Statement of Franklin D. Kramer
before the
House Armed Services Subcommittee
on
Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities
July 11, 2007

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

I appreciate the opportunity to testify this afternoon, which I am doing in my individual capacity, on the topic of "Strategic Communications and the Battle of Ideas: Winning the Hearts and Minds in the Global War Against Terrorists." I would like to discuss three points with the Committee.

First, the communications context in which the battle of ideas arises.

Second, the obstacles that face the United States.

Third, what we should be doing to be more effective.

The United States is an information superpower, but despite this, as numerous surveys have shown, its global image and international influence have badly declined. Strategic communications, properly utilized, can make a difference because the very fundamentals of United States policy inherent in the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights—democracy, the rule of law, individual rights, economic freedom, and societal openness—have a broad appeal throughout the world as reflected in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights which has been adopted by most countries.

But in the battle of ideas—as the Committee puts it for "hearts and minds" in the global war against terrorists—there are many obstacles to the acceptance of those fundamental ideas in a way that supports U.S. policy. The obstacles include the complex international environment, in which messages and events beyond those focusing on terrorism have significant impact; the multiplicity of cultures and differing audiences to which communications must be addressed; the extensiveness and significance of contending or alternative messages; the overwhelming impact of facts, particularly in the context of violent, war-type situations such as Iraq and

Afghanistan; and the complexity yet importance of utilizing appropriate influential messengers and message mechanisms. It is in dealing with those considerations that United States strategic messengering often fails.

The United States Government does make a concerted effort to communicate. As the Committee plans to hold comparable hearings with official witnesses, let me only list a few channels to give context, including White House and departmental public affairs offices; the State Department's public diplomacy office including the websites it operates; the Broadcasting Board of Governors with its multiple television and radio services; and the Department of Defense's numerous networks and websites. In short, there are a great number of communications from the USG on the air, over the Internet, and in face-to-face contacts, but the overall strategic communications effort obviously is not succeeding as well as we would like. There are several reasons.

First, a good deal of USG communications is "mass messaging"— simply because the U.S. has many interests and many audiences. Mass messages are a good mechanism for communicating to those who are ready to listen. But to those disinclined to do so—for cultural, policy, or other reasons—mass messages are unlikely to have significant impact. As an example, a Presidential address on Middle East issues necessarily will be tailored to the American public, as it should be since we are a democracy and the American public is the President's prime audience, but the speech will not have the same impact in the Middle East for reasons including the language in which it is delivered, the nature of the coverage it receives, the prior inclinations of the audiences, and the multiple other messages those audiences are receiving.

Second, the United States does have multiple interests so it regularly is sending multiple messages. Those multiple messages sometimes arise because of multiple policies—and the task of bridging multiple policies often can result in the reduction of the clarity of messages. Again, to pick a Middle East example, the U.S. positions with respect to the Middle East Peace Process often fail to persuade numerous Arab audiences. We hold our positions, including support of Israel, because we think they are correct but we should not fail to recognize that not all think them persuasive and that affects the impact of our messages.

Third, in the target audiences—those whose "hearts and minds" we wish to affect—there are also obstacles. To begin with, those audiences already live in a context, and already have multiple communications reaching them on a daily basis. Some will be disinclined to take more information, and some will only take information already congenial to their prior attitudes. For many such persons, the multiple channels, stations, and web sites in the Middle East that are anti-U.S. will crowd out the U.S. messages. For example, as a recent Radio Free Europe study demonstrates[1], both the Sunni insurgency in Iraq and Al Qaeda make very substantial use of communications both directly on websites and through "amplification" by providing content to television, radio and other web sites. These insurgent media are popular in the Arab world and "reflecl[t] a genuine desire for th[e] message."[2]

Additionally, and very importantly as an obstacle to reaching audiences, people interpret the same information differently—affected by what they know and feel—so that simple exposure to information is often not sufficient to cause a change in attitudes. To put this in the U.S. context, the Rush Limbaugh listener is not likely to be persuaded by Michael Moore, and vice versa. Thus, who presents the information and in what context is enormously important. Simply increasing the flow of information is often not sufficient to make information be received with the desired effect (though the opposite—the absence of an adequate flow of information, including its repetition--surely will undercut a message).

Fourth, and this is implied by much of the foregoing, when there is significant opposition to our policies and actions, even the best communications will not be able to overcome the substantive differences. More subtly, however, when there is opposition to our policies, such as is broadly true in the Arab world with respect to our actions in Iraq, opposition communicators in other areas, such as extremist groups like Al Qaeda, will try to use that opposition as a basis of support for their positions. Thus, the Al Qaeda narrative that the Muslim world is "under attack" from the West relies in important part on the ongoing violence in Iraq. A change in policy on Iraq—as is obviously a key issue right now in the United States—will have a potential impact on our own broader strategic communications

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[1] Kimmage and Ridolfo, "Iraq Insurgent Media: The War of Ideas and Images" (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2007).
[2] Id. at p.3

narrative. Of course, what the change actually may be and how it is implemented will be importantly consequential.

In light of the foregoing, let me make eight suggestions as to what can and should be done to make U.S. strategic communications more effective.

