

# Strategic Communication: An Integral Component of Counterinsurgency Operations

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## Introduction

The tactical successes achieved by the United States and its allies in the war on terrorism will mean little if the war for the hearts and minds of citizens in the Muslim world is lost. In a global counter-insurgency campaign, the military and other U.S. government agencies not only have to battle elusive foes, but also have to work closely with their counterparts in host nations, conduct sophisticated strategic communication efforts,<sup>1</sup> support infrastructure development, and engage constructively with the local populace, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the media. Counter-insurgency is a separate and distinct form of warfare; it is a competition between ideologies and distinct socio-political movements.

Successful counter-insurgency operations focus on diffusing violent socio-political movements, which is best done by drawing on a full spectrum of communications methods and thoughtful actions that encompasses programs across many agencies and non-governmental entities. Efforts to win hearts and minds will be much more effective if these efforts are coordinated, or at least if they do not work at cross-purposes. Strategic communication is a critical component of such a strategy, and will be the focus of this paper.

The United States government faces a formidable challenge when it comes to strategic communication. Not everyone recognizes or fully appreciates the subtleties and complexities of strategy in today's environment. The United States defense establishment is comfortable with fighting a conventional war, and is uncomfortable with the

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<sup>1</sup> Strategic communication is the effective, thoughtful, and focused blending of public diplomacy, information operations, non-military U.S. international broadcasting services, and public affairs, all working in coordination and oriented towards specific audiences in support of super-ordinate goals and transmitted via timely and appropriate means. Effective strategic communication helps create the conditions, build the relationships, and mobilize the resources that allow authentic, constructive, and engaging narratives to emerge between stakeholders. Successful strategic communication requires a deep appreciation of attitudes, perceptions, and culture; a capacity to pay attention to the environment; the capability to listen closely to and engage in healthy dialogues with a variety of diverse stakeholders; access to decision-makers; and the ability to measure effects, trends, and patterns.

ambiguity of unconventional warfare. The Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) noted that, of 127 pacification operations in Iraq from May 2003 to May 2005, “most operations were reactive to insurgency activity—seeking to hunt down insurgents. Only six percent of operations were directed specifically to create a secure environment for the population.”<sup>2</sup> A cultural change within the various parts of the U.S. government will be required for it to be more effective at counter-insurgency operations.

This is especially true for those engaged in the strategic communication aspects of counter-insurgency campaigns. A Defense Science Board recently stated that United States’ strategic communication capability is “in crisis.”<sup>3</sup> Then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld echoed this concern: “The standard U.S. government public affairs operation ... tends to be reactive, rather than proactive—and it still operates for the most part on an eight-hour, five-days-a-week basis, while world events, and our enemies, are operating 24/7, across every time zone. That is an unacceptably dangerous deficiency.”<sup>4</sup> Given the urgency and importance of this challenge, every government agency needs to adapt to the fast-paced and complex environment of counter-insurgency and improve their respective organization’s strategic communication capabilities.

### **The Core Challenge of Counter-Insurgency: Values and Beliefs**

Effectively dealing with counter-insurgency efforts from an ideological perspective requires new thinking and action. Winning hearts and minds is far more important than killing or capturing terrorists and insurgents. The United States has to recognize the importance of radical social movements and their ideology, and operate from this baseline.

A comprehensive approach to strategic communication recognizes that the ideology a terrorist or insurgent group espouses is a critical component of these groups. Ideology serves as a recruiting tool and galvanizes foot soldiers, financiers, logisticians, and indirect supporters. It is the lifeblood of an organization. Deep-seated values, beliefs, and norms inform perspectives, influence actions, and forge networks with like-minded individuals. Ideology provides assumptions about how the world works, shapes priorities, and offers the rationale for decisions terrorists and insurgents make.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 2006). Available at: <http://www.defenselink.mil/qdr/report/Report20060203.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Defense Science Board, *Report of the Defense Science Board 2004 Summer Study on Transition to and from Hostilities* (Washington, D.C.: December 2004), 71.

<sup>4</sup> Donald Rumsfeld, “New Realities in the Media Age: A Conversation with Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense,” written transcript of speech given at the Council on Foreign Relations, New York, NY (19 February 2006). Available at: [http://www.cfr.org/publication/9900/new\\_realities\\_in\\_the\\_media\\_age.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/9900/new_realities_in_the_media_age.html).

<sup>5</sup> Don Beck, presentation at the Spiral Dynamics Conference, Washington, D.C. (6–11 January 2006). For more information, please refer to [www.spiraldynamics.net](http://www.spiraldynamics.net).

