non-kinetic forces.²⁵

Integrating the information effects in the planning process is commendable but influence is not only the enabling force that will support the military actions on the ground, it also is the end state. What is needed in today's operations is to change the behaviors of a given population and to modify or preserve their attitudes towards the force and towards their own destiny. The strategy then consists less in throwing forces against a foe than in persuading a future friend. This is not usual in American doctrine that is mostly oriented towards defeat mechanisms.

Field Manual FM 3-24, the U.S. Army counterinsurgency manual, articulates the evolution of the American doctrine to adapt to these new conditions. It is mainly a discussion about engaging a foreign population, the ways to create, preserve, and develop a relation, with an emphasis on non-kinetic actions. —“Best weapons for countering an insurgency do not shoot” is the motto that should invite commanders at every level to think more about influence and less about a mere combination of firepower and force. Each military action carries information and constitutes a message by itself. It makes clear sense that each commander should then ponder the message conveyed by kinetic actions such as searching private houses or bombing. The success in Afghanistan does not rest upon —“winning hearts and minds” of the local population. It rather depends on the coalition capacity to influence the locals in order, for example, to deprive the insurgents of local support. A former commander of British 52 Brigade in Helmand, retired Major General Andrew Mackay defines influence as the driving force to organize strategy in the context of today's —“behavioral conflicts.”²⁶ The other former

colonial power, France, has followed a parallel strategy in Afghanistan in developing a so-called “billard strategy”: influence effects drive operations.²⁷ It echoes what Morocco

Pacificator, French Marshall Hubert Lyautey, reflected in the late 19th Century:

When the military commander also administrates the territory, he takes an enemy position thinking of the marketplace he'll set up there after victory. He doesn't seize it the traditional way.²⁸

There are limits to influence, and too strong an exposure for a foreign population may elicit indifference or backlash. The U.S. should fully acknowledge the capability of foreign populations to think independently and to resist interferences. Influence as such has to be nuanced. Any perception of interference into internal affairs can easily backfire, as shown by French newspapers reaction to Wikileaks exposing U.S. specific policy to engaging French Muslim populations.²⁹ To better apprehend influence requires to fully assess the acceptability and suitability of a communication strategy for a given place, and not merely discuss the feasibility of it. Influence goes far beyond the mere affirmation or explanation of objectives, as stated by Susan Gough:

Simply explaining U.S. policy, U.S motives, and the U.S. way of life will not change hostile audiences if they perceive our policies as inimical to their way of life. A world-class strategic influence campaign will not be the panacea for overcoming the current difficulties in world opinion.³⁰

Strategic communication requires then the U.S. to overcome its own cultural bias and to have an appeased approach of influence as a virtuous concept, based on persuasion and not manipulation, that acknowledges the limitations and friction due to local sensitivities. Some may argue that influence does not have an actual meaning and that there is nothing such as a reliable measure of effectiveness associated with that notion. The benefits of the notion, however, are to allow for a broader, deeper, and

more reasoned view about the desired effects of strategic communication – and its limits.

Two-way communication and messages

Counterinsurgency (COIN) offers a field of study in order to assess to which degree influence as an endstate can be reached. The U.S. Army COIN manual asserts very explicitly what the force is supposed to do but it does not articulate the inherent volatility and ambiguity of communication. Commanders are merely to —communicate the message that the COIN force is robust and persistent, and will assist the population through their present difficulty.”³¹ The manual, however, does not account for more than the requirement for —an understanding of indigenous culture.”³²

DOD definition of strategic communication highlights the importance of —coordinated” actions and —synchronized” products. One conclusion is that strategic communication inevitably reaches success thanks to an appropriate level of resources brought together and the adequate alignment of core capabilities. For a military commander, this is a direct application of the military principle known as mass. It translates into a single-shot conception of communication as a mere message-sending business. Such conception does not capture the dynamic character of communication. The targets are not at all of the same nature as the physical targets one can destroy using the adequate weapon. The challenge here is about thoughts, perceptions, and behaviors. It is not a one-shot approach that will help commanders to solve the communication issue and create meaningful messages.

Meaning-making is a core activity of the marketing industry. The RAND Corporation has conducted a study —The Marketing Approach to Earning Popular

Support in Theaters of Operation.” They propose a 10-step program in order to adapt a specific information program:

Step 1: Know your program focus.

Step 2: Move the movable.

Step 3: Clearly delineate your objectives and goals.

Step 4: Know your market and competition.

Step 5: Design a product just for them.

Step 6: Make prices as low as they go.

Step 7: Place the product: location, location, location.

Step 8: Create messages that stand out and are motivating.

Step 9: Get the message out.

