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TESTIMONY

Getting Better at Strategic Communication

CHRISTOPHER PAUL

CT-366

July 2011

Testimony presented before the House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities on July 12, 2011

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The RAND Corporation

Getting Better at Strategic Communication[2]

Before the Committee on Armed Services
Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities
United States House of Representatives

July 12, 2011

Thank you for inviting me here to testify today.

In 2001, Vince Vitto, chairman of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Managed Information Dissemination, coined the phrase "strategic communication."[3] Here, ten years later, we are still using that term, but we still struggle to collectively get our arms around the concept, let alone do it well.

For example, in December of 2009 I joined a handful of other subject matter experts on strategic communication or public diplomacy for a discussion of the topic with the Director for Global Engagement at the National Security Council. At one point during this meeting we were going around the table describing the essence of strategic communication and the key elements for emphasis moving forward. As I listened to my colleagues, one after the other, I made an interesting observation: while no-one was actively disagreeing with or disputing the remarks of previous speakers, they weren't exactly agreeing, either. We were all talking about the "same" thing, but differently. I don't believe that experience was unique. I think here in 2011 one could empanel any group of 10 or so strategic communication experts and give them each five minutes to describe strategic communication and get 10 different descriptions, with a fair amount of overlap, to be sure, but with different points of central emphasis, different boundaries, different details; to be brief, differences real in their consequences, about what was described.

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[2] This testimony is available for free download at http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT366/.

[3] See the task force's report, *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Managed Information Dissemination*, Washington, D.C., October 2001. As of July 1, 2011: http://www.acq.osd.mil/dsb/reports/ADA396312.pdf
I document and corroborate Vitto's originating claim in Paul, Christopher, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts, and Current Debates*, Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger, 2011.

There is no official government-wide definition of strategic communication. There is not an agreed definition in academia, either, nor is there complete consensus about the boundaries or agreement on priorities.[4] A lack of clear consensus and a troubled lexicon are significant challenges to progress in this area, and is why much of my writing and thinking on this topic relates to the concept itself and how we talk about it.

There is not consensus on the definition of strategic communication

In my recent book on strategic communication, I compile and review all the official and unofficial definitions of strategic communication I can find. There are a lot of them. They mostly agree, but not so much in the details or the boundaries. The boundaries matter, because sloppy boundary definitions lead to things that should be considered strategic communication being excluded, or things that should not be considered strategic communication being included.[5]

Beyond the unintended difference brought in by slightly different definitions, in my research, I have observed at least three real differences, actual tensions or disagreements in how people conceive of strategic communication. I discuss each below.

The tension between "broadcast" and "engagement"

Some proponents emphasize broadcast, others emphasize engagement. This difference in concept is most easily captured in caricature. Broadcast is traditional messaging, what former undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs James Glassman has called "the great megaphone approach" to public diplomacy. If we say our message louder, and clearer, on more channels, "they" will understand and strategic communication will have succeeded. Just articulating it in this way begins to expose some of the shortcomings of such a view.

In tension with broadcast is engagement: an emphasis on "the last three feet" of public diplomacy, establishing relationships, seeking two-way understanding, listening to what others in

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[4] See the discussion in Chapter Two of Paul, Christopher, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts, and Current Debates*, Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger, 2011

[5] An example of the latter is the "strategic communication" plans of the various military services. These service plans treat strategic communication much like broader and higher level definitions, with one major difference. Rather than declaring the objective of service strategic communication to be support for national policy goals, these plans instead serve the services' narrow parochial interests. Note that it is perfectly reasonable for the services to coordinate their messages in pursuit of a positive image with the American public, full information for congresspersons on proposed Army programs, more robust pools of recruits; it is just that in my view these activities should not be called strategic communication.

the world think and have to say. There is obvious good to engagement, but it cannot be wholly at the expense of broadcast. We need both, and we can get better at both.