Before launching a strategic communication initiative, U.S. forces have to better understand ideology and the cultural terrain that the initiative will have to navigate. External approaches designed to improve local conditions in a counter-insurgency environment will fail if they do not include parallel and simultaneous engagement with how people perceive the world they inhabit. This means strategic communication professionals have to learn more deeply about the socio-economic, historical, and cultural landscape in which social and political movements live. We enjoy the benefits of many sophisticated means for disseminating our messages: Internet, DVDs, radio, TV, etc. But if we do not appreciate the complexity and richness of the values and concerns of the people with whom we are communicating, we will miss the mark.

### **Importance of Culture and Local Context**

Counter-insurgency and strategic communication planning demand deep cultural and social knowledge of threats and local populations. The United States government lacks the right people, programs, systems, and organizations that can provide anthropological knowledge on a wide variety of cultures. Counter-insurgency efforts do not address themselves to the fixed targets of the Cold War, but too much of the U.S. military is still stuck in Cold War approaches. As a result, human factors, cultural anthropology, and other analyses of socio-cultural data are underfunded and undermanned, and have not been supported as means for developing a central resource for social, economic, and cultural analysis.<sup>6</sup>

The importance of gaining an understanding of the local conditions of an insurgency cannot be overestimated. Counter-insurgency planners must understand the needs of discontented groups. In addition to using military and federal agencies, strategic communication planners should employ media consultants, finance and business experts, psychologists, organizational network analysts, and scholars from a wide range of disciplines (including anthropology and religious studies) to develop a more comprehensive picture of the environment. The more insight strategic communication planners have into the causes of the insurgency, the better their capacity to effectively address those conditions. Insurgents require regional support. By understanding where and why they get their support, planners can help develop long-term strategic communication strategies that will address the insurgents' constituencies.

In order to develop sophisticated socio-cultural understanding of local and regional conditions that feed terrorist ideologies, we need to be able to establish baselines of values, attitudes, and perceptions around the world. This baseline is not static: ideologies travel, cultures shift, and socio-economic developments occur. In order to track these underlying currents, we have to develop the capacity to monitor these changes. Public-sector and private-sector actors in the U.S. should work together to develop technology to map and track human conditions. If insurance companies and economists are able to follow trends and patterns in human behavior, why not broaden these ap-

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<sup>6</sup> Montgomery McFate, "The Military Utility of Understanding Adversary Culture," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 38 (July 2005): 46.

proaches so that we can more holistically observe and monitor other vital shifts on a global basis? Individuals, societies, tribes, nations—all are living organisms. Like a doctor who examines a patient regularly in order to provide preventive medicine, we need better mechanisms to monitor cultural and political “vital signs” in order to prevent conflict and anticipate strategic communication needs. The use of geographic information systems (GIS) to display social, economic, health, and cultural data would help identify hot spots and anticipate opportunities, breakdowns, and conflicts. This deeper understanding of socio-economic conditions and culture will show strategic communication actors how values and beliefs shape political, economic, and social performance.<sup>7</sup>

In order to monitor and assess how ideology spreads, or to measure the impact of strategic communication efforts, more sophisticated systems and procedures to collect and analyze information will be required. Open-source collection and assessment mechanisms need to evolve. Systematic surveys, public opinion polls, focus group interviews, and cultural attitudinal databases are just a few examples of tools that need to be bolstered in order to establish baselines of perceptions, monitor political and social movements, and measure the impact of strategic communication plans.

This kind of analysis and feedback would also assist strategic communicators to better understand their audience, develop appropriate themes, and establish the best means of delivering their messages. The signals of violent ideological threats are always abundant and are widely recognized. Yet somehow they fail to penetrate the government’s immune system’s seemingly automatic response to reject the familiar. If strategic communication actors are to effectively deal with insurgent groups, they must be able to go beyond established ways of seeing things and be open to new possibilities without judgment. We need to sit back, listen deeply, and study the situation from many angles and ask ourselves what, fundamentally, is going on. Strategic communication players need better analytical tools to enable them to see what is happening globally and locally, and to inform their approaches to defusing hostility, improving the United States’ image abroad, and bridging gaps in dialogue.

