

Statement by

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On

“Strategic Communications and the Battle of Ideas: Winning the Hearts and
Minds in the Global War against Terrorists”

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Chairman Smith, Congressman Thornberry, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to testify today, which I am doing in my individual capacity, on the important 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 four broad areas with the Subcommittee:

- The importance of strategic communication¹ and the need to synchronize deeds and words.
- A summary of U.S. Government strategic communication initiatives, limitations, challenges and successes.
- The importance of non-governmental actions in strategic communication.
- Some ways ahead.

The Importance of Strategic Communication

Effective strategic communication will be essential to winning the Long War. Just as the Cold War was won through ideas, persistence, and national commitment, so will ideas, and the way we communicate them be central to the outcome of this conflict. But in these communications, facts (which include actions) speak much louder than words.

The United States needs to do much better than it has in communicating its commitment to the Nation’s core values, reaching out to those who share our ideals, supporting those who struggle for freedom and countering those who espouse hate and oppression. In many parts of the world, regard for America has declined to dangerous lows.² As one person asked: “How can the country of the Declaration of Independence, Madison Avenue and Hollywood be losing the war of ideas to people who think it’s rational to cut other people’s heads off?”

“The objective of strategic communication - and its ultimate measure of success - is the advancement of U.S. policies. This is achieved by influencing foreign audiences to take actions that support U.S. interests or to cease actions that damage U.S. interests.”³ As such, the success of strategic communication is affected by more than government actions alone.

¹ The U.S. government typically refers to strategic communication, without an “s.”

² Some go further, arguing that: “U.S. strategic communications is in a state of crisis,” citing the overwhelmingly negative views of the U.S. by majorities in key Muslim nations as referenced in surveys such as the annual Pew reviews of public opinion survey trends. See, for example, Charles Balck, “Strategic Communications Paper,” draft 2.0, Jan 2007, p. 3.

³ Balck, op cit., p. 2.

There is no doubt that effective strategic communication is very hard to achieve. Messages and delivery mechanisms must be aligned within the U.S. government; messages and actions must be linked across organizational, national and cultural lines; cognitive impacts on foreign audiences must be understood and adjusted. The difficulties are compounded by the rapidly changing information environment where distributed means of communication make it almost impossible to control the messages that are being delivered to any target audience.

Nevertheless, America has a number of enduring strengths that ought to be advantages in the future struggle for ideas. Among these are the Nation's:

- Openness
- Opportunity, and
- The ability to learn from our mistakes, and to acknowledge it when we don't live up to our principles.

A core issue is how to describe these qualities in ways that are important to people around the world and in ways that matter in their lives.

U.S. Government Initiatives

The U.S. government has been working to improve its strategic communication performance.

At the end of May, the Policy Coordinating Committee (PCC) of the National Security Council (NSC) on Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy issued the "U.S. National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication."⁴ It laid out three strategic objectives for America's public diplomacy and strategic communication with foreign audiences:

- America must offer a positive vision of hope and opportunity that is rooted in our most basic values.
- With our partners, we seek to isolate and marginalize violent extremists, who threaten the freedom and peace sought by civilized people of every nation, culture and faith.
- America must work to nurture common interests and values between Americans and people of different countries, cultures and faiths across the world.

Similarly, within the Department of Defense (DoD), the Deputy Secretary of Defense (DepSecDef) signed out the Strategic Communication Execution Roadmap last September that specified actions and designated lead agents to implement strategic communication objectives identified during the 2006

⁴ Issued May 31, 2007. The PCC is chaired by Karen Hughes, who also is the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs.

Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR).⁵ In particular, the QDR's recommendations support efforts by the Department of State to "improve the integration of information as a vital element of national power." Moreover, the quarterly updates to the Congress on the QDR reflect the establishment of a Strategic Communication Integration Group (SCIG) and an Executive Committee to oversee it.⁶

Despite these steps, there is a long way to go. The first step of getting alignment across the government will be hard enough. For example, DoD uses the following definition for Strategic Communication:

Focused United States Government processes and efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable to advance national interests and objectives through the use of coordinated information, themes, plans, programs and actions synchronized with other elements of national power.

