

Strategic Communication: Who Should Lead the Long War of Ideas?

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If the War on Terrorism is a struggle of ideas, then strategic communication is an area where we must excel. Our National Security Strategy of 2002 calls for the transformation of security institutions, to include public information efforts designed to help people around the world learn about and understand America.¹ Yet, more than three years later, little has been accomplished to build a comprehensive strategy designed to influence international audiences.

The United States has a serious image problem. World opinion, especially in the volatile Middle East, has deteriorated significantly. A groundbreaking 2002 Zogby poll queried 3,800 adults in eight Arab countries asking, among other things, their overall favorable impression of 13 countries throughout the world. Only France had consistently net positive ratings; Israel received the lowest favorability scores. But the United States was right behind Israel, in all countries polled except Kuwait.² According to a 2003 Council on Foreign Relations study, many around the world see the United States as “arrogant, hypocritical, self-absorbed, self-indulgent, and contemptuous of others.”³ The study goes on to relate that we should care whether or not we’re well-liked:

*Anti-Americanism is endangering our national security and compromising the effectiveness of our diplomacy. Not only is the United States at risk of direct attack from those who hate it most, but it is also becoming more difficult for America to realize its long-term aspirations as it loses friends and influence. By standing so powerful and alone, the United States becomes a lightning rod for the world’s fears and resentment of modernity, inequality, secularism, and globalization.... Washington needs to focus on traditional state-to-state diplomacy, but it must also create a strong and robust public diplomacy – one able to win hearts and minds and show people that the United States can once again be trusted and admired.*⁴

The President elected to solve our image problem by designating the Department of State to lead the interagency effort to reinvigorate strategic communication. In March 2005, he nominated his close advisor, Karen Hughes, to serve as the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. Her appointment was expected to generate new momentum for strategic communication efforts, ensuring not only the ear of the President, but also key national security leaders throughout the administration. Upon assuming her Ambassadorial duties in September 2005, Hughes announced that she had been given responsibility under Presidential direction to lead the interagency process bringing together senior-level policy and communications officials from different agencies to develop a government-wide communications strategy to promote freedom and democracy, to win the war of ideas, and to set in place the communications strategic plans for the Administration.⁵ It was widely hoped that her leadership and influence would bring together the government's fragmented approach to strategic communication that had thus far failed to produce a long-term communication strategy, or associated interagency planning, prioritization and execution effort.

Selecting Hughes to lead the strategic communication interagency effort was widely applauded. As Counselor to the President for the first 18 months of the Bush administration, she led the communications effort in the first year of the war on terror, and managed the White House Offices of Communications, Media Affairs, Speechwriting and Press Secretary. But the larger question looms: is the State Department the right government agency to develop our national communications strategy and lead the interagency to effectively communicate our national interests and policies abroad? There are other options. The President could direct the National Security Council (NSC) of the Department of Defense to oversee the effort. Or, he could work with Congress to create a new Executive agency to lead strategic communication initiatives to repair America's image problem as part of our grand strategy.

I contend that a new executive agency is needed to transform our communication capabilities. In this paper I will define strategic communication and review past government initiatives to integrate

its core components. I will support my argument by outlining the strengths and weaknesses of the four options, and conclude with an analysis that will demonstrate why a new Executive agency would be best suited to craft our national communication strategy and lead the strategic communication interagency effort.

Defining Strategic Communication

The term “strategic communication” is used by the NSC, the Department of State, and the Department of Defense to address a number of disciplines that impart messages on a strategic scale.⁶ Its use can be traced to the NSC’s Policy Coordinating Committee (PCC) on Strategic Communication, established in 2002. The PCC’s charter directed the member agencies to develop and disseminate the President’s message around the world by coordinating support for international broadcasting, foreign information programs, and public diplomacy; and to promote and develop a strategic communications capability throughout the government.⁷

Recent studies have used the terms “public diplomacy” and “strategic communication” interchangeably. In a National War College paper, Arnold Abraham, a former Defense Department staffer, defined strategic communication quite simply as “communications that have strategic impact – the art of choosing audiences, messages, and means at a level where it has direct strategic implications.”⁸ In his August 2005 paper, *Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication: Cultures, Firewalls, and Imported Norms*, Bruce Gregory, Director of the Public Diplomacy Institute at George Washington University, embraces both public diplomacy and strategic communication as “analogous terms that describe an instrument of statecraft with multiple components and purposes.”⁹ This “instrument of statecraft” embraces diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, international broadcasting, political communication, democracy building, and open military information operations.

Others have defined strategic communication more narrowly. In his book, *Soft Power*, Joseph S. Nye, Jr. defines three dimensions of public diplomacy: daily communication to explain the context of domestic and foreign policy decisions; development of strategic communication themes used to sell or “brand” a particular

government policy; and development of lasting relationships via exchanges, scholarships, and access to media communications. Nye finds that strategic communication is simply one element of public diplomacy.¹⁰

The Defense Science Board (DSB), a federal advisory committee established to provide independent advice to the Secretary of Defense, formed a Task Force to study strategic communication in 2004. Their report provided a comprehensive analysis of America's ability to understand and influence global publics. The DSB described strategic communication as instruments governments use to "understand global audiences and cultures, engage in a dialogue of ideas between people and institutions, advise policymakers, diplomats and military leaders on the public implications of policy choices, and influence attitudes and behavior through communication strategies."¹¹ The DSB suggests that strategic communication is comprised of four core instruments: public diplomacy, public affairs, international broadcasting, and military information operations. The DSB describes the four core instruments:

- Public diplomacy seeks to build long-term relationships through the exchange of people and ideas, thereby increasing receptivity to a nation's culture, values and policies. It doesn't seek to directly influence foreign governments—that's traditional diplomacy. Public diplomacy concentrates on reaching people, since few major strategies, policies, or diplomatic initiatives can succeed without public support. Its ultimate goal is to increase understanding of American policies, values and interests and to counter anti-American sentiment and misinformation about the United States around the world.¹²
- Public affairs addresses communications activities designed to inform and influence U.S. media and the American people. The White House and the NSC have communications offices, as do most government departments and agencies. Military commands have long maintained public affairs staffs. They focus on domestic media, but in a world of global media outlets with global audiences, their messages reach allies and adversaries around the world.