## Strategy

A successful strategic communication strategy encompasses a deep understanding of why people join terrorist or insurgency groups. People join, fund, tolerate, support, and/or encourage others to join movements due to many factors, ranging from the bottom of the hierarchy of human needs and values (safety and security) to the top (self-actualization). Some people support insurgent groups because they are afraid to do anything else, or because insurgents help them meet their basic needs, such as food or housing. When people see other sources of power and decide that these alternatives are sufficiently robust to last, people switch allegiances, because they see the direction in which the power is shifting and they do not want to be left out. Other core motivations for making such decisions include gaining and maintaining connections with clans,

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<sup>7</sup> Beck.

tribes, family, friends, and local communities. Some people are motivated by achievement, growth, and money, while different groups consider consensus and participation as key motivations. Some people are motivated by ideas and seek political or societal change, so they seek avenues through which to exert influence. If these people feel that they are neglected or oppressed, then they may think that political leaders do not care about them. Even if certain people do not admire insurgent leaders, their tactics, or their ideology, they may look to them for support. If people think that insurgents or terrorists are finally succeeding in getting attention for a previously neglected cause, then they may support these groups because they see them as effective. If people see insurgency movements as a way to meet their core beliefs and needs, then they may join or support them.

If we want to counteract a social movement, such as an insurgency, we need to offer alternative ideologies, improved economic opportunity or security, different channels for political influence to travel, or ways to strengthen family and clan ties outside of insurgent movements. With a better understanding of the values and concerns of affected parties, we will be better able to provide more appropriate alternatives to political violence. The strategic approach to communications, then, needs to be like that of a headquarters of a socio-political movement. We should be rallying support and matching our words with our deeds. Since this is a long-term endeavor—instead of a short campaign, ending in a vote—the “negative campaigning” approach is less likely to be successful.

Most of our energy should be devoted to building new alternatives or increasing existing alternatives. Acting like we already know the answers will not help. This approach involves offering assumptions like “They would like us if they really knew us,” “The other side is inherently wrong or immoral,” and “We are doing the right things already—we just need to get the word out better.” All of these things may, at times, be true, but they are still dangerous assumptions, and are very risky phrases to let slip into our communications. Therefore, we need to build rapport with others by listening, paying attention, and being responsive and proactive in a way that is appropriate to the socio-cultural needs of various groups.<sup>8</sup>

With this more holistic approach to understanding cultural landscapes and seeing insurgencies as socio-political movements, strategic communication planners can take a multifaceted approach and produce an effects-based strategy that aims to:

- Address underlying causes of the insurgency
- Dissuade the local populace from supporting the insurgency
- Create new attractors that will draw support away from the insurgency
- Discourage insurgents

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<sup>8</sup> Curtis Johnson, phone conversations and e-mail exchanges, January 2006. Curtis is a key leader in the Advanced Concepts Group, a think-tank at Sandia National Laboratories in New Mexico, and has been investigating various terrorism challenges, socio-political identity issues, and strategic communication.

- Tarnish the insurgents' image
- Disrupt recruitment
- Counter propaganda
- Build rapport with the local populace
- Help defeat threatening ideologies
- Reduce tensions and negative attitudes towards the United States and its allies
- Communicate themes of freedom, tolerance, justice, dignity, and opportunity, and match them with actions
- Develop and sustain the host nation's strategic communication and independent media capacities, so that a country or region with an insurgent threat can conduct these tasks successfully (ultimately, we want to communicate shared interests and concerns, not appear unilateral, and not force messages that make our allies and partners look like puppets of the U.S.)
- Develop a responsive network of key communicators and subject matter experts (U.S. and foreign) to help develop, communicate, clarify, and amplify appropriate messages rapidly and effectively
- Actively engage with journalists, writers, students, grassroots leaders, NGOs, religious leaders, academics, opinion leaders, and think-tanks (U.S. and foreign).

The United States military and other agencies must blend short-term kill-or-capture operations with host-nation capacity building and other long-term efforts to address violent social movements and their root causes. The *9/11 Commission Report* emphatically states that the United States must “help defeat an ideology, not just a group of people.”<sup>9</sup> Growing anti-American and anti-Western sentiment in the Middle East and elsewhere spelled out in numerous recent polls cannot be ignored. As the government defeats insurgents on the battlefield, it must also simultaneously help prevent the spread of insurgent movements and help promote the U.S. image abroad. This would include promoting the rule of law, professional and open media, educational programs, cultural exchanges, and economic development projects.