However, since 2004 at least 10 definitions or descriptions of strategic communications have been listed on the INTERNET. Some are straightforward, like David Kilcullen's: "The ability to counter the insurgents' messages through words and deeds."⁷ Other descriptions are more complex. In fact, there seems to be wide agreement that strategic communication is a process that links together many different kinds of activities, from public affairs, to public diplomacy, to some kinds of information operations, to the use of visual information, across many parts of the U.S. government, primarily focused on foreign audiences. It is continually being refined. However, without an agreed definition of what's meant by strategic communication and public diplomacy it will be harder to implement

⁵ 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) Strategic Communication (SC) Execution Roadmap, dated Sept 25, 2007, OSD 13697-06.

⁶ The SCIG has been established to recommend, coordinate, and oversee DoD strategic communication initiatives and plans. The SCIG consists of senior representatives from the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), the Joint Staff, Military Departments, U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), U.S. Joint Forces Command (USJFCOM) and U.S. Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM). Other DoD organizations and representatives of other U.S. Government departments and agencies are invited as appropriate. An Executive Committee, consisting of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Legislative Affairs), Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Policy), the Director of the Joint Staff, and the Director of Strategic Communication (Joint Staff), provide oversight and guidance to the SCIG Secretariat director. Several representatives from the Executive Committee also attend the inter-agency PCC. The supporting SCIG Secretariat is also established and is tasked to ensure products from OSD, the Joint Staff, the Combatant Commanders, and the Military Departments are coordinated and synchronized across the Department. The SCIG is facilitating the development of strategic communication plans for two priorities approved by the DepSecDef: "Educate coalition and domestic audiences on Iraq strategy," and "Counter al Qa'ida and Taliban in Afghanistan."

⁷ Cited in Hon Eric Edelman, Under Secretary of Defense (Policy), remarks at the State Department, 12/12/2006 <http://www.defenselink.mil/Utility/PrintItem.aspx?print=http://www.defenselink.mil/Tra...>

them effectively, and it's not clear that a single inter-agency definition has been accepted.

The issues also are broader than just definitional. A quarterly update to Congress on the QDR stated that accomplishing the roadmap requires: "integrated and synchronized action while promoting cultural and organizational change [DoD-wide]."

- These are transformational changes, and need to be treated seriously.
- Experiences in other areas suggest that improvements in the ability to engage with external partners must be pursued in parallel across several fronts:
 - Capabilities must be built to develop, coordinate and deliver messages. This requires inter-disciplinary and language skills that may not align well with any single part of the U.S. government.
 - Social networks will be needed to engage effectively with appropriate audiences.
 - Changes in policy, doctrine, TTP (tactics, techniques and procedures) will be needed to guide operations, training and education so that the activities (especially by military) can be executed at appropriate levels without having to refer too many issues to higher authority.
 - Funds must be available to facilitate rapid and effective operations.
 - Sometimes legal changes may be needed—the Department benefited greatly from last year's authorization conference report language that allowed information and communications technology (ICT) capabilities to be incorporated into rudimentary construction and repair activities when DoD elements are engaged in humanitarian and civic assistance activities. Because of this, for example, a hospital damaged by an earthquake now can be rebuilt with internet connectivity, which had previously been prohibited. If this hospital can become a more effective facility as a result of that connectivity, the upgrade can contribute to the kind of outcomes strategic communication desires.

Strategic communication often is conducted through campaigns composed of "a defined set of actions and messages aimed at a target audience and purposively coordinated to generate specific effects."⁸ Such campaigns require at least six actions:

- The change agent must understand the intended audience.
- Specific, achievable and measurable objectives must be articulated.
- The campaign must be directed toward specific audiences, recognizing that messages to one group may be received simultaneously by others, sometimes with quite different effects.

⁸ Balck, op. cit., pp. 13-14

- Messages must be crafted that the audience finds compelling.
- The message must be relayed through a messenger that is seen as credible and likeable by the recipients.
- A feedback loop must be cultivated to evaluate the campaign's effectiveness.

However, there are important aspects of strategic communication in today's information age that are messy, "bottom-up" (vice "top down"), and difficult to orchestrate.