- International broadcasting services are funded by the government to transmit news, information and entertainment programs to global audiences using radio, satellite television, and web-based internet systems. American broadcasting services have a rich history – Voice of America and Radio Free Europe helped win the Cold War. Today’s Radio Sawa and Al Hurra Arabic language radio and television services are now making their mark in the Middle East.
- Information operations is a term used by the Department of Defense to describe the integrated employment of electronic warfare, computer network operations, psychological operations, military deception, and operations security, to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp an adversary’s information and information systems, while protecting our own.¹³ The military have long been practitioners of psychological operations which are “military activities that used selected information and indicators to influence the attitude and behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals in support of military and national security objectives.”¹⁴

Strategic communication, therefore, forwards integrated and coordinated themes and messages that advance our interests and policies through an interagency effort supported by public diplomacy, public affairs, international broadcasting and military information operations in concert with the other instruments of national power.¹⁵

Communicating Foreign Policy: How We’ve Shaped America’s Message

Before addressing how the United States might best structure government to communicate and advance our interests and policies abroad, it may be advantageous to look at how we’ve done so in the past, and review how our government has struggled to integrate strategic communication within the interagency since 9/11.

The modern practice of influencing public opinion about this country, its ideas and its global policy agenda originated in the Office of War Information (OWI), which existed from 1942 to 1945. Prior to

World War II, the United States was the only major power that did not have a strategy, with a supporting bureaucracy, for carrying out ideological programs beyond its borders. That changed after Pearl Harbor. The OWI had a public affairs component which generated media coverage for both domestic and overseas audiences on the progress of the war effort. It used the services of the Voice of America, the U.S. government-funded radio network. But the OWI information effort also had a covert side: propaganda operations that were directed by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), a forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The OSS was responsible for activities such as clandestine radio stations broadcasting to Nazi Germany, spreading rumors about the enemy and planting newspaper stories. Wilson Dizard, Jr., a 28-year veteran of the United States Information Agency (USIA) and State Department relates:

During the war, the OWI was running the largest propaganda operation in the world...yet the whole operation closed down just two weeks after the war ended. Its tattered remains were relegated to the third level of the State Department while Congress and government officials debated whether we should be in the propaganda business at all. A few years later...Cold War developments convinced the Eisenhower White House that a new organization, separate from the State Department, was needed to deal with the Soviet ideological threat. The decision to create an independent agency was prompted in large part by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles' belief that propaganda operations were not a proper diplomatic function—an attitude many Foreign Service officers would continue to hold long afterward.¹⁶

Thus, in 1953, USIA was created to counter anti-American propaganda perpetrated by the Soviet Union, and coordinate the dissemination of information to foreign audiences.¹⁷ Although it was initially established as a propaganda agency, it carefully avoided using the term “propaganda” to describe what it did because of negative connotations associated with the word in the United States.¹⁸

In the early years of the Cold War, this country debated whether the use of propaganda was warranted in a democracy. Although many saw the need to counter propaganda and dis-information emanating from behind the Iron Curtain, they were also concerned

that Americans could become the victims of our own propagandistic information program directed at foreign audiences. Propaganda was seen by many to be inconsistent with democracy. Intellectuals bemoaned it as dishonestly partisan, one-sided, and anti-democratic in its techniques and aims. But others, such as Assistant Secretary of State George V. Allen, made a strong case for the use of propaganda. He wrote in 1949: “Propaganda on an immense scale is here to stay. We Americans must become informed and adept at its use, defensively and offensively, or we may find ourselves as archaic as the belted knight who refused to take gunpowder seriously 500 years ago.”¹⁹

As Cold War tensions eased, America’s anti-propaganda tradition resurfaced, and a new term was used to describe the USIA mission: public diplomacy. It retained the propagandistic program elements for a time, but later shifted its focus to educational and cultural programs designed to create mutual understanding rather than unilateral persuasion. These programs included information activities (such as speakers programs and library resource centers) and educational and cultural exchanges (including the Fulbright scholar program, English language instruction, and American studies programs).

International broadcasting has its roots in the Foreign Information Service, which was initiated in 1942 to counter propaganda emanating from Nazi Germany during World War II. In 1943, it was delivering the news in 27 languages over 23 radio transmitters. Known later as Voice of America (VOA), our international broadcasting efforts grew into a network of 22 stations and 900 affiliates, reaching an estimated audience of 91 million people in 53 languages.²⁰ VOA was folded into USIA in 1978. Over the years, other radio and television projects were added to the international broadcasting plate: private networks Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty; satellite television service WORLDNET; and Cuba-targeted Radio Marti. The International Broadcasting Act of 1994 consolidated the various USIA broadcasting programs under a bipartisan Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), comprised of eight members from mass communications and foreign affairs.