Degree of control of the message: Balancing between taped-message automatons and loose cannon

Another critical tension in this discussion is the desired level of control over the message. At one pole is the desire for complete control of information, which harkens back to a different technological era, one before mass media and before social media. In this view, the themes and messages are centrally developed and all representatives of the government cleave exactly to the approved talking points. Caricaturized, this makes all representatives taped-message automatons, speaking the same three talking points in robotic unison.

While perfect control of messages would be both impossible and at least a little bit creepy, the other extreme is no more palatable. If every representative of the government says whatever they feel like saying, each becomes a potential loose cannon in the ship of communication. Contradiction and inconsistency would abound. The right answer, then, is a balance somewhere between the two extremes. There needs to be central guidance and coordinating mechanisms, but government personnel need the freedom to put what they need to say in their own words, and to respond to changing situations based on their own understanding of that situation, hopefully within a broader context of well articulated strategies and goals.

Inform versus influence

Perhaps the most significant and pernicious tension in the discussion is those who imply that the goal of strategic communication or public diplomacy is influence, and those who hold that the goal is just to inform, without influencing.

This is a false dichotomy. Informing without influencing is impossible; there is no such thing as value free information. Every provision of information passes on the attitudes and beliefs of the speaker or writer, and seeks to serve some purpose. “Letting the facts speak for themselves” presupposes that the facts have something to say, and that it is something the speaker wants said. Every provision of information is an act of persuasion.

There is, however, a line to be drawn between benign influence and manipulation. Deception, manipulation, propaganda: these are all inappropriate forms of influence that are unsustainable in the contemporary information environment (they will be exposed, usually fairly quickly), and

undermine the credibility of current and future messages and efforts. Strategic communication should admit to being about influence, but it should also contain a commitment to the truth, a commitment to credibility, and should be undertaken as "virtuous persuasion."[6]

The unassailable core of strategic communication

A wide range of definitions, boundaries, or preferences regarding the balance points listed could effectively enumerate strategic communication; the definition is less important than the concept. The concept, however, demands that definitions respect what I call "the unassailable core" of strategic communication.[7]

Informing, influencing, and persuading is important

The first part of the unassailable core of strategic communication is the belief that it is important to attempt to inform, influence, and persuade in pursuit of policy objectives. While there is a lack of consensus on the boundaries of and appropriate priorities for strategic communication, there is broad consensus that how we, the United States, present and describe ourselves to, and engage and communicate with, foreign audiences *matters for foreign policy outcomes*, now, and in the future. The foreign audiences of interest include current and potential adversaries, but are not limited to them. Strategic communication should not be thought of only as a tool for countering violent extremism, but as an important part of government efforts to speak to, listen to, engage with, and demonstrate good faith to all the people of the world. Now more than ever, it is the citizens of countries as much as countries' formal leaders that determine the course of nations and how U.S. policies are perceived and received, as has been dramatically highlighted by the "Arab Spring." Foreign perceptions and understandings of images, policies, and actions matter, the success of many policies is contingent on the support they receive from various populations, and perceptions are influenced both by what we do and what we say.

Effectively informing, influencing, and persuading requires clear objectives

Informing, influencing and persuading in support of national policy requires both that the policy objective be clear, and that it be clear how a certain set of audience attitudes, behaviors, or perceptions will support those objectives. I completely agree with Dr. Emily Goldman, who is currently part of the office of communication at United States Central Command, when she says,

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[6] For a more extensive discussion of the "inform vs. influence" issue, see Chapter Two of Paul, Christopher, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts, and Current Debates*, Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger, 2011.

[7] The unassailable core and the associated discussion come from Paul, Christopher, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts, and Current Debates*, Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger, 2011.

"Effective strategic communication requires clear, consistent core messages *that flow from policy goals*. [emphasis added]"[8]

It is critical both that the objectives be clear and that the desired effect sought through communication be clear. Vague goals like "win the long war" do not imply any observable or measureable indicators of progress, nor do they do much to allow the articulation of supporting objectives to which an influence campaign could connect.