First, and perhaps most importantly, there needs to be a greater focus on the nature of audiences and of the societies and cultures into which messages will be delivered. In the first instance, we need to be clear as to who are our message recipients. There likely will be a difference among messages to populations at large; to those who are sympathizers toward terrorists; to those who are active supporters; and to those who are terrorists themselves. Moreover, those varying audiences might well be reached by different types of communications—for example, television for broader audiences; websites for potential terrorist recruits. In this context of the importance of differentiated messaging, a further very important consideration needs to be an understanding of the types of persons who have influence with the message recipients and the types of contexts in which that influence will be most effective. In the book, "The Tipping Point," Malcolm Gladwell wrote of "mavens," who validate a message, "connectors," who link different persons and groups, and "salesmen," who sell the message. In cross-cultural strategic messaging, we need to understand who these "influencers" are and how to reach them.

In that regard, we also need to understand what types of messages will be effective. There needs to be focus on both what is being said and on how it is being said. Considerations will include whether the culture is such that the message should focus on individual values or on group values (relevant societies differ); whether negative messaging will work; what is the role of religion—and a myriad of other similar questions.

Second, and implied by the first, we need to increase the number of experts in geographic and cultural arenas, including a much greater expertise in languages. Such expertise can help build a societal/cultural "map" of "influencers," key communications nodes, and cultural communications patterns to guide strategic communications. To these cultural experts, we need to add experts in psychology and marketing who can help generate messages and communications that are effective. Finally, we need experts in the use of communications techniques like television, radio, the Internet, cell phones, etc. In short, an interdisciplinary approach is required.

Third, we need to realize that while we may have a consistent base message, we will have multiple theatres in which it will be presented. Those areas will differ significantly from one another—and one should expect that, to be effective, messaging will likewise differ. To use an example, the society, culture and influential persons in Indonesia are significantly different from those in Pakistan, and they are each significantly different from those in Egypt. It is also worth noting that the Internet has created coherent, non-geographic communities. There are numerous studies and reports on the Internet's effectiveness in transmitting messages that sympathize with, support, and recruit for terrorist efforts. We need to include the Internet as a focused arena for our own strategic communications.

Fourth, we need to give greater resources to the overall strategic communications effort. Expanding the capacities of the Broadcasting Board of Governors and the embassies and other outlets of the State Department would be enormously valuable. As noted, the Internet is a key mechanism. The State Department does run web sites, but a much broader and more multifaceted Internet strategy—both globally and regionally—would be highly desirable. The General Accountability Office has found that while embassy posts are supposed to have a strategic communications plan, they are generally ineffective with little focus and not enough resources.[3] Enhancing the USG capabilities is a critical requirement.

Fifth, we need to encourage long-term efforts as well as short-term responses. It is possible to change attitudes over time—but it takes time. As an example, consider the American attitude toward smoking which has changed significantly over the last 30 years. In the battle of ideas, we are seeking a long-term change—and so we need to adopt long-term policies. As examples of useful approaches, the Department of Defense websites, Southeast European Times (presented in nine languages) and Magharebia (presented in three languages) that provide news, analysis and information are productive long-term approaches that will not affect attitudes immediately but can have significant consequences over time.

Sixth, we need to appreciate the dictum that "facts speak louder than words." As noted above, some policies generate significant opposition and

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[3] General Accountability Office, "U.S. Public Diplomacy, State Department Efforts to Engage Muslim Audiences Lack Certain Communications elements and Face Significant Challenges" (May 2006).

strategic communications are not panaceas that can overcome all real world actions. But even at the implementation level, we need to focus on the communications consequences of actions. In the wartime conflicts we now find ourselves in Iraq and Afghanistan, the impact of violent activities will very significantly change the views of the world not only of those immediately impacted but of those who are indirectly affected and those to whom those impacts are communicated. Every battle commander in these irregular wars soon finds out that the communications battle is critical— because the center of gravity for success is the population. But all too often, our commanders have to learn this on the ground. Especially in this globalized world of instant communications, tactical actions can have strategic consequences. Much increased support for training and resources for communications will be critical elements of effective counterinsurgency and stability operations. Again, by way of example, in David Galula's classic "Counterinsurgency Warfare," there is extensive discussion of the crucial importance of communications--to one's supporters, to the population at large, and to the opposition. We need resources and training for our people on these issues—and it also needs to be undertaken, not only by DOD, but in a joint DOD-State context.

Seventh, we should not expect to be successful at strategic communications acting solely on our own. Rather, we should use an alliance and partnership approach, both to expand our capacities and to increase our effectiveness. In the business world, it would be the rare American company that would seek to enter another country without the guidance and support of local business, whether as partners, joint ventures, or advisors—and often all three. In military and diplomatic arenas, we recognize our allies and partners as enormous sources of strength. In the strategic communications arena, we need likewise to develop those alliances and partnerships both to shape our own messages and to support theirs.

Eighth, and finally, it might well be worthwhile for Congress to review the overall structure of, and resources devoted to, strategic communications. The Committee's hearings should produce valuable insights, and there have been a number of studies on public diplomacy. I have noted already my belief that increased resources should be devoted to strategic communications including additional focus on the Internet—and I would provide those promptly, but a longer term look as to the appropriate capacities and organizations in this highly globalized information world deserves a thorough analysis. A comprehensive review which included all

governmental capabilities—including State and Defense—might help produce a more effective overall strategic communications strategy.

Mr. Chairman, I appreciate the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to further discussion with the Committee.