Throughout the Cold War, public diplomacy initiatives and international broadcasting helped contain and defeat communism,

promote democracy, explain American foreign policy, and expose foreign audiences around the world to American values. The USIA purpose merged countering negative propaganda with “presenting a favorable image of the United States.”²¹ We were cultivating what Joseph Nye calls “soft power” – obtaining our goals by attracting others to our culture, policies and political ideals, rather than coercing or buying them.²²

But after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Congress began looking for peace dividends. In the mid-1990s, with the Cold War won and no powerful adversary to counter, Congress slashed USIA budgets. For example, resources for Indonesia, the world’s largest Muslim country, were cut in half. Academic and cultural exchanges fell from 45,000 to 29,000 annually between 1995 and 2001.²³ Nye reflects,

*Between 1989 and 1999, the budget of USIA, adjusted for inflation, decreased 10 percent. While government-funded radio broadcasts reached half the Soviet population every week and between 70 and 80 percent of the populace of Eastern Europe during the Cold War, at the beginning of the new century, a mere 2 percent of Arabs heard the VOA.*²⁴

In 1998, Congress chose to reduce foreign operating expenses and consolidate operations. The Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act merged the USIA into the Department of State as part of the project to reinvent government.²⁵ The Act also cut loose the BBG, making foreign broadcasting an independent government entity once more. But the USIA/Department of State merger was fraught with problems. The programs, products and personnel of the USIA, already seriously weakened by neglect in the decade following the end of the Cold War, were diminished in the reorganization. A once formidable communications agency was reduced to “a shadow on the periphery of foreign policy.”²⁶

Unfortunately, few noticed during the 1990s’ information revolution that our ability to influence audiences and shape public opinion abroad was diminishing. It became painfully clear to Americans after September 11, 2001. Although strategic communication had a high priority in the months immediately following 9/11, it was evident that the fragmented public diplomacy/public affairs entity in

the State Department was not up to the task of coordinating a strategic communication effort that required a sophisticated method to map perceptions, identify policy priorities, determine objectives, develop themes and messages, use relevant media channels, and monitor success.²⁷ What followed was a flurry of sometimes uncoordinated interagency activities designed to fill the void.

First were the tactically-oriented Coalition Information Centers (CICs) that deployed language-qualified public affairs experts to respond to breaking news, Al-Qaeda and Taliban claims, and regional events. The CICs were a temporary fix; they were followed by the White House Office of Global Communication, established by Executive Order on 21 January 2003. It was charged with advising the President and heads of the Executive Departments/Agencies on the “utilization of the most effective means for the United States Government to ensure consistency in messages that will promote the interests of the United States abroad, prevent misunderstanding, build support for and among coalition partners of the United States, and inform international audiences.” Part of its charter was to develop a strategic communication strategy.²⁸ It never did; the office closed in 2005.

In September 2002, the National Security Advisor (NSA), Condoleeza Rice, established a Strategic Communication Policy Coordinating Committee (PCC) designed to “coordinate interagency activity, to ensure that all agencies work together and with the White House to develop and disseminate the President’s message across the globe.” The PCC was charged with developing strategic communications capabilities throughout government. Co-chaired by the Department of State and the NSC, it met few times with limited impact.²⁹

Simultaneously, the Department of Defense was working on its own strategic communication effort. The Defense Department had long been using its information operations organizations (to include military deception and psychological operations) to achieve effects-based outcomes on the battlefield, and a robust public affairs apparatus to inform American and world audiences about military operations around the world. In October 2001, the Department created the Office of Strategic Influence (OSI) to serve as the focal point for a “strategic communication campaign in support of the

war on terrorism.” It was to “develop a full spectrum influence strategy that would result in greater foreign support of U.S. goals and repudiation of terrorists and their methods.”³⁰ The Office gained negative press scrutiny when Defense Public Affairs officials worried that OSI would undermine their credibility by placing lies and disinformation in foreign media as part of information warfare operations that would ultimately be picked up by the American press.³¹ Amid the controversy, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld closed the OSI in February 2002.

Many Initiatives – Little Progress

Several government agencies and think tanks have conducted studies over the past three years about how to repair America’s “image problem” in the world.³² Each advocated various methods to consolidate and lead the interagency effort to transform public diplomacy/strategic communication. Three solutions recommended in these studies to lead the strategic communication effort include: leaving the Department of State in charge, but with significant changes to its public diplomacy structure;³³ establishing a permanent strategic communication structure within the NSC to oversee the interagency effort;³⁴ or designate a public diplomacy advisor with a dedicated Secretariat.³⁵ Another option is to designate the Department of Defense as lead agency, re-establishing the mission given to the War Department during World War II.³⁶

There is one consensus: the way we’ve been doing business since the demise of the USIA has not promoted a long-term communication strategy, or an associated interagency planning, prioritization and execution effort. Why have we made so little progress? Experts point to lack of sustained direction and leadership; failure to integrate the “message” into policy formulation; a stove-piped interagency that is not organized to compete with an agile, adaptive combative enemy propaganda effort; and firewalls that preclude the integration of “elements of influence” when communicating with the media serving domestic and international audiences.³⁷ These factors should be addressed when analyzing which government agency is best suited to lead the strategic communication effort. Is the leader positioned to influence policy? Is the organization structured, staffed,

focused and flexible enough to lead (not just coordinate) interagency efforts? And, is the organization able to overcome cultural firewalls separating “information” and “propaganda” designed to protect organizational credibility?

The Independent Agency Option

One course of action is to establish a stand-alone, independent executive agency to develop the national communications strategy and focus government agencies to effectively wield the information element of power. Proponents of this option contend that the “War of Ideas” cannot be won by seduction, it must be won by persuasion, and that the U.S. has “unilaterally disarmed” itself of the “weapons of ideological warfare.” To win the “War of Ideas” we must have an agency that is devoted to it.³⁸

Re-establishing a stand-alone agency, or a “Director of Central Information,”³⁹ to lead the U.S. strategic communication effort would bring about singleness of purpose and focus that could not be achieved in other government agencies. Communications experts would not be relegated to third-tier positions in a bureaucracy that does not understand or appreciate the mission; Congressional funds would not be diverted to other department priorities. With its targeted focus, it would not suffer from the internal cultural firewalls that plague organizations with a broader mandate—like attempts to separate “propaganda” from “diplomacy” in the State Department, and “psychological operations” and “public information” in the Department of Defense. It could be structured to counter propaganda and dis-information with speed and agility.