Step 10: Monitor and evaluate the success of the campaign.³³

This study deserves more attention than the over-simplifying 10-step example given here suggests. The authors consider changes of behavior to be the main objectives of such an information campaign, and they develop the notion of —segmentation,” which is another way of analyzing the targeted audience based on a true understanding rather than a mere application of preexisting messages. —Know your enemy” is the famous quote from Chinese strategic thinker Sun-Tzu. —Understand your audience” has become the military paradigm of today.

Target audience analysis (TAA) appears as one essential part of the answer to the issue faced by military commanders on theaters: —the vital task of how to successfully communicate information and ideas to multiple audiences, local and international, individually and simultaneously.”³⁴ However, TAA also is a dynamic process where the various information inputs will affect and possibly modify the

segments of the target audience. Dr. Lee Rowland and Commander Steve Tatham insist on the careful measurement of the degree to which the force may influence that audience.³⁵

What military commanders need also to recognize is the volatility of the message and the absence of control they have about that specific weapon of communication. The process does not merely consist in creating a message and sending it out using mass media techniques. It also requires fine-tuning and appropriate tone, according to these authors' warning that ~~the~~ most effective form of communication is dialogue, not monologue."³⁶ They caution that impressing brute messages upon foreign people simply does not work. The same comment applies to the current definition of the narrative by the Joint Forces Command: the ~~enduring~~ strategic communication with context, reason/motive, and goal/end state". An interpretation of ~~enduring~~" could be to stick to the story whatever the events and worse, whatever the reactions. It implies that the narrative is directed to a passive audience that can only receive the messages but not react to them, nor have its own story to tell. It fails to encompass the inherent dynamics of communication and leaves no place for flexibility and adaptation. How can one make a difference? The narrative could better be defined as ~~no~~ going discussion of and collective opinion about events taking place in theater, and assigning value motivations and value judgments to the parties in conflict."³⁷

In the same way military commanders try to achieve force superiority in the operation theater, they also have to reach narrative superiority. Not only should the narrative be based on a rational argument and provide tangible evidence, it should also take into account ~~critical~~ cultural foundations" and be developed with appropriate tone

—to ensure it will not be rejected.”³⁸ This requires a honed understanding of the local expectations and emotional sensitivities, and this applies to every level of communication. Such a requirement is less than obvious in the latest initiative from the U.S. Department of State. In February 2011, the department started to develop messages through Twitter social network in order to engage opposition groups in Iran. One can but wonder about how accepted the U.S. narrative can be when thrusting official views through conduits dedicated to individual and personalized communication.³⁹ Was this a smart move or a bully one?

Consistency and credibility are quite obvious guidelines to stand-by. Clarity would seem another commonsense principle to add, but there is much caution to add to this principle. The U.S. global war on terror offers many examples of those messages that seem very clear for an American audience but create confusion for a Muslim audience, as detailed by Dr. Sherifa Zuhur.⁴⁰ The research scholar demonstrates that imprudent use of catch-words such as —~~m~~ujahedeen” or “jihadists” to depict violent extremism in Muslim countries may totally miss the target, for these words have a different meaning for Muslim populations. The local people are then left with the impression that they are the enemy to the United States. Hence, clarity could be a deceiving principle to abide by. Misunderstanding can even become worse when augmenting ill-conceived message effect through mass-media techniques.

Admiral Michael Mullen hints at a complementary angle to consistency and credibility: accountability. In the era of transparency that we have reached by now, official cover-up is not the good course of action, whereas acknowledging the truth could be what is exactly expected.

We hurt ourselves more when our words don't align with our actions. Our enemies regularly monitor the news to discern coalition and American intent as weighed against the efforts of our forces. When they find a —say do” gap—such as Abu Ghraib—they drive a truck right through it. So should we, quite frankly.⁴¹

Transparency and accountability are principles more obvious to assert than to apply, as illustrated by the infamous Kill-Team in Afghanistan, 2010. Even though clear evidence existed about the murder of Afghan civilians by U.S. soldiers, cultural bias or preconceived ideas may have led to local communication failure.⁴² The *New York Times* edited an article stating that the U.S. investigator refused to interview local villagers, saying —~~that~~ telling villagers that an American soldier had been accused of murdering civilians would have had —~~strategic~~ consequences that puts people at risk,” including other soldiers.⁴³ Who can convincingly think that the local population is not perfectly aware about the origin of the murderers? Besides, the Kill Team story might have reached even the distant villages of Afghanistan. There was an influence gain in precisely doing what the investigator refused to do.

As good as the narrative and the messages may be, the enemy can be good at it also, especially when it comes to mistakes or faults from the military force.⁴⁴ It is common knowledge that the adversary will exploit any gap and show less restraint in diffusing propaganda, and the COIN manual asserts the requirement to —~~respond~~ quickly to insurgent propaganda...delaying a response can let the insurgent story dominate many news cycles, allowing their version of events to become widespread and accepted.⁴⁵ Most of the times however, the strategic communication line will be to deny or cover-up, A review of corporate communications in times of crisis gives the same insights about crisis communicators not applying what they preach.