Coordination and deconfliction are necessary to avoid information fratricide

Army Field Manual 3-13, *Information Operations: Doctrine, Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures*, defines **information fratricide** as "the result of employing information operations elements in a way that causes effects in the information environment that impede the conduct of friendly operations or adversely affect friendly forces."[9] When one piece of information a government or its forces provides contradicts or is otherwise inconsistent with another piece of information provided by that government, that is information fratricide. "Since each USG agency has its own mission, each habitually targets different audiences, with different messages, through different channels. By communicating different messages to multiple audiences at home and abroad, the USG risks the perception of being seen as disingenuous."[10] Getting every possible source of messages and signals in an enterprise as sprawling as the U.S. government to avoid contradicting each other is non-trivial. Nonetheless, integration, coordination, and deconfliction are central to strategic communication.

Actions communicate

Actions speak louder than words. This truism is absolutely central to an effective strategic communication construct. Any implementation of strategic communication that includes only traditional communication, such as messaging, press releases, media relations, etc. is all but doomed to fail. This holds true even if it includes non-traditional media, such as web or other technology new media/now media and individual engagement. To be successful, strategic communication must include the communicative content and signals of actions, images, and policies.

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[8] Goldman, Emily, "Strategic Communication: A Tool for Asymmetric Warfare," *Small Wars Journal*, October 6, 2007, p. 6.

[9] Headquarters Department of the Army, *Information Operation: Doctrine, Tactics, Techniques, and* Procedures, Washington, D.C., FM 3-13 (FM 100-6), November 2003, pp. 1-5.

[10] Ecklund, Marshall V., "Strategic Communications: How to Make it Work?," *IOSphere*, Fall 2005, p. 8.

"Actions" include not just policy actions, but a much broader set of behaviors, deeds, and undertakings by members and representatives of the government. This goes double for the kinetic actions (maneuver and fires) of military forces. If a picture can be worth a thousand words, then a bomb can be worth ten thousand.

The smart thinkers in this area realize that actions communicate, and I echo their call. Whether you think of it as minimizing the "say-do gap,"[11] or wish to discuss the "diplomacy of deeds,"[12] what we *do* matters at least as much (if not more) than what we say, especially for deployed military forces. Every action, utterance, message, depiction, and movement of a nation's military forces influences the perceptions and opinions of populations that witness them, both in the area of operations (first hand), and in the broader world (second or third hand).[13] The 2010 White House National Framework for Strategic Communication gets it exactly right: "Every action that the United States Government takes sends a message."[14]

If a definition of strategic communication doesn't embrace these four elements, then it is a definition of something else..

My working definition of SC is "Coordinated actions, messages, images, and other forms of signaling or engagement intended to inform, influence, or persuade selected audiences in support of national objectives."[15]

However, as long as a definition respects the four elements of the unassailable core, it might be as good or better than mine. In fact, if we must, we can continue to operate without a good definition, and just with a somewhat shared understanding of the topic.

Strategic communication is vague – say what you mean

Much of the apparent disagreement and talking past each other that takes place in this arena stems from different discussants using the single phrase to denote different elements or aspects

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[11] Defense Science Board, *Task Force on Strategic Communication*, Washington, D.C.: Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics, January 2008, p. 13.

[12] Gregory, Bruce, "Public Diplomacy and National Security: Lessons from the U.S. Experience," *Small Wars Journal*, 2008, p. 6.

[13] Helmus, Todd C., Christopher Paul, Russell W. Glenn, *Enlisting Madison Avenue: The Marketing Approach to Earning Popular Support in Theaters of Operation*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-607-JFCOM, 2007, p. 171.

[14] The White House, *National Framework for Strategic Communication*, Washington, D.C., March 2010, p. 3.

[15] Paul, Christopher, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts, and Current Debates*, Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger, 2011, p. 3.

of strategic communication. Strategic communication is a very broad term that is used to capture a wide range of concepts and activities. I see a simple solution. As the title of my 2010 *Joint Force Quarterly* article suggests, "Strategic communication is vague – say what you mean."[16] Much of this confusion could be avoided if those speaking or writing about strategic communication would add a qualifier to their uses of the phrase. Here are the most frequent denotations intended when someone says, "strategic communication," each of which can be used to better specify a use of the term:

- enterprise level strategic communication
- strategic communication planning, integration, and synchronization processes
- communication strategies and themes
- communication, information, and influence capabilities
- knowledge of human dynamics and analysis or assessment capabilities.