To win the war of ideas, the United States must also confidently tell the truth, honor its words with actions, counter insurgent propaganda efforts, and communicate its messages quickly and effectively. Robert Kaplan, the author of *Imperial Grunts*, further states:

Because the battles in a counterinsurgency are small scale and often clandestine, the story line is rarely obvious. It becomes a matter of perceptions, and victory is awarded to those who weave the most compelling narrative. Truly, in the world of postmodern, 21<sup>st</sup>-century conflict, civilian and military public-affairs officers must become war fighters by another name. They must control and anticipate a whole new

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<sup>9</sup> *The 9/11 Commission Report* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 376.

storm system represented by a global media, which too often exposes embarrassing facts out of historical or philosophical context.<sup>10</sup>

The United States and her allies are in direct competition with insurgents on the battlefield and in the media. Any strategic communication strategy must consider this fact and ensure that a comprehensive strategic communication plan is integrated with the overall counter-insurgency strategy. Learning to blend information operations, public affairs, psychological operations, and public diplomacy will help coordinate themes and messages. Currently, the United States government is spending too much time trying to separate the various players involved in strategic communications, instead of synchronizing them in order to beat the insurgents to the punch. Improving interagency systems and procedures would help the United States implement necessary changes in the way it develops and communicates thoughtful and persuasive messages to the right audiences at the right time with the appropriate means.

With a more informed perspective, strategic communicators would then be better prepared to develop a more holistic strategic communication strategy. Planners of strategic communication efforts must dedicate time and resources to developing country-specific objectives, themes, messages, and effects. Part of the strategic communication strategy must also include developing overall themes to promote free and pluralistic media, high standards of journalism, rule of law, and transparency. Other efforts would include messages to reduce the motivation and legitimacy of those involved in terrorism and insurgencies as well as messages designed to build bridges for dialogue and highlight constructive activities of the United States and other countries.

The importance of identifying audiences, opinion leaders, and key communicators must also be taken into account. The U.S. Congress, the American public, opinion leaders, and foreign populations all must be considered as critical audiences. Given the anti-U.S. feelings that currently pervade the international environment, pushing a "Made in the USA" message will probably not always be the most appropriate or effective way of getting our point across. Who gets the credit for a communication should not matter; what *does* matter is whether the message is well received and helps to diminish violence. Finding mutual concerns and interests across a variety of organizations, groups, and societies is a critical step in helping to extinguish the fiery rhetoric of violent ideologies that promote killing innocent people for political gain.

Unfortunately, a cultural divide exists between the various arms of the government and the private sector involved in strategic communication. Every agency has unique interests and values, and these can be difficult to reconcile. For instance, many NGOs are not going to want to be associated with military operations, even if they were informed of them and had plans to follow in the wake of military humanitarian assistance programs. However, there has to be a way to bring together all of the groups involved so that they are publicly cooperating and supporting each other, but still retain their

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<sup>10</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, "The Real Story of Fallujah: Why Isn't the Administration Getting It Out?" *Wall Street Journal* (31 May 2004). Available at [www.opinionjournal.com/editorial/feature.html?id=110005147](http://www.opinionjournal.com/editorial/feature.html?id=110005147).

own identity and pursue their individual agency goals. Leaders need to step up and speak with one voice and focus on points where information operations, public affairs, public diplomacy, and private-sector public relations converge. Given that Al Qaeda has a sophisticated and active information capability, we must overcome bureaucratic turf battles, small-mindedness, and the absence of a visible commitment that pervades strategic communication.

Within the U.S. government, improving interagency cooperation in strategic communication will require promoting and institutionalizing interagency exchanges, training, exercises, organizational design, doctrine, and asking Congress for legislation similar to the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 to further help align and integrate the various parts of the government. Hiring media-savvy reporters and journalists to serve as consultants to military commanders and diplomats would also build a much-needed bridge between the government and the media.<sup>11</sup>

The various professionals in the public and private sectors involved in promoting the United States' image, policies, and programs abroad must also identify super-ordinate goals that transcend other priorities and agendas. All actors must recognize and take responsibility for addressing their respective organizations' cultural differences, suspicion, territorial protection, ignorance, and stereotypes that create barriers to interagency and multinational cooperation. With that understanding, strategic communication actors will be more open to options that serve healthy super-ordinate goals in counter-insurgency. The fear of nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons triggered by terrorists, or the gap between the "haves and have-nots" that sows seeds of violence are examples of concerns that strategic communication actors cannot effectively take on unilaterally. Correcting the perceptions that the United States is engaged in a global war on Islam and acts in a unilateral fashion without regard to other countries' interests will require numerous organizations within the U.S. government to better coordinate, integrate, and synchronize their themes and messages. This will require building networks with NGOs, multinational companies, and other non-U.S. voices. Fragmented, isolated, ad hoc, piecemeal, and single-agency solutions will fail to make a significant difference in winning hearts and minds. Strategic communication professionals must work together (formally and informally) to integrate, align, and synergize their efforts.