The study shows that

Despite its ineffectiveness, organizations seem to continuously engage in denial, regardless of their crisis circumstances. Although the most often used strategy, in their analyses authors deemed it, from our research, as the least effective strategy with regard to outcome of the crisis situation.”⁴⁶

The military communicators hold then no monopoly in a cover-up attitude, but they have to better handle these inevitable mishaps that can thwart the best laid-out communication campaign. Rearranging the core information capabilities is but a necessary first step.

Focusing Information Capabilities

The ever-increasing complexity of current operations and the constant development of information techniques raise questions about the current segmentation of information capabilities and their integration into the joint planning process. The recent adoption by the U.S. Special Forces of military information support operations (MISO) in lieu of PSYOP offers an opportunity to review the information capabilities and to eliminate redundancies.

The latest Quadrennial Defense Review points at a critical aspect of information war, where —adversaries often enjoy the advantage of greater local knowledge and calibrate their activities to achieve sophisticated information objectives.”⁴⁷ Even though the exact degree of sophistication of adversary propaganda would deserve deeper scrutiny, it seems important to deprive the adversary of this cultural advantage. In a notional military organization, knowledge about the enemy and the environment falls under intelligence specialists’ purview. The current epoch leads to other requirements, adding to the —need to know” the —need to understand.”

Improving information sharing between the intelligence cells and the communication experts is a first step. The compartmentalization mindset is a necessary tenet to process intelligence and to plan operations, but it is a hindrance when it comes to information needs. The information community needs to have access to knowledge and to data bases run by the others, in order to fine-tune their messages and to benefit from situational awareness. They also have to share with the rest of the operation center their own knowledge, the results of face-to-face meetings with local leaders, or the conclusions they reach through their human-mapping system. Knowledge management is key and must be translated into operating procedures rather than remain wishful thinking.

An additional measure consists in redefining the core capabilities at stake. —Globalization's smoothing of the seams between formerly segmented audiences makes it imperative that PA and IO integrate strategies and tactics to present consistent messages," public affairs expert Tadd Sholtis noted.⁴⁸ The current distinction between public affairs, information operations, and military information supporting operations actually derives from the original ill-conceived meaning of influence as manipulation, and DOD should overcome that conception that still permeates Joint Doctrine.⁴⁹ As noted by Colonel Curtis Boyd, the MISO construct offers true opportunity to rebuild partnership between public affairs and information operations, truth being the common denominator. —MISO must and will be truth-based," he adds.⁵⁰ There is much leverage in reorganizing the core activities of public affairs, information operations, and now MISO, considering that they should be driven by the same principles of consistency and accuracy and the same goal to develop a virtuous and reasoned influence.

Ultimately, addressing core information capabilities leads to question the level and depth of expertise needed to increase local knowledge and to reduce the adversary's cultural advantage. There is a natural tension between subject matter experts, most of them pertaining to the U.S. Special Forces, and the field actors.⁵¹ Does it really take a special force specialist to communicate and to engage with the local population?

Information Empowerment and Empathy

Solving the strategic communication dilemma takes more than addressing turf battles between information operations, MISO, and public affairs experts. DOD should also consider better ways to leverage the number and quality of troops operating on the ground and directly engaging the audiences at stake. The soldiers should match the criteria for the ideal communicator: ~~somebody~~ who is living in the culture and who understands it.”⁵² The race against time and the adversary propaganda leads to the reemergence of a military principle: centralized conception and decentralized execution. The COIN manual identifies the possibility to dispatch ~~—increased~~ information assets and responsibilities to lower-level leaders, since they are also at the ~~—point~~ of the spear” for information operations. U.S. Army War College Professor Dennis Murphy expands the idea and recommends ~~—information~~ empowerment” as the true lever on which to act.

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.⁵³

Information empowerment also means to give specific content to the somewhat hollow concepts coined in the strategic circles. The strategic level retains its relevance as far as national and international opinions are concerned, obviously. However, what is

broadcasted at the national level does not directly support the ground action, which needs specific messages and not generic ones. Information campaigns delineated at the highest levels may totally miss the point when applied in local villages in Afghanistan, as noted by General Andrew Mackay writing about the British communication: “It is clear that not only are Whitehall messages a diluted and distant memory by the time they reach the tactical level but they may actually have no relevance at ground level anyway.”⁵⁴ The requirement for a “culture of engagement” has not failed to catch the attention of military students of strategic communication. Major Keith Kramer identifies the critical need to better engage a local population through direct interaction by troops on the field. He underlines the gains for the U.S. Army to entrust its operational and tactical leader with information power and initiative:

This will develop leaders who are proactive, innovative, and adaptive at communicating their messages to an audience rather than leaders who simply wait for a senior headquarters command message for rote memorization and ineffectual recitation to the media.⁵⁵

Whatever trust is put into operational and tactical leaders, they will need more than principles of information empowerment. They will also need the direct support of information experts in order to hone their communication and their local understanding. Discussing the needed expertise, Colonel Calvin DeWitt even suggests that “PSOP forces need to be removed from U.S. SOCOM and viewed as elemental to conventional forces at every level.”⁵⁶ Doctrine should address this tension between the necessary expertise in each information activity and its distribution and support to the forces.