For the record, throughout this testimony, my references to strategic communication are almost all exclusively to enterprise level strategic communication.

A decade of reports, white papers, and opinions suggest a variety of different improvements to strategic communication and public diplomacy

Beginning with the 2001 report of the aforementioned Defense Science Board task force, the past decade has seen a host of white papers, reports, articles, and commentaries suggesting reforms and improvements for U.S. strategic communication and public diplomacy. In 2009, I surveyed and compared the conclusions and recommendations of 36 of these reports for a RAND study on the topic.[17] These documents contained many reasonable ideas and recommendations. Unsurprisingly, these reports often recommend very different things.

While there was no universal consensus, there were at least four commonly repeated themes in the recommendations.[18]

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[16] Paul, Christopher, ""Strategic Communication" Is Vague: Say What You Mean," *Joint Force Quarterly*, No. 56, 1st Quarter, 2010, pp. 10-13. See that article for a detailed discussion of each of the five identified aspects or elements of strategic communication.

[17] Paul, Christopher, *Whither Strategic Communication? A Survey of current Proposals and Recommendations*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2009. As of July 1, 2011: http://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP250.html

[18] Paul, Christopher, *Whither Strategic Communication? A Survey of current Proposals and Recommendations*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2009. As of July 1, 2011: http://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP250.html

A call for "leadership"

Roughly one quarter of the 36 documents make an explicit call for "leadership." Leadership is in quotes because the different reports use it as shorthand for at least four different things: 1) presidential attention (which, to be fair, is desired by proponents in any issue area); 2) authority (no element of the government has any kind of enforceable authority over any of the various departments with shared responsibility for strategic communication); 3) good choices (bad policies cannot be well communicated), and 4) clear direction.

Demand for increased resources

The paucity of current resource levels for strategic communication and public diplomacy and recommendations for more was the single most frequent recommendation in the reports reviewed. There was broad agreement on the need for both increased personnel and for programmatic resources.

A call for a clear definition of overall strategy

Almost one-third of the reports reviewed make a call for clear strategic direction in this area. According to one commentator, without a clear strategy, "the leaders of each department, agency and office are left to decide what is important."[19] Most of the sources recommending clear strategy call for highest-level strategy, as well as strategy that goes beyond strategic communication: a clear foreign policy strategy that strategic communication can support.

The need for better coordination

Second in prevalence to increased resources for strategic communication is an admonition to coordinate better, with 19 of the reviewed documents making such a recommendation. Many sources lament the lack of coordination of U.S. government strategic communication efforts, both within and between agencies. Reports of information fratricide, where one element of the government (or of the military) makes a statement that contradicts or undermines messages from elsewhere in the government, abound.[20]

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[19] Borg, Lindsey J., *Communicating with Intent: DoD and Strategic Communication*, Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.: Air University, April 2007, p. 23. As of January 20, 2009: http://www.carlisle.army.mil/DIME/documents/strat_comm_borg.pdf

[20] Helmus, Todd C., Christopher Paul, Russell W. Glenn, *Enlisting Madison Avenue: The Marketing Approach to Earning Popular Support in Theaters of Operation*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2007, pp. 33-34. As of July 1, 2011: http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG607.html

Many reports also call for a new organization

Many of the reports reviewed call for a new organization of some kind for the support or coordination of strategic communication or public diplomacy. Some kind of organizational change or addition is recommended by almost all of the reports. Consensus is less strong, however, on the specific organizational changes needed. These include:

- creation of a new government agency
- creation of a new independent supporting organization
- reorganization within existing organizations
- rebalancing authorities between government agencies
- creation of new advisory or coordinating positions.