## **Recruiting and Selection**

This transformation in strategic communication will require incentives. Governmental bureaucracies will not change unless the people working within those bureaucracies—particularly those involved in strategic communication—are rewarded for working differently. In the military, for example, if we want to see public affairs, foreign area specialists, civil affairs and information operations officers—all core players in counter-insurgency and strategic communication efforts—become truly integral to the military

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<sup>11</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, *Atlantic Monthly* journalist and author of *Imperial Grunts*; personal conversation on topic of media relations during his visit to Pacific Command, Honolulu, HI, 23 February 2006.



profession, then we will need to provide them with much more attractive career tracks, including increased general and flag officer opportunities in these areas. The same applies to the Department of State (DoS). Offer better career opportunities and promotions to public diplomacy professionals, and the DoS will enjoy more successful public diplomacy initiatives and a stronger cadre of foreign service officers dedicated to strategic communication excellence. Providing rewarding career paths and opportunities for education and advancement will help attract quality people to the demanding challenges that strategic communication presents in today's information age.

Enticing incentives are imperative because the interagency challenges and unconventional threats require the right kind of people to support strategic communication in counter-insurgency campaigns. Strategic communication actors need to be intelligent, compassionate, and innovative in order to adapt to the multi-faceted and fast-moving information environment. Strategic communication planners and operators also have to be creative risk-takers who appreciate a multidisciplinary and comprehensive approach to complex problems. They cannot be protectors of the status quo or risk-averse careerists. Recruiting and selecting the right people for strategic communication requires selecting people who can perform these jobs naturally. Too much time is wasted trying to reshape people to do strategic communication jobs for which they were unsuited from the start. Combined with situations where people with strategic communication skills and talents are stuck in non-strategic communication jobs, government organizations will enjoy better success in strategic communication when they align people, form, and function in a more meaningful way. Placing talented people in a collaborative work environment led by competent innovators would help instill the more adaptive organizational culture that is needed to engage ambiguous threats via strategic communication.

## **Training and Development**

Hiring and promoting the right people for strategic communication tasks is not enough. The U.S. government must ensure that strategic communication players have the right skills to help them perform. Because few strategic communication professionals ever experience deep cultural immersion outside of the government, they often do not develop sufficient cultural and social expertise. Strategic communication entities must support internships with cutting-edge media outlets. They have to build better bridges with academics, think-tanks, and other organizations so that strategic communication staff will be able to exchange ideas with journalists; advertising and marketing experts; TV, movie, and other media-savvy professionals; and social scientists, psychologists, cultural anthropologists, and other academics.<sup>12</sup>

The Olmsted Scholarship program is a flagship example of what the government can do in conjunction with foundations and academic institutions to promote cultural sensitivity and strategic communication training. The Olmsted program offers military officers a chance to study in foreign universities, immerse themselves in the local cul-

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<sup>12</sup> McFate, "Military Utility of Understanding Adversary Culture," 46.

ture, and bring fresh and innovative perspectives back to their respective services. The United States should promote similar programs throughout the government. More importantly, the government must ensure that its agencies benefit from these experiences by placing graduates of these programs in critical positions where they can bring these unique perspectives to strategic political-military and strategic communication positions of authority. Government bureaucracies frequently practice an ineffective and cold “fill spaces with faces” mentality that does not consider a governmental employee’s talents, passions, or interests. Too often we attempt to force or shape a person to fill the job. Given the complexity and nuances of strategic communication efforts, government organizations should instead build positions around talented people to create opportunities to match what they do best.

This change will also require other new approaches to training and education. Training and development of all government professionals will require placing content addressing terrorism, irregular warfare, foreign languages, social sciences, psychology, complexity science, culture, media, and strategic communication in core curriculums of military, diplomatic, law enforcement, and intelligence training schools. These subjects are too often only electives, are underfunded and undermanned, and/or lack institutional support.