Conversely, if the past is any indication, a separate agency would have difficulty trying to establish itself as a strong influence in the formation of key foreign policy decisions. With the exception of Presidents Eisenhower and Reagan, who forged close relationships with their information agency directors, our chief executives rarely brought key USIA leaders to the NSC table to develop communications strategies in making and implementing foreign policy. Edward R. Murrow, USIA Director during the Kennedy administration, was continually frustrated when he was called in to “clean up” a foreign policy debacle that could have been avoided

if public diplomacy experts had been involved in the policy's formulation. He advocated that USIA leaders be there at the "take-off," rather than the occasional "crash landing."⁴⁰

Over the years, the USIA demonstrated that it was not adept at developing communications strategies or coordinating interagency activities at the strategic level, despite its statutory advisory responsibilities to do so.⁴¹ Part of the problem may have been reluctance by other government agencies to support an organization that seemed to be working at cross purposes. Traditional diplomats, famous for engaging in negotiations behind closed doors, saw public diplomacy's open communication with mass audiences as having the potential to derail and disrupt sensitive negotiations by exposing them to public scrutiny and complicating their chances of success. And, although the military recognized the importance of influencing foreign populations to support national objectives, they had reservations about propaganda produced by a civilian organization that was not directly linked to the battlefield.⁴²

The NSC Option

The DSB recommended that the NSC take the lead as strategic communication integrator by creating a new position for a Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communication, who would chair a Strategic Communication Committee on the NSC "with authority to assign responsibilities and plan the work of the departments and agencies in the areas of public diplomacy, public affairs, and military information operations; concur in strategic communication personnel choices; shape strategic communication budget priorities; and provide program and project direction to a new Center for Strategic Communication."⁴³

There are benefits to expanding the role (and staff) of the NSC to lead the interagency strategic communication effort. It would get strategic communication into the heart of the national security policy formulation process with an organization that "thinks" in interagency terms that can serve as an "honest broker" when dealing with interagency rivalries. As the entity that creates the National Security Strategy, crafting the National Communications Strategy based on the President's stated policies would not be much of a stretch. And,

the NSC's close working relationship with the President provides its staff more influence with other governmental agencies, beyond that of a single agency such as the Department of State.

Conversely, using the NSC to formulate, synchronize and implement strategic communication policy would subject the effort to personnel turnover every four to eight years since the organization, with its large percentage of Presidential appointees, is susceptible to election cycles. These appointees may not have the longevity needed to provide long-term continuity to win the "War of Ideas." It's hard to "stay the course" when key leaders with depth and breadth of experience depart with the President. Additionally, the NSC has traditionally possessed weak tasking authority. "Operationalizing" the NSC, making it responsible for implementing rather than simply synchronizing or coordinating government policy, also goes against the preferences of some Presidents and their National Security Advisors.⁴⁴ And, the organization's close ties to the administration and lack of Congressional oversight (Congress does not approve the President's NSC appointments) brings up a potential problem: the NSC's strategic communication staff may be seen as taking a propagandistic, party-line policy advocacy approach to influencing international audiences instead of engaging, informing and persuading them to favorably view U.S. policies based on their merits. Being "too close" to the chief policymaker may dilute message credibility and effectiveness.

The Department of State Option

If one of the primary focuses of strategic communication is to explain our foreign policy and influence foreign publics, then aligning the strategic communication effort under this Cabinet Department puts the foreign policymakers and the foreign policy communicators in the same building. Unfortunately, the past tells us that proximity does not equate to working together effectively. The way the USIA and State merged has been a major factor in the Department of State's fractured approach to integrating public diplomacy since 1999. A 2005 Heritage Foundation Report authored by Stephen Johnson, Helle C. Dale and Patrick Cronin, states:

Although it made economic sense, the merger created disarray. Negotiators unfamiliar with the USIA's mission carved up the agency and placed regional divisions under the authority of the State Department's geographic bureaus and buried support functions within the State Department's functional divisions without regard for outcome. USIA's public opinion research office was placed inside the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), outside the hierarchy of communications professionals who need its analysis the most. Most of all, USIA's proactive communicators and creative personnel were dropped haphazardly into a bureaucracy that values secrecy and a deliberative clearance process....its independent culture clashed with the consensus-driven State Department. Without leadership that understood how to integrate public diplomacy into department operations, PD/PA [public diplomacy/public affairs] officers were left out of senior policy meetings in both regional and functional bureaus.⁴⁵

Placing the strategic communication effort in the hands of the Department of State has its pros and cons. As stated, foreign policymakers and key communications practitioners are co-located. A trained cadre of USIA alumni, seasoned experts in shaping and communicating America's foreign policy message with a long history of working closely with the Department of State in Embassies around the world, are already in residence there. Cabinet departments have more continuity than the NSC, and possess their own operating budgets, and contract authority. They are also less susceptible to the demand of election cycles.

The Department of State is well-positioned to harmonize the interagency effort, having worked closely with the other players that comprise the strategic communication team: the Department of Defense and the BBG. Embassy country teams have long included Department of Defense representatives; State's political advisors have been providing in-residence advice to the Defense Department and regional combatant commanders for years. The Secretary of State also sits as an ex-officio member on the bi-partisan BBG, the independent federal agency responsible for all U.S. government and government sponsored (non-military) international broadcasting.

However, cabinet departments haven't tended to think in interagency terms and often promote their own interests.⁴⁶ Critics contend that the State Department is not suited to lead the interagency effort

because they advocate the more “soft sell” education and exchange programs designed to produce mutual understanding rather than an aggressive agenda of persuasion.⁴⁷ And, using an Under Secretary of State to lead the overall strategic communication effort is not a plan earmarked for success in most administrations, since these officers rarely have direct communications with the President, are not a part of the policy formulation process outside the State Department, and do not wield sufficient influence over the other Cabinet departments. Take, for example Charlotte Beers and Margaret Tutwiler, who preceded Ambassador Hughes in the Under Secretary position. Neither had the ear of senior administration leaders, nor did they last long in the job.⁴⁸ In fact, the office of Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs went vacant or was filled in an acting capacity for nearly three years during the Bush administration between 2000 and 2005.