The proposals with the greatest potential traction are those advocating the creation of a new independent supporting organization. These include the "institution for international knowledge and communication" recommended by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Commission on Smart Power;[21] the "Center for Global Engagement" proposed by the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication;[22] and the "USA/World Trust" proposed by Kristin Lord of the Brookings Institution.[23]
Specific details differ, but all proposed organizations would:

- Be independent or semi-independent
- Conduct research and analysis
- Serve as a repository of expertise
- Tap and engage the private sector
- Advise government officials

One or more of the proposed organizations would also

- Be a hub for the exchange of ideas (both within and outside of government)
- Conduct experiments or pilot communication programs

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[21] Center for Strategic and International Studies, Commission on Smart Power, *A Smarter, More Secure America*, Washington, D.C., November 2007, p. 48.
[22] *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication*, Washington, D.C., January 2008.
[23] Lord, Kristin M., *Voices of America: U.S. Public Diplomacy for the 21st Century*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute, 2008.

- Promote and invest in innovative communication technologies
- Provide grants and venture capital to endeavors that advance its objectives

The proposals tend to emphasize the benefits of public-private partnerships and to focus on things the government struggles to (or simply cannot) do itself.

Where are we right now with the strategic communication enterprise?

Department of State

In the government, the U.S. Department of State (DOS) should be the home of robust strategic communication and public diplomacy capabilities, the source of related strategies and themes, and prominent in efforts to coordinate and deconflict.
Instead, department-wide, the term strategic communication is shunned in favor of public diplomacy, and public diplomacy takes a backseat to traditional state to state diplomacy. The fact that the undersecretariat for public diplomacy and public affairs is once again vacant since the 24 May resignation of Judith McHale speaks volumes.[24]

There have been improvements at State. I have lectured repeatedly on this subject at the Foreign Service Institute, and I have heard from the action officer level that there is more attention to, better guidance for, and more freedom to pursue public diplomacy than there was previously.

Department of Defense

Rosa Brooks, whose testimony directly preceded mine, has just come from a prominent coordinating role for strategic communication in the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD). I defer and refer you to her testimony regarding the current state of play in DoD.

Based on my research and awareness, I see strategic communication as a point of emphasis in DoD. More commanders at more levels are making strategic communication a priority. All of the combatant commands have established some sort of structure for the coordination of strategic communication.

The last few years have seen several improvements. The Strategic Communication Capabilities Based Assessment was completed in 2010, which paves the way for identified gaps to be addressed in formal DoD planning and resourcing processes. There has been some

[24] Kamen, Al, "McHale Leaving State Department," *The Washington Post*, May 23, 2011. As of July 1, 2011: http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/mchale-leaving-state-department/2011/05/23/AFF8D39G_story.html

consolidation of oversight of strategic communication within the office of the secretary of defense (OSD), to include movement of strategic communication and information operations oversight out of OSD (intelligence) into OSD (policy). This consolidation still leaves multiple (but fewer) principals with responsibility for strategic communication, including representation in OSD (public affairs) and on the Joint Staff.

There are, however, still concerns in the broader force at lower echelons. Outside the strategic communication cognoscenti, there is a general lack of certainty about what strategic communication really is and how to do it. Subordinate formations still decry the lack of guidance for strategic communication and the lack of higher level themes and messages (echoing the cries for clear strategy from numerous reports on strategic communication, and the requirement for clear objectives as part of the unassailable core of strategic communication, as articulated earlier in my testimony). Room for improvement clearly remains.

Find the Right Balance Between Civilian and Military: Don't Just Strip the Department of Defense of Capabilities to Inform, Influence, and Persuade

Regarding the balance between Defense and State, right now "American public diplomacy wears combat boots."[25] That is, the Department of Defense employs the majority of the resources (funding, manpower, tools, and programs) used for U.S. government efforts to inform, influence, and persuade foreign audiences and publics. Most of us agree that this is not the ideal state of affairs. The Department of State or another civilian agency should have the preponderance of the United States' capabilities in this area. Both the White House and DoD concur.[26] This would, of course, require substantial changes at State, in terms of orientation, priorities, and in the level of funding and capabilities available for public diplomacy and strategic communication. This also begs two questions: what is the right balance between civilian and military capabilities, and how do we get there?