In order to learn and grow, strategic communication leaders at all levels ought to also study diverse cultural and disciplinary perspectives. Like everyone else, government officials are molded by their experiences and see the world through various filters. Complexity science and systems thinking help strategic communication actors broaden their apertures and learn to see patterns in ambiguity. Diverse social, cultural, academic, religious, and psychological perspectives can also open a strategic communication actor’s mind to new possibilities in detecting subtle shifts over time. Leaders must study a variety of cultural, psychological, and social perspectives and incorporate relevant slices of each in order to recognize changing patterns in an insurgent campaign.<sup>13</sup>

Successful strategic communication also requires an awareness of how others perceive us, what signals we send (intended and unintended), how we view the world, and how the world views us. This requires a high degree of cultural self-awareness and reflection. How does a strategic communication professional develop better self-awareness? Meditation, journaling, and other concentration exercises can help. Many scientific studies and well-documented experiments unquestionably demonstrate that meditation helps heighten perception and improves concentration and attention.<sup>14</sup>

Negotiation training is another active way in which strategic communication leaders can build competencies in awareness and listening. Many courses in mediation, conflict resolution, dialogue, and negotiation are available and should be part of a strategic communication leader’s professional development program. Leaders need to put this training into action by actively using a negotiation framework in their daily

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<sup>13</sup> Irene Sanders, “Strategic Thinking in a Complex World,” month-long course at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (May 2004).

<sup>14</sup> See the Web site of the Mind and Life Institute, at [www.mindandlife.org](http://www.mindandlife.org).

lives. By practicing looking for mutual interests and creative alternatives, leaders will hone their empathetic listening and authentic articulation skills. Practicing negotiation skills by consistently using an organized framework for simple as well as complex agreements will help strategic communication leaders become more proficient in persuasion, coordination, and dealing with obstacles.

## Attitude

Sophisticated training can help broaden strategic communication professionals' attitudes and approaches to counter-insurgency. This will help them (and us) understand that we are part of the system, and thus we are part of the challenges confronted in any strategic communication effort—they cannot be separated. If we believe that strategic communication and counter-insurgency efforts are problems we have to solve “out there,” and we do not see or want to see any possible relationship between us (who are trying to solve the problem) and what the problem actually is, we will not be able to view counter-insurgency efforts accurately, in all their complexity. The environment surrounding such campaigns is highly dynamic and interdependent. Being fast and adaptable is difficult when our egocentricity and ethnocentricity get in the way of our perceptions. When we think, “Of course they will like this message, anyone (like me) would,” we unwittingly contribute to maintaining the undesired situation.

We must be careful that we do not just address the symptoms of the problems and challenges we face. Not facing the real, fundamental problem will cause it to get worse. We cannot afford to seek symptomatic solutions to the challenges of strategic communication. Quick fixes lead to unintended side effects and new problems for others, leading to more quick fixes and more side effects. We must dig deeper than the symptoms of insurgencies to address the causes and underlying conditions and address those issues directly and openly.<sup>15</sup>

Addressing these underlying conditions via strategic communication is not just about sending a message via an opinion maker, TV, blog, e-mail, radio, or Web site. Attitudes and perceptions cannot only concern strategic communication planners. The behavior of all the players in the United States government, whether in a diplomatic negotiation in Indonesia or a military operation in Iraq, also sends strong messages to their audiences. Everyone involved in counter-insurgency has to ask herself what she is doing, in her actions and messages, to potentially produce negative trends or patterns of violence. How is she contributing to those conditions? Treating people appropriately, with dignity, and showing genuine respect for local cultural norms goes a long way in winning trust and confidence. Meeting and communicating with people at a place where they are socially and culturally comfortable is essential. Each person in his respective organization needs to understand that he is responsible for the themes and messages he is sending through his words and actions and the impact they are having.

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<sup>15</sup> Otto Scharmer, presentation at the conference *Presencing: Collective Leadership for Profound Innovation and Change*, Boston, MA (12–16 December 2005). For more information, please refer to [www.solonline.org](http://www.solonline.org).

In today's environment of instant global communications, everybody in an organization is a spokesperson and a communicator of an organization's values and beliefs.

To be an effective communicator requires a blend of cultural knowledge, technical skills in strategic communication, and a sincere motivation to bridge communication gaps. This requires discernment and consideration of other viewpoints, regardless of whether one agrees with them. Strategic communication planners must anticipate the tendencies of radical ideologies and learn how to minimize polarizing dynamics. This will include driving wedges between violent radicals and moderates in order to help resolve deep-seated conflicts and meet underlying needs. Strategic communication actors will have to work with their audiences and decision makers to avoid "us vs. them" rhetoric. They should also enhance the capacities of pragmatists, moderate voices, and conciliators in the region where they are working. Listening sympathetically and respectfully and echoing back concerns are essential to success. Strategic communication is not about changing other people; rather, it is about designing the conditions and mobilizing the resources that allow authentic, constructive, and engaging narratives to emerge. Sophisticated and successful strategic communication meshes intellectual capital, communications technology, and the heartfelt desire to address the underlying conditions of violence.<sup>16</sup>

As part of this attitudinal shift, U.S. government officials will also have to wrestle with their tendency to rely on technology as a "silver bullet," and their insistence on quick, kinetic results in counter-insurgency campaigns. Winning trust and confidence is a long-term process that has to be persuasively explained to foreign and domestic audiences alike. The process of change and adaptation within societies, nations, and organizations demands deep listening, discernment, and staying power. Improving economic conditions and helping societies transform and evolve requires commitment and a willingness to accept a long time horizon. We must keep the seductiveness of technology in perspective, and work towards institutionalizing the notion that the human component is the key to winning hearts and minds in counter-insurgency efforts.