The Department of Defense Option

Although no major study advocated that the Department of Defense lead the strategic communication effort, it is a contender. With hundreds of thousands of troops based outside the United States, our military greatly influences how America is perceived by our allies and adversaries alike. A 2003 Council on Foreign Relations study reflects: “What the Pentagon says or what local commanders and units do has an enormous impact on the reaction of foreign publics, and hence foreign governments, to the United States.”⁴⁹ Defense Department spokesman, Larry Di Rita, stated: “We have a unique challenge in this department, because four-star military officers are the face of the United States abroad in ways that are almost unprecedented since the end of World War II.” He added, “Communication is becoming a capability that combatant commanders have to factor in to the kinds of operations they are doing.”⁵⁰

Like the Roman pro-consuls of old, geographic combatant commanders wield enormous power with influence that transcends military matters and impacts all the instruments of national power. With its substantial budget and global presence, the Department of Defense is, arguably, the primary instrument of national power responsible for implementing foreign policy.⁵¹ The Pentagon has

a broad range of military-to-military exchanges, joint training and humanitarian assistance programs funded through combatant commander Theater Security and Cooperation programs. They constitute an aspect of “preventive defense” by developing contacts and relationships that help to shape the perceptions of foreign military officers to better understand American policies abroad.⁵²

In an August 2005 U.S. News and World Report article, Linda Robinson wrote: “Despite fears that the U.S. military is waging a duplicitous propaganda war, many military officials say that ‘information operations’ are inevitable dimensions of warfare and must play a role, along with State Department public diplomacy efforts.”⁵³ Commanders in the field are more than aware that their campaigns are fought in front of local, national and international audiences. The actions of soldiers on the ground can create immediate strategic impact – such as the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal – with wide-ranging consequences.

Lieutenant General Peter W. Chiarelli, who commanded the 1st Cavalry Division in Iraq, related that shaping the message and tying it to operations is critical. “Understanding the effect of operations as seen through the lens of the Iraqi culture and psyche is a foremost planning consideration for every operation.” He added that information operations rose to a level of importance never before thought necessary. For example, unless coalition-initiated aid projects were immediately publicized, insurgents would claim credit for the results as if they were responsible for the improvements.⁵⁴

The Defense Department’s commitment to make Information Operations (IO) a core military competency is moving the services to create a trained and educated career workforce capable of providing combatant commanders with planners and specialists trained to execute information operations. Joint Forces Command is revising IO doctrine. The Joint Forces Staff College is standardizing a joint IO curriculum for field grade and general/flag officers. A Department of Defense Center of Excellence is working with the private sector to create technologies and techniques to help the military “absorb ideas that will help the military improve information capabilities.”⁵⁵

In early 2006, the Deputy Secretary of Defense announced that the Defense Department would launch eight follow-on assessments of issues raised during the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). One of the QDR Execution Roadmap panels will study strategic communication in an effort to further define missions and develop doctrine for its public affairs, information operations and defense support to public diplomacy assets.⁵⁶ Strategic communication, with its sub-component of information operations, is central to winning the “War of Ideas” and the Defense Department “gets it.” It’s pushing its doctrine, education system, training and exercises, and organizational structure to better prepare the force to execute.

With its large operating budget, robust planning capability, trained public affairs and information operations apparatuses, world-wide ties to influential leaders, and access to key American policy makers through national security channels, the Department of Defense is structured and well-positioned to lead the strategic communication interagency effort. But should it? The military could lose its credibility, and the respect and good will of both the American people and foreign audiences around the world, if it is seen to be a propaganda machine. Proponents of this argument point to what the American press called the “five o’clock follies” during the Viet Nam War, in reference to the military’s daily press briefings. Others argue that a strategic approach to communications that aligns public information with military objectives is inherently political, and would tarnish the reputation of a professional military that takes pride in maintaining its status as an apolitical public institution.⁵⁷

Evaluating the Candidates: The Department of Defense

The battle for public opinion in the Middle East is being vigorously waged between the radical Islamists who seek “a totalitarian empire that denies all political and religious freedom,”⁵⁸ and the moderates who support modernity and tolerance. It’s an ideological battle for “hearts and minds” and it is in the interest of the United States to ensure the moderates succeed. To win the “War of Ideas,” the easy answer would seem to be to give the lead for strategic communication to the Pentagon and allow them build an apparatus with overt and covert components to wage political warfare similar to the OWI and

OSS during World War II. After all, the Defense Department has the structure, the skilled personnel, the budget, and policy influence to lead the interagency to success. But the issue is more nuanced.

Throughout our history, Americans have been uncomfortable with the idea of government, rather than a free press, reporting the news both domestically and internationally. Government efforts to communicate its actions are particularly controversial during times of war as the president in power seeks to maintain public support at home and abroad despite inevitable “bad news” from the war front. In an era where people remember lessons from both the Cold War and Viet Nam, some see our Government’s attempts to bring news to people in other nations as “propaganda” to sway public opinion, while others contend it is an “information campaign” designed to educate the public with facts in regions where “free” and “unbiased” media outlets are limited in number.