Since the end of the Cold War, the information environment has undergone revolutionary changes resulting from advances in technology and the proliferation of new media.⁹ Desktop publishing, the INTERNET, plus cable and direct satellite television and related developments have led to massive flows of information emanating from an ever-expanding number of sources directed at a mass, global audience on a 24/7, real-time basis. Moreover, widely accessible, cheap and pervasive new ICTs like cell phones with cameras and video, WiFi hubs, iPods and similar devices promote an explosion of user-generated and interactive content. Collectively they enable the rapid dissemination of ideas, stories and images from around the world. These ICTs help citizens and media outlets circumvent the government censors and media monopolies that have long stifled the free flow of information in many societies.

This glut of information means that an information source must be perceived as credible and trustworthy to capture an audience's attention. Consumers will seek out their preferred information sources, and the INTERNET in many areas is seen as a more trustworthy source of information because it is very hard to censor. The Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, Karen Hughes, understands this dynamic. In contrast to the Cold War environment when the goal was simply to penetrate closed societies with information, the competition today centers around winning attention and credibility in a hostile, crowded and highly competitive information environment.¹⁰

The Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Ambassador Eric Edelman made some important remarks at the State Department last December.¹¹

Ironically, crafting an all-of-government strategic communications strategy for today's threat is both enabled and complicated by new technologies in the internet age. Traditionally, our comparative advantage in warfare has

⁹ See, for example, Dan Gillmor, *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism By the People, For the People* (Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media, Inc., 2006). Also Balck, op. cit., p. 4

¹⁰ Karen Hughes remarks to the Pacific Island Conference of Leaders, May 8, 2007.

¹¹ Hon Eric Edelman, USD (P), remarks at the State Department, 12/12/2006, op. cit.

been technology. Communications technology has enabled a network-centric approach to warfare that gives us greater battlefield awareness than ever before. At the high end of the conflict spectrum it has enabled us to win spectacular victories on the battlefield in Iraq and Afghanistan, in the major combat phases. On the other hand, the enemy is also enabled by technology. At this lower end of the conflict spectrum the advantage in use of these technologies may shift to our enemies. (emphasis supplied) ... Counter-terrorism expert, Audrey Cronin, observes that the INTERNET is facilitating a “cyber-enabled mass mobilization” of such enemies....

In any case it is critical that decision-makers understand the impact of these technologies. As David Kilcullen has noted, every combat action sends a political message, nearly instantly. These effects cannot be ignored, but the press of short term communication demands also must not be allowed to overwhelm the long term strategic approach.

A key element of long term strategic communication is “strategic listening.” It is not enough just to “deliver the message.” Most approaches recognize that listening and influence analysis are critical prerequisites to effective communications strategies. However, insights from various meetings held over the past to years suggest that effective strategic listening includes:¹²

- Receiving without judgment – seeing what’s there, adapting, and finding ways to connect.
- Being willing to relinquish control, moving from strongly held positions, and co-creating.
- Making use of “user-generated content.”
- Sustaining involvement in an area. Public diplomacy and strategic communication demand a long-term focus and flourish best when policies are not driven by the agenda of the moment. In some cases, trying to take credit for an outcome may be detrimental to the ultimate objective of a stable, prosperous environment that does not support hateful ideologies. However, this “arms-length” approach can be especially hard for governments where pressing, tactical, near-term needs threaten to dominate long-term strategic initiatives.

These concepts are hard to fit into a top-down framework of “agreed on” messages.

The National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication does, in fact, include long term proposals, including an emphasis on student exchange programs, English language training and the education of girls and women. People-to-people programs foster life-long connections, as DoD also has found with many of its international military education and training efforts.

¹² Richard P. O’Neill, The Highlands Forum, briefing dated January 16, 2007

There have been some long term successes. By all accounts, the campaign against the Abu Sayef Group (ASG) and other militant radical Islamic groups in the southern Philippines has been effective through low-profile U.S. approaches in support of local leaders and the Philippine government. This has been characterized by long-term engagement on the ground, the development of local knowledge, and close cooperation with local peers whose messages are trusted and respected by the people of the area. The emphasis on long term engagement and building the capacity of partner nations in the stand-up of the African Command (AFRICOM) also reflects an understanding of the new environment.