## **Organizational Design**

Donald Rumsfeld, speaking at the Council on Foreign Relations, stated that the "U.S. government still functions as a 'five-and-dime' store in an eBay world."<sup>17</sup> Fortunately, some marketing practices of successful global companies and social movements offer ways to help move strategic communication into the twenty-first century. Many successful companies employ a sophisticated branding strategy as a central part of their business, not relegated to the margins, as strategic communication is too often within the U.S. government. Leaders of various business lines (analogous to different governmental agencies) need their own strategies to execute their functions. The strategy for building cars is very different from the strategy for selling cars, but they need to have important points of coincidence. If we are selling "driving excitement," the cars

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<sup>16</sup> Beck.

<sup>17</sup> Rumsfeld, "New Realities in the Media Age."

had better be exciting to drive; if we are selling safety, then that had better be a different car. At the local level, freedom is needed to respond to local needs and local competition. This might include ordering the right mix of cars, pricing and advertising flexibility, service and operations flexibility, but all within the overarching marketing and branding strategy. Local businesses cannot compete if every decision has to go up to headquarters, but they have to be counted upon not to run local ads that ruin the corporate brand.

Unlike the government, businesses accomplish this without a long list of orders, edicts, procedures, and signatures. The private sector does this with a clear coordinating framework, a coherent and overarching strategy, two-way dialogue with customers, empowered local business leaders, and open and uninhibited dialogue between headquarters and field agents. The U.S. government has much to learn and apply from successful multi-national companies and Madison Avenue advertisers.<sup>18</sup>

Successful branding strategies depend on a seamless fit between form and function within an organization in order to win trust and confidence. The Washington Post newspaper, for example, employs open office spaces and a flat organization, where reporters and editors can quickly communicate with one another and get critical stories out in a timely and appropriate manner. One does not find reporters holed up in isolated cubicles. Editors are not separated by bureaucratic layers, nor do they work on different floors. They share the same well-organized space and enjoy a collaborative work environment, which promotes efficiency and speed.

Strategic communication entities and the organizations they support ought to look at their physical spaces and organization design. Do they contribute to collaboration, aid in the sharing of information, and promote agility in quickly getting appealing stories out to the right audiences in a timely manner? A carefully designed work environment is essential to a successful strategic communication organization. Pressures created by strategic communication issues tend to keep leaders in a continual “fire-fighting” mode, with little or no time for reflection or real thinking. The design of a physical workspace for a cutting-edge strategic communication entity would include space for brainstorming and scenario planning, and other spaces for project design that reflect the sensibility of the audiences the strategic communication actors want to reach. A space that includes TV, radio, video, and the latest newspapers and magazines would help stimulate people’s thinking, show them what their competitors are doing, and offer fresh ways of seeing how other organizations present themselves to their audiences.<sup>19</sup>

The government needs to make strategic communication a central, not marginal, part of its operational design. First, a Deputy National Security Advisor for strategic communication with tasking authority over departments and agencies would help quarterback strategic communication efforts. Second, reviewing strategic communication strategy in a systematic fashion (as the Department of Defense does with the

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<sup>18</sup> Personal communication with Curtis Johnson.

<sup>19</sup> Tom Kelly, *The Ten Faces of Innovation* (New York: Doubleday, 2005).

Quarterly Defense Review) would be beneficial. This would help make strategic communication a central thread that runs through all military, economic, diplomatic, political, intelligence, financial, judicial, and law enforcement plans and policies. Third, strategic communication centers of excellence need to be established to synthesize and provide open source analysis, strategic communication products, databases, lessons learned, feedback/monitoring mechanisms, think-tank reports, academic studies, and subject matter expert exchanges.<sup>20</sup> Finally, governmental operations centers need to incorporate strategic communication as an integral part of their day-to-day business.