Since 9/11, President Bush and members of his administration have drawn numerous comparisons between the Global War on Terrorism and the Cold War. For example, the President’s October 2005 policy address to the National Endowment for Democracy contained the following:

The murderous ideology of the Islamic radicals is the great challenge of our new century. Yet, in many ways, this fight resembles the struggle against communism in the last century. Like the ideology of communism, Islamic radicalism is elitist, led by a self-appointed vanguard that presumes to speak for the Muslim masses... Like the ideology of communism, our new enemy teaches that innocent individuals can be sacrificed to serve a political vision... Like the ideology of communism, our new enemy pursues totalitarian aims... Like the ideology of communism, our new enemy is dismissive of free peoples... And Islamic radicalism, like the ideology of communism, contains inherent contradictions that doom it to failure.⁵⁹

But the Cold War was fought with political objectives formulated to contain the spread of an ideology by countering nation states from forcefully promulgating their communist political system among the Free World. The war on terror is being fought with ideological objectives designed to counter the spread of Islamic extremism by

discrediting the terrorists and influencing publics to support the integration of their nations into an American-designed alliance of peace and prosperity. In the Cold War, America fought to defend the Free World; in the War on Terrorism, America fights to defend freedom itself. We are balancing interests and ideals. Although there is a vital need for our Government to counter Islamic extremist propaganda, this war cannot be won by the hard sell of political warfare alone. That is not to say that the Department of Defense and CIA should not engage in information operations and propaganda activities in support of the war on terror. Propaganda has always been a part of warfare. But, if the United States is to maintain credibility with publics around the world, the military, America's ultimate instrument of coercion and hard power, cannot be seen as leading the strategic communication effort.

Evaluating the Candidates: The Department of State

The President has directed the Department of State to lead the interagency strategic communication effort. But if State is to take on and successfully execute the larger program, it must first get its own public diplomacy house in order. The DSB Task Force on Strategic Communication found numerous deficiencies and recommended significant structural and cultural changes within the Department of State. First, the DSB recommended that the role and responsibility of the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs be redefined to include input into foreign policy formulation as well as implementation. Second, the DSB found that the Under Secretary needed to be staffed and resourced to provide policy advice, program direction and evaluation, to include placing public diplomacy experts at the regional bureaus (where foreign policy is developed), as well as with the Chiefs of Mission (where foreign policy is executed). Third, the DSB suggested that State re-align the Office of Foreign Opinion and Media Research from the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (where it was placed after the Department of State/USIA merger), to work for the Under Secretary in order to better measure the effectiveness of strategic communication efforts around the world. Finally, the DSB recommended that the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs approve all public diplomacy assignments, and have input into performance evaluations.

Secretary of State Rice moved quickly in 2005 to implement many of the DSB findings, and through Ambassador Hughes, is leading a cultural change within the Department. In her November 2005 House International Relations Committee statement, Ambassador Hughes outlined three efforts she has undertaken to reinvigorate communications with world audiences: integrating policy and public diplomacy at the State Department; re-launching the interagency strategic communication process by leading a high level group of policy and communications professionals to “further the freedom agenda and win the war of ideas” and; emphasizing public diplomacy as a strong, rewarding career path within the Department of State. In this area, she is working to restore the management links that were severed during the USIA merger by elevating public diplomacy in the policy-making regional bureaus to add a deputy assistant secretary with dual reports to the head of the bureau and to Hughes.

The Department of State is also making public diplomacy a part of every officer’s job description and developing ways to evaluate and reward success. But most importantly, either Ambassador Hughes or a member of her staff sits at every key policy-making meeting at the State Department, integrating public diplomacy initiatives. However, the Secretary of State did not re-align the Office of Foreign Opinion and Media Research under the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, leaving it outside the hierarchy of communications professionals who need its analysis the most.

Even with these initiatives, it is important to note that bureaucratic culture doesn’t change quickly within the State Department, and neither public diplomacy nor strategic communication have been first-line priority efforts in the past. In an article published in the *Weekly Standard*, Joshua Muravchik lamented that when the USIA was folded into the State Department, the latter was “more eager to absorb the agency’s resources than to carry forward its mission.”⁶¹ The Department of State received appropriations for public diplomacy programs during fiscal year 2006 totaling \$430.4 million for Education and Cultural Exchanges (an increase of 21% over FY05), and \$333.8 for other public diplomacy programs (an increase of 4% over FY05). However, the budget did not include funding to increase personnel in support of the public diplomacy

mission.⁶² Outside of the domestically oriented Bureau of Public Affairs, the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs has a small staff that handles foreign cultural affairs, news dissemination, and policy.⁶³ She may have the mission, but Ambassador Hughes is not staffed to lead a coordinated, interagency strategic communication effort.

Ambassador Hughes has a reputation and influence her predecessors did not. She is widely respected throughout the Bush administration, and has the ear of key leaders as she works to repair our previously dysfunctional public diplomacy efforts. But any success she achieves in her current position based on her close ties with the President will likely be an anomaly that will not be sustainable when the next administration comes to power. A sub-level cabinet officer does not normally wield enough power and influence to bring together a complex function within the interagency. Bruce Gregory sums it up by stating:

Although a strong cabinet Under Secretary of State with full support from the President and the Secretary can bring about real and immediate change, any approach that places the public diplomacy 'quarterback' in a sub-cabinet position over time carries a heavy burden...Whether the State Department can or should 'quarterback' today's multi-agency, multi-issue public diplomacy is a threshold question to be considered with care.⁶⁴

Even if the State Department had a “talented quarterback” and unlimited means, critics point out that this cabinet department, known for the “soft sell,” is ill-suited to lead a comprehensive ideological campaign to counter the radical Islamist threat. Work that used to be handled by professional USIA officers is now being executed by career diplomats who are typically less enthusiastic about the mission. In his recent book, *War Footing*, Frank Gaffney strongly states that political warfare “must not be assigned to our diplomats.”⁶⁵ As with the Department of Defense, it’s an issue of credibility. Can a State Department that oversees a public information program that includes covert elements and propaganda still maintain credibility within its primary mission of traditional diplomacy? After World War II, it took seven years for the Chief Executive to determine that he needed an agency separate from the State Department to oversee

America's information programs. It's taking this administration a little longer to reach the same, inevitable conclusion.