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[25] Armstrong, Matthew, "Operationalizing Public Diplomacy," in Nancy Snow and Philip M. Taylor, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 63.

[26] See White House, *National Framework for Strategic Communication*, Washington, D.C., March 2010, and Kushlis, Patricia H. and Patricia Lee Sharpe, "Public Diplomacy Matters More than Ever," *Foreign Service Journal*, Vol. 83, No. 10, October 2006, p. 32.

The balance between the Department of State and the Department of Defense is not "zero" on the Department of Defense side

Imagine that, in some foreseeable future, DOS's capabilities become sufficiently robust to meet baseline steady-state needs on a global level. *DoD will still need to retain significant capability in this area.* Why? There are at least two significant reasons.

First, actions communicate, and DoD *will* continue to act. It will need capabilities to support planning and coordinating the communication content of those actions, and it will also need (at a minimum) the communication capabilities to explain those actions and encourage the favorable perception of those actions.

Second, DoD's responsibilities for responding to contingencies necessitate that it retain its inform, influence, and persuade capabilities. Even the most robust State Department that anyone imagines will still lack the kind of surge capacity and expeditionary capability needed to adequately respond to the crises and contingencies that our military is asked to prepare for. When the U.S. military presence in a foreign country goes from negligible to massive, who will be alongside the operating forces, explaining (and seeking to make palatable) their presence? The answer is: military communicators. If all the military communicators went away, who would conduct critical inform, influence, and persuade missions at the dawn of an emergent crisis? The answer is: no one. And that is why the appropriate balance of such capabilities between DoD and DOS is not "zero" on the DoD side.

How do we get from here to there?

Right now, Stateis not capable of meeting global steady-state strategic communication and public diplomacy needs of the United States. How might State's capacity be increased and resources transferred from Defense without creating gaps in service that would come at the expense of the national interest or military lives?

If the Congress is overzealous in stripping capabilities from DoD before State is ready to receive or recreate them, there is a very real possibility that the operation will be a success, but the patient might die anyway.

The right answer is to slowly and thoughtfully migrate some of DoD's public diplomacy capabilities over to DOS. This is exactly what the White House has proposed. As noted in the *National Framework for Strategic Communication*, "We recognize the need to ensure an appropriate balance between civilian and military efforts. As a result, a process has been initiated

to review existing programs and resources to identify current military programs that might be better executed by other Departments and Agencies."[27]

DOS should have the preponderance of inform, influence, and persuade capabilities and resources in the U.S. government. *This should happen without an overall diminution of the capabilities available.* Before DoD capabilities are reduced, DOS will require increased resources and improved organization. While DOS is improving its ability to meet the country's international inform, influence, and persuade needs, further growth can come from the direct transfer of selected DoD programs to DOS. Such transfers can increase in size and scope as DOS gains experience, and as its ability to manage and plan for these programs and capabilities improves. Finally, when it becomes clear exactly which capabilities DOS will and will not be able to develop or take over, it will be time to take a hard look at remaining DoD capabilities to determine which have been made redundant by DOS and which simply cannot be replaced by a civilian agency.

At the end of this process, all parties would like to see greater U.S. capability to inform, influence, and persuade abroad, with the Department of State as the robust leader of American public diplomacy and the Department of Defense as a valued and supporting partner. Get the balance right, and get there the right way.

Movement in the private sector

But this is not just about the government, military or civilian. As mentioned earlier in my testimony, many of the reports on strategic communication and public diplomacy reform propose a new organization of some kind, with a public-private partnership, independent of (but with an important relationship with) government, being the best idea. What is going on in the private sector?

I have been involved in the SAGE effort (Strengthening America's Global Engagement) hosted by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars seeking to prepare a detailed business plan and proposal for just such an organization. Current plans are to announce and roll-out the proposal later this year.

While there are many entities in the private sector that contribute to public diplomacy or citizen diplomacy in one way or another, my understanding is that there is limited coordination between them, and limited connections to government. Of possible concern is the fact that *Business for Diplomatic Action* closed its doors on December 31 of 2010.