To reflect the importance of strategic communication, 24/7 operations centers need to display cultural and socioeconomic overlays, and employ knowledge managers adept at open source analysis. Inside these updated operations centers, planners will constantly pay attention to the media, population studies, polling, other players (threats, governments, NGOs); analyze open source information; send messages; listen for the response; send updated messages; and prepare for contingencies.

Given the around-the-clock nature of global connectivity and the rapid decision-making loops and information flows within the U.S. government, operations centers need to be fast and adaptive, making sure that each local loop is locally controlled—not turned over to a committee (a sentence of “interagency death”) or sent up the chain. Strategic communication players will also have to speed up the process of prototyping themes and messages, and must actively experiment with how they are transmitted and received. Based on a tight feedback loop, strategic communication planners will adapt accordingly, and not rely on unevaluated, canned responses. Operations centers will have to “reorient staffing, schedules, and culture to engage the full range of media that are having such an impact today” in order to incorporate strategic communication as part of its daily functions.<sup>21</sup>

A successful organizational design for strategic communication would support fast and uninhibited flows of information and would empower teams with the authorities, approvals, and means to quickly communicate themes and messages. Secretary Rumsfeld said, “Let there be no doubt—the longer it takes to put a strategic communications framework into place, the more we can be certain that the vacuum will be filled by the enemy and by news informers that most assuredly will not paint an accurate picture of what is actually taking place.”<sup>22</sup> The United States government must support a holistic infrastructure to develop, produce, distribute, and disseminate strategic communication by, through, and with its interagency partners, host-nation counterparts, and private-sector venues. Too often, compartmentalization and bureaucratic layers favor the enemy and endanger the success of strategic communication. Having the means to quickly coordinate and share knowledge, databases, strategic communication products,

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<sup>20</sup> Bruce Gregory, “Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication: Cultures, Firewalls, and Imported Norms,” paper presented at the American Political Science Association annual conference, Washington, D.C. (31 August 2005), 34–8.

<sup>21</sup> Rumsfeld, “New Realities in the Media Age.”

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

subject matter experts, and feedback across geographical and organizational boundaries is essential to impeding insurgencies.

## Conclusion<sup>23</sup>

Insurgents remain a dangerous socio-political threat to the United States and its allies. The worldwide trend of anti-Western rhetoric and the sophistication of Al Qaeda's information war demonstrate that terrorist and insurgent groups are constantly adapting and reorganizing. Given Al Qaeda's global reach, the United States must develop a more integrated strategic communication strategy for counter-insurgency with its allies to diminish violent rhetoric, improve its image abroad, and detect, deter, and defeat this social movement at its many levels. To counter this menace, the nation must continue to develop flexible and efficient capabilities through innovative interagency strategic communication organizations.

Although it is extremely important, having the right strategy plus integrated and nimble strategic communication organizations is not sufficient if governmental leaders are unprepared to engage in actions in ambiguous environments and reorient their organizational culture to deal with insurgencies. A successful strategic communication campaign is not just about better cultural awareness or new organizations. It is also about transforming the attitudes and mind-sets of leaders so they have the capacity to take decisive yet thoughtful action against insurgents in ambiguous situations. Ideally, the U.S. government would have strategic communication professionals in place who are sensitive observers and thoughtful communicators capable of working seamlessly within military, civilian, media, and international communities.

To develop this capacity, strategic communication professionals must dedicate themselves to innovative training. In addition to traditional strategic communication technical skills, training in areas including negotiations, psychology, media relations, cultural anthropology, foreign languages, and complexity theory will become increasingly important. Like the martial arts master who deftly handles multiple attacks, the strategic communication expert, with multidisciplinary training and interagency experience, would learn to adapt to any given situation in a fast-moving and fluid environment.

To become agile and competent at strategic communication, the United States government cannot approach the task piecemeal. Improving the ability to do "hearts and minds" campaigns requires that all elements of national power have to improve their capacities for dealing with irregular warfare. Integrated and holistic strategic communication approaches to counter-insurgency will require the meshing of elements of national power in new and constructive ways.

This new attitude is imperative. An integrated and comprehensive approach to strategic communication requires a continued reorientation in the way the government plans, organizes, trains, and thinks about counter-insurgency. To be successful, the

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<sup>23</sup> Fred Krawchuk, *Combating Terrorism: A Joint/Interagency Approach* (Washington, D.C.: AUSA, January 2005).

United States will need to devote more attention and resources to strategic communication in terms of strategy, training, and force development. Strategic communication leaders would then, through innovative training and adaptive organizations, be better able to communicate compelling messages with discernment and counter violent social movements with agility.