Evaluating the Candidates: The National Security Council

But what about the NSC? The DSB and other prestigious think tanks advocate that they are the logical entity to execute strategic oversight of interagency efforts. However, a widespread opinion is that the NSC has not been "provided the direction to properly provide for the balance of issues that need to be addressed...nor empowered to coordinate those issues across the Executive Branch."⁶⁶ Additionally, critics contend that the NSC staff tends to focus on the tactical crisis of the week rather than promulgate a long-term, strategic focus, and that it "lacks adequate capacity to conduct integrated, long-range planning for the President."⁶⁷

The NSC attempted to integrate strategic communication between 2002 and 2005 with limited effectiveness. The Strategic Communication Policy Coordinating Committee (PCC), formed in 2002, was co-chaired by the NSC's Special Assistant to the President for Democracy, Human Rights and International Operations and the Department of State's Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. PCC representation was at the Assistant Secretary level. But this PCC was particularly ineffective – the DSB blasted its practical influence as "marginal at best, non-existent at worst."⁶⁸ Why did it fail to produce? One could expand the target and look at the effectiveness of NSC committees over time. The DSB points out that NSC advisors and PCC members come and go. Even when given elegant authorities, their sustained impact has proven weak. In the case of the Strategic Communication PCC, one of the Committee's key leaders, Under Secretary of State Charlotte Beers, abruptly departed during the critical period leading to the initiation of Operation Iraqi Freedom. After Beers' departure, the PCC met on few occasions. When it did meet, its actions were described as "scripted, bureaucratic, non-accomplishing, and ineffective."⁶⁹

The NSC's Strategic Communication PCC was not staffed, structured, resourced or given authority to lead, and ultimately failed to effectively integrate America's message with policy. Based on this track record, it's hard to understand why experts would point

to the NSC as the potential solution to the strategic communication problem set. But if given greater authorities by the President, which would necessitate Congressional legislation, would an NSC-led strategic communication option have potential to succeed? Perhaps, but it would take a major cultural shift for the Bush administration to adopt the level of change advocated by the DSB. The NSC would have to shed its traditional role of preparing decisions for the President, and take a more active part in ensuring government agencies act to bring about the President's intent.

The DSB recommends that the President enable the NSC to lead the strategic communication effort by establishing a permanent communication structure led by a Deputy National Security Advisor (DNSA) for Strategic Communication. The DNSA would chair a high-ranking Strategic Communication Committee (SCC) with members provided from the Departments of State, Defense, and Homeland Security; the Attorney General; the Chief of Staff to the President; the Director of the Office of Management and Budget; the White House Communications Director; the Director of Central Intelligence; the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs; the Director of the Agency for International Development; and the Chairman of the BBG.⁷⁰

So far, not much is new. But the DSB goes on to recommend that the SCC provide program and project direction to a new, Congressionally-mandated, independent, non-profit, non-partisan Center for Strategic Communication. The DSB describes the Center for Strategic Communication as a "hybrid organization modeled on federally funded research and development centers, such as the RAND Corporation, and the National Endowment for Democracy." It would be formed as a tax-exempt private 501(c)(3) corporation, with "authority to provide services to government departments on a cost-recovery basis and contract with academic, commercial, and other non-government organizations."⁷¹

Although innovative, the Center is not a new concept. Others, including the Council on Foreign Relations and The Heritage Foundation, have advocated the need for an organization – independent from government – that could synthesize private sector capabilities found in America's academic, business, media and

non-governmental organization communities.⁷² The Center could: serve as a “heat shield” between the government and controversial projects, become a focal point for private sector involvement in public policy, attract media and other personalities who may not be willing to work directly for the government, and provide more credible messengers for skeptical audiences.⁷³ With Congressional oversight and funding, a non-partisan composition, and status as independent entity, the Center would mitigate the argument that the nation’s strategic communication apparatus is simply a mouthpiece for the current administration. It would make audiences more apt to trust the messenger, and therefore, the message.

The DSB goes on to advocate that to help this committee succeed, that the DNSA have the “right to concur” with personnel chosen to lead major strategic communication operating entities such as the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, the Chairman of the BBG, and the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs. The DSB findings also recommend that the SCC be given authority to plan the work of line agencies in the areas of public diplomacy, public affairs and military information operations, but not direct the execution. Further, the DSB suggests that the DNSA should work with the Director of the Office of Management and Budget to develop strategic communication budget priorities.⁷⁴

The DSB advocates giving a political appointee (the DNSA), who would assume the position without Congressional scrutiny, great latitude in developing budget priorities, influencing senior administration personnel assignments, and prioritizing workloads within the Departments of State and Defense and the White House Communication office. Would the NSC-led effort work in this era of intense interagency turf battles and partisan maneuvering in Congress? With Presidential mandate, and the right person at the helm at the NSC, the answer is “yes.”

But the bigger issue is that any option built around a NSC committee is not structured to create sustained impact over time. The DNSA, as a political appointee, would serve at the pleasure of the President, as would all the high-ranking members of the proposed SCC. There would be few full-time staff members to support the effort. Additionally, even if the current President and NSA agree with the

concept of using the NSC in such a manner, the next President and NSA may not. This body might be able to craft the government's communication strategy and integrate message with current policy, but it is doubtful that it would be able to sustain long-term planning and program execution vital to our success.

Evaluating the Candidates: The Independent Agency

Should the administration look at reinventing the USIA to solve its strategic communication problem? The short answer is "no." Since the 1960s, the USIA's primary mission was producing soft power effects through public diplomacy and international broadcasting. It did not associate with the CIA's covert or Defense Department's overt information operations programs. For better or worse, the USIA's public diplomacy mission is now ensconced within the Department of State; foreign policymakers, implementers and communicators are working to synthesize their activities. "Undoing" the State/USIA merger would cause another disruptive reorganization within the State Department, and it would come with a hefty personnel price tag. Bureaucratic efficiencies gained would be lost, driving up the cost of government in an era where both American political parties are looking for ways to cut Government spending.⁷⁵ International broadcasting, which used to be an important arm of the USIA, has now been set apart from the foreign policy establishment by Congressional mandate to protect their journalistic independence and integrity. As long as the State Department continues on its current path to reinvigorate public diplomacy, there is no need to revisit the USIA issue. Breaking out the government's public diplomacy apparatus and reestablishing it as a separate entity won't solve the government's strategic communication integration problem. It would still leave the "hard power" overt and covert information instruments out of the equation.