Doctrine and training should also clearly take into account the duration of military operations. The U.S. soldiers endure the lengthiest rotations in Western armed forces with an average 12-month tour, not including training. The U.S. military should consider

the amount of time available that truly favors a consistent and sustainable engagement of a local population, as far as operating procedures support such interactions. Training programs already include cultural awareness courses and they should also inculcate information alertness, as two intertwined tenets of influence and not as two different subject matter fields of expertise. Military commanders and soldiers have especially to be aware of the message conveyed by the presence and the posture of the force. One can but measure the long way still to go when reading General David Petraeus' guidance to the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan: "Take off your sunglasses. Situational awareness can only be gained by interacting face-to-face, not separated by ballistic glass or Oakleys."⁵⁷

Beyond cultural awareness, the true quality to ingrain in the soldier is empathy, that ability to fully understand local expectations and complaints. A former commandant of the U.S. Marines Corps, General Charles Krulak had identified the potential of the individual soldier when coining the term of "strategic corporal."⁵⁸ He actually thought of small-unit leadership and NCOs, asserting "we must aggressively empower our NCO's, hold them strictly accountable for their actions, and allow the leadership potential within each of them to flourish."⁵⁹ There is a requirement now for an information astute strategic corporal, aware that he has as much to say than to listen to.

All these initiatives will fall short of the intended influence objectives if the whole strategic communication process does not value local understanding, as stated by Commander Larry LeGree:

Overarching policies that fail to capture local sensitivities or heed local voices are counterproductive. Americans, it seems, are predisposed to solve "problems" they perceive—often to the exclusion of those who know better and have local knowledge and local understanding. Hindered by our

lack of immersion knowledge and cultural understanding, we rely on security requirements while forgetting to listen and watch the other players in the game....The deciders make decisions deaf to local voices and local reason.⁶⁰

Rather than a classic top-down approach where themes and messages are merely left to execution by the tactical level, the process should then leverage the information-savvy leaders of today and fully allow the strategic level to be informed by local military actors. Kenneth Payne defended that idea to define better interaction between strategy and communication:

The relationship should not only be in one direction. Strategists would do well to reflect on the opinion of audiences, leveraging them in pursuit of policy goals, and working with the grain of the audience rather than against it.⁶¹

Conclusion

Are virtuous influence, information empowerment, and empathy robust enough to bolster U.S. strategic communication? Without being naïve, it appears that affirming a strong commitment to a reasoned influence and founding clearly the information activities on truth offer ways to address the numerous tensions that currently thwart strategic communication.

First and foremost, the White House should reorient the whole strategic communication process towards manageable influence objectives that integrate expectations of multiple audiences thanks to a better understanding of local realities and sensitivities. In the absence of a leading governmental agency, the White House alone has the authority to set direction and to assign influence objectives to Department of State and Department of Defense, the two major actors interacting with foreign audiences.

The Department of Defense should proceed to a doctrinal review intended to redefine relationships between the core information activities and to better integrate them towards a common influence endstate. It should include a thorough and candid examination of what information expertise is about, what the U.S. Special Forces should really retain, and what information capabilities the conventional forces should develop. It should also consider the introduction of bottom-up procedures from the field to the strategic level in order to allow for policies and strategies better adjusted to the ground realities. The Joint Chiefs of Staff seem to be the appropriate authority to conduct such review in a non-partisan way.

Effectiveness rests upon major cultural evolutions within the DOD and especially the U.S. Army, which should take advantage of current operational lessons to develop empowerment of its leaders on the field. It will require appropriate training to tie together cultural awareness and information skills and to raise empathy of the individual soldiers towards foreign populations.

Consistency is a key principle in order to adjust strategic communication and information capabilities in consideration of reasonable influence objectives. Listening to local expectations does not mean that national policies will exactly match any single grievance. However, enhancing the empathy ability offers ways to devise suitable strategies and does support the intent depicted in the latest U.S. National Security Strategy, to be more effective in our deliberate communication and engagement and do a better job understanding the attitudes, opinions, grievances, and concerns of peoples—not just elites—around the world.”⁶²

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