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[27] White House, *National Framework for Strategic Communication*, Washington, D.C., March 2010.

My vision for strategic communication

I have a vision of what successful strategic communication would look like. In this vision, we have clearly stated national objectives, which contain nested subordinate objectives, which contain nested intermediate or supporting objectives, nesting all the way down to the operational and tactical level. These clear statements make it easy to see which objectives can be realized through influence or persuasion, and which can be supported through such efforts.

In this vision commanders and decision-makers have a "communication mindedness" and consider the messages and signals their actions, utterances, or planned policies send. Failing that (or as that is developing) these same leaders have access to (and respect for) communication advisors who sit at their right hands and bring communication implications to their attention.

In this vision everyone in government speaks not with one voice like some kind of robot automaton, but with their messages aligned in the same direction, because everyone understands the nested objectives and how their own efforts support those objectives, and because they have (or have access to) requisite communication training and cultural knowledge. In this vision communication is not just one-way broadcast, but is true two-way communication, engagement, or dialogue. In my vision this leads to policies shaped with our own interests as well as the interests and preferences of others in mind. This is my vision.[28]

Recommendations

To support progress toward this vision, I have seven specific recommendations.

Specify information endstates

The single best piece of advice for improving strategic communication that I have encountered comes from the U.S. Army War College's Professor Dennis Murphy. He suggests that all statements of commander's intent should also include a commander's desired information endstate.[29] The inclusion of an information endstate will guide subordinate plans such that they

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[28] Vision extracted from Paul, Christopher, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts, and Current Debates*, Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger, 2011, p. 174-5.

[29] See Murphy, Dennis M., *Fighting Back: New Media and Military Operations*, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: Center for Strategic Leadership, United States Army War College, November 2008.

comply with the commander's stated intent, and provide just a little bit more guidance and context for subordinates in their autonomous decision-making in support of the mission.

Here is an extended hypothetical example. The traditional commander's intent might include the endstate: "remove the insurgent threat from village X." Subordinates executing on this guidance, depending on the existence of other standing orders or rules of engagement, might conceivably have the whole military toolbox open to them: they could level the village, cordon and search, or a variety of softer approaches. Now imagine the implications if the following information endstate is additionally specified: "If possible, leave the population of village X neutral to our presence." That significantly changes the approaches subordinates are likely to take. It also allows the commander to assign explicit priorities to kinetic vs. informational outcomes, or short-term vs. long-term. There may be other types of cases where informational endstate does not matter to the commander, and in those cases the commander's intent can note that fact. In the vast majority of situations, however, that will not be the case. If commanders think about and are explicit about communication and information endstates, their subordinates will have no choice but to do so as well. Under this construction, while the commander accepts responsibility for conceiving the information endstate, his subordinates naturally accept more responsibility for achieving it than they would be forced to if it were left unstated.

This recommendation is obviously explicitly aimed at the DoD, but has applicability for senior leaders and decision-makers throughout the government, too.

Nest strategies and goals

My vision of strategic communication includes purposiveness and intentionality in communication at all levels. To communicate in the national interest is easiest when the national interests are specified and include clear goals at each level. What is missing is a subordinate set of goals to connect from national strategic guidance (which is often vague) to operating organizations. In the presence of clearly articulated national objectives and intermediate or supporting subordinate goals, the talented men and women of our government and our armed forces will surprise us with how diligently and effectively they inform, influence, and persuade in support of those goals.

Build strategic communication as a crawl, walk, run enterprise

As we try to get better at strategic communication, we need to remember that Rome wasn't built in a day. There are many gaps between what we currently do well in this arena and all the things we would like to do well in pursuit of a fully mature vision of strategic communication. It follows from this insight that there should be a logical progression toward closing gaps and building

capabilities related to this area. To propose such a progression, I borrow from an often used military training metaphor: the crawl, walk, run progression. Before you can walk, crawl; before you can run, walk. When we consider all of the things that could go into strategic communication, rather than getting into an argument about which ones are most important, I propose instead we ask: Which ones are easiest and which ones are foundational for, or logically prior to, the others? In short, which do we need to develop to progress to the crawl level of strategic communication, and which should be considered part of the higher walk level, or the highest run level?
I recommend that first we focus on being intentional and deconflicted in our own messaging and signaling. Then incorporate consideration of other participants in the information environment, consider cultural contexts, listen, and conduct true engagement. Finally, move to full integration of messages and signals, realize complex influence models, and seize the initiative from adversaries.