There is another independent agency option. If the NSC is not the right choice to lead the strategic communication effort based on its inability to sustain long-term planning and execution, one could advocate using the same organizational components and authorities, but placing the leadership and support structure in a separate, independent executive agency or secretariat. A Director of Central Information (or Strategic Communication), nominated by

the President and approved by Congress, could integrate the nation's communication and information programs, chair or co-chair the NSC Strategic Communication PCC, and provide program direction for the proposed Center for Strategic Communication. The Director and his or her staff would be charged with streamlining efforts across agencies and departments, and assuming a role similar to the NSC as an advisor, synthesizer, and coordinator. Key tasks would include setting priorities, developing communication strategies and executing long-range planning.⁷⁶ With a support staff of permanently assigned government employees, and augmentation from State (which would represent the interests of the BBG), Defense, and Intelligence, the Directorate could sustain long-term initiatives needed to "Win the Long War of Ideas." Its permanently assigned employees would enable this organization to do something the NSC could not - sustain the mission through election cycles and changes of administrations.

For the independent agency option to succeed it must overcome two potential barriers that hampered the USIA in the past: key leader access and interagency cooperation. The Director must have regular access to the President, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense and other top administration officials to ensure "message" merges with "policy." A seat at the NSC table is a must. The agency must also obtain the full cooperation of the White House, State and Defense Departments, and the CIA to ensure all components of strategic communication are integrated, to include public diplomacy, public affairs, and covert and overt information operations. Should the Director expect such cooperation? One could make an argument that today's interagency is different than that of past eras. The events of 9/11 have taught us that stovepiped organizations and turf battles do not help to solve complex government problems. The national security agencies are working together as never before. Studies indicate that over the last four years, the Defense and State Departments and the NSC have been willing partners to improve our strategic communication capabilities. It would not be a huge leap of logic to infer that they would work together in the future to achieve a common goal - to improve America's ability to communicate our policies and interests by influencing, educating and informing audiences around the world.

This option does have its drawbacks. First, critics might state that because this agency would be charged with planning strategies to use both “hard” and “soft” power, it would likely be seen in the eyes of many as a propaganda manager. That’s true. But counter-propaganda is a necessary tool in the national arsenal in an era where our adversaries aggressively use propagandistic methods to forward their extremist agenda. Better to have an agency that can plan strategies to wage ideological warfare than to designate the Department of State or the Department of Defense as the lead agency, placing those organizations in a position where their credibility is compromised in the eyes of the press, the American people, and with nations and publics abroad.

Second, the Center for Strategic Communication, as defined by the DSB, would likely not gain the same participation from private agencies due to the “propaganda taint” to which this organization would be vulnerable. Another option would be to form a Corporation for Public Diplomacy, led by the Department of State, which would accommodate those organizations that would rather align themselves with the members of the national communication team who wield “soft power.”

Third, the BBG would not look favorably on aligning themselves with an agency that includes “hard power” players. Norman Pattiz, a member of the BBG since 2000 and the driving force behind the recently-created Radio Sawa and Alhurra Television projects, argues that any attempt to place the BBG within a structure that includes the CIA, Defense Department and State Department would have a “chilling effect” on the notion that its broadcasts were impartial and independent.⁷⁷ The government would be best served with the BBG maintaining its “arm’s distance” relationship through the Department of State.

The Road Ahead

The analysis suggests that the President, in coordination with Congress, should establish an independent agency or executive secretariat led by a Director of Strategic Communication, who would chair a high-ranking Strategic Communication Committee, and provide program and project direction to a Congressionally-mandated, independent, non-profit, non-partisan Center for Strategic Communication. It

would create an organization with focus, flexibility, and longevity that could incorporate both “hard” and “soft” information power elements without breaching firewalls designed to protect and preserve institutional credibility within government, particularly the Departments of State and Defense. With increased emphasis on public diplomacy at the State Department, unprecedented focus and resourcing on information operations within the Department of Defense, innovative new broadcast programs initiated by the BBG, our government agencies have proven that they understand the need to act now to solve America’s image problem in the world. But there is clearly much work still to be done.

At the top of the list is a Presidential directive assigning roles and missions to the interagency to synchronize all components of strategic communication and provide a foundation for new legislation to coordinate, conduct and fund the effort. Strategic communication cuts across the lines of operation in the Washington bureaucracy. If we are to unite public diplomacy, public affairs, international broadcasting and information operations under a single information strategy, it will take Presidential guidance to do it. Whether the designated lead is an independent agency or the Department of State (where the mission currently resides) President Bush needs to enforce his decision with written guidance that provides tasking authority, and direction to enact new Congressional legislation to fund strategic communication programs to wield this important instrument of national security and foreign policy. It is ironic that the United States “spends about \$30 billion annually on intelligence to find out what others are thinking throughout the world, but only \$1 billion on trying to shape those thoughts.”⁷⁸

The Defense Science Board sums it up this way:

For sixty years strategic communication planning and coordination has been ephemeral and usually treated with indifference. The United States can no longer afford a repetitious pattern of hollow authorities, ineffectual committees, and stifling turf battles... There is no such thing as a “perfect” planning and coordinating structure. The success or failure of new structures ultimately will be the people involved. But substance and structure are integrally related. Good organizations can help shape good outcomes.⁷⁹

If we are engaged in a “Long War of Ideas,” the problems we face today will be with us well into the future. The time to transform our information institutions in order to project our influence is now.