A related area where DoD is beginning to make progress, but needs to do better, is in the sharing of UNCLASSIFIED information outside the boundaries of the DoD enterprise with civil-military partners who may not have security clearances. Such partners include aid organizations, indigenous security forces, non-governmental organizations, local governments, commercial firms and local populations. Without effective engagement with such groups in a wide range of scenarios, the U.S. CANNOT achieve the social, political and economic goals for which the military forces were committed. Thus, the ability to share UNCLASSIFIED information with these partners is not a “nice-to-have” adjunct to the kinetic phases of warfare, but needs to be a core part of the national strategy from the beginning of planning efforts.

Non-Governmental Activities

Strategic communication is broader than the U.S. government. Many more messages about the U.S. are delivered around the world through advertising and entertainment than through governmental channels. Regrettably, those messages are not always positive. A year and a half ago I was in a North African country where there was an “American Channel” on the local cable. The shows were drawn from popular television and movies, seemingly chosen for their portrayals of fast lifestyles and edgy behavior. Suffice to say that the America that was portrayed on that channel bore little resemblance to the country that I know and, in many respects, would not have been an attractive role model for the local audiences in the host nation. I have no idea what to do about this. I’m certainly not advocating censorship of media or entertainment. But we should not kid ourselves that these are positive images.

On the other hand, there have been effective advertising campaigns that have portrayed American products in ways that have resonated effectively with diverse audiences around the world. There are people in this country who know how to communicate strategically with selected audiences. It is important that we tap into them.

The American Muslim community could be a source of significant strength as an example of a religious people who can practice their faith while they are integrated into the mainstream of American society.

Ultimately it is important that people perceive that U.S. actions are advancing their interests, not just our own. Facts must be coherent with words and also need to provide hope to the population, such as jobs. We have to recognize that our way of planning and our solutions will not always be the right ones, and that local inefficiencies may be preferable to externally imposed approaches, however optimal those might be in our environment. The success of micro-cap financing and private sector development models like those laid out in C.K. Prahalad's "The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid"¹³ suggest alternatives to traditional aid approaches that can reduce instability through broadly based economic development. Such efforts support the fulfillment of the U.S. National Security Strategy objectives to encourage global economic growth and to expand the circle of development. To these ends they support the goals of strategic communication.

Ways ahead

There are no simple ways ahead. Strategic communication is enormously important, but ends need to be matched to means, limitations need to be recognized, and metrics need to be designed to evaluate progress (whether a project is begun as a bottom-up venture, or a top-down one). Some basic principles follow:¹⁴

- Define strategic goals clearly and assess the probability of success honestly.
- Make strategic communication approaches more agile, decentralized, and local. Clearly the U.S. government must be organized enough to minimize discordant messages, and clearly there are important themes to emphasize, but top-down approaches will not always work in the present and future information environment.
- Understand the intended audience, as well as the potential impact on other listeners of the messages designed for that audience
- Be realistic about the causes of anti-Americanism and also realistic about our ability to change this in the short term.
- Leverage new technologies that allow much greater interaction with audiences.
- Recognize that the basic approach should be long term, realistic, and humble—total control is not possible. Short term issues can't be ignored, but focusing on them will not necessarily achieve the long term objectives.

¹³ C.K. Prahalad, *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid: Eradicating Poverty Through Profits* (Philadelphia: Wharton School Publishing, 2006)

¹⁴ Balck, op cit., p. 18

- Recognize that public diplomacy and strategic communication serve policy and that the goal is the effectiveness of policy.
- Work to align the U.S. with the public in the areas we seek to reach (emphasize that people everywhere have similar long term goals, and that we do not consider foreign audiences as “the enemy”). Some have suggested that Arabs be thought of more as constituents than an audience, or a “target.”
- Promote open media. It is important to make room for moderates.
- Focus from the first on how to achieve the desired effects.
- Provide adequate resources. Prior to the significant increases recently allocated to public diplomacy, average funding levels were about \$800 thousand per year, plus some \$700,000 for exchange programs. Another \$2.9 million was available for public opinion research, which seems small by the standards even of a U.S. political campaign. Resources for strategic communication should be proportional to the potential benefits.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to discussions with the Subcommittee