Build strategic communication from the top down as well as from the bottom up

Many of the calls for reform in this area emphasize guidance, leadership, and strategic direction coming from the top. I also advocate top-down progress in this area, but when I speak about strategic communication to embassy staffers or company and field grade officers, I emphasize the prospects for bottom-up progress in this area as well. Even in the absence of clearly articulated higher level goals and subordinate objectives, improvement can be made in nesting goals. I encourage personnel at all levels to embrace strategic communication and to write clear goals for their inform, influence, and persuade activities. Personnel at all levels should seek to connect their goals to the goals one level up. If goals are not clearly articulated at that higher level, personnel can request that clear objectives be developed, but should not wait for that to happen. Instead, I encourage subordinate personnel to articulate their own goals and make them point toward what they think the goals should be at the higher level. If those at higher levels do not agree, that can only further incentivize them to actually state their objectives. If the community of practice begins to build nesting goals from the bottom up (or from the inside out, or whatever), eventually the authorities at the top of these organizations will harness those connections with guidance in the form of clearly articulated goals of their own.

Separate black from white

While inform and influence cannot be meaningfully separated, truth and falsehood can. Lies, deception, and manipulation cost credibility when uncovered. In the contemporary global information environment, the prospects for keeping such acts under wraps indefinitely is increasingly low. Further, the fact that some communicators (notably psychological

operations/military information support operations) have falsehood in their doctrinal toolbox is a barrier to collaboration with other communicators.

If we must retain “black” information capabilities (and I accept that there are compelling arguments for doing so), carve them off and sequester them from other sources of messages and signals. Do not have the same organizations and personnel conducting both truth-based and false messaging. Retain some kind of conduit or connection between those who deceive and manipulate and the rest of the communication community for deconfliction and coordination purposes, but keep such “black” information capabilities small and away from the light. Freeing routine communication conduits from the suspicion of falsehood both internally and externally will increase credibility and make coordination and integration easier.

Specifically, psychological operations (now military information support operations) should be doctrinally and organizationally divided to separate those who inform, influence, and persuade using true information and attributed sources, from those who manipulate, mislead, and misattribute. This small residual could have a pernicious sounding name, like “information manipulation” or… psychological operations. The firewall should be between military information support operations and this black capability, not between public affairs and military information support operations.

Create and disseminate a government-wide definition of strategic communication

I strongly recommend that the White House or the National Security Council publish a formal definition of strategic communication that is intended to apply to all executive departments and agencies. Provided it is a good definition (and I understand that is a somewhat risky proviso), this would end efforts by relevant agencies to avoid strategic communication by pleading that it is not what they do, and would end debate within departments (notably the Department of Defense) by providing a single definition which must be adhered to. Unity of understanding can only help unity of effort.

If such a definition cannot (or just will not) be produced, then as a fallback position I continue to advocate that everyone add qualifiers to make clear what element or aspect of strategic communication they intend to discuss when they use the term – say what you mean!

Whatever you want to call strategic communication, don't throw the baby out with the bathwater!

I am not indelibly committed to the term "strategic communication." I do, however, have a strong commitment to the notion that the United States should be thoughtful, purposive, and coordinated in efforts to inform, influence, and persuade foreign populations in pursuit of national policy objectives. If strategic communication as a term is too vague, too contested, or becomes politically untenable, abandon it. Just do not allow the underlying effort to coordinate government impact on the information environment to be lost too.

In closing, I thank the Subcommittee for inviting me to testify. I hope the foregoing discussion of strategic communication is useful to your important deliberations.