
A Critical Analysis of the US Government's Current Perception Management Efforts

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Editorial Abstract: *Maj Martemucci describes divergent US strategic messaging efforts, highlighting findings from critical assessments originating from three separate areas of government—each calling for prompt action. He offers recommendations for a single executive level Director of Strategic Communication with both proper authorities and appropriate interagency relationships. (This article is derived from his full thesis, available at <http://handle.dtic.mil/100.2/ADA468873>)*

September 11 was a watershed event for US Public Diplomacy and the subsequent rethinking of the role of Perception Management (PM)/Information Operation (IO) across all areas of national power. US State Department Middle Eastern specialist Christopher Ross opined, "In the 10 years between the Cold War and September 11, we had forgotten about the outside world." The harsh anti-American rhetoric and images that quickly began to overtake initial responses of international sympathy and support, he said, "showed us what people think of us, and we were shocked." Americans should not have been shocked, however, considering the US retreat from Public Diplomacy and Perception Management over the previous decade. A review of strategic and operational attempts to refocus the informational element of national power post-September 11th reinforces the three reasons for the Government's inability to leverage the informational element of power: politics and personalities, bureaucracy, and a historical/institutional aversion to the effective use of mass media.

Strategic Direction

The initial reaction by the White House after the 9/11 attacks was to stand up the temporary Coalition Information Center (CIC). This was very much reactionary, both in the way it was established and in the manner in which it operated. CIC was established to counter Taliban and Al Qaeda disinformation regarding the war in Afghanistan. By its very nature it was on the defensive, acting as the "rapid response team" to address propaganda put out by the newly identified enemy. It operated as a tactical entity rather than a long-term strategy-making body.

Also in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, President Bush appointed Madison Avenue advertising powerhouse Charlotte Beers as the Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. Moving into a position which had been vacant for the first nine months of the Bush administration, Ms Beers approached the problem as an advertising campaign. But, as Safford argued as early as 1953, "Psychological or political propaganda is not the same as advertising." Ms Beers drew criticism from those who argued that even an unsophisticated foreign audience would immediately recognize and reject such directed marketing. Reports claim she was "shunned by her

department," and her tenure lasted only 17 months. The office once again went unfilled by a primary Undersecretary after her abrupt departure in March 2003.

While the CIC was still reacting to a relatively effective terrorist propaganda machine, the White House created the Combating Terrorism Information Strategy Policy Coordinating Committee (PCC) in July 2002. This was followed less than two months later by the creation of the Strategic Communication PCC. Both NSC-level committees were charged with creating a national strategic communications strategy. Established for the first time by the Bush administration, NSC PCCs are responsible for the management of national security policies and are the main day-to-day forums for interagency coordination of national policy. Unfortunately, they wield no authoritative power to direct any one or combination of agencies to act. The Strategic Communications PCC drafted a national communication strategy, but never issued it before the organization was dissolved six months later in March 2003.

Still without a national communications strategy 15 months after the 9/11 attacks, the White House office created the Office of Global Communications (OGC) in January of 2003. Created by executive order, the OGC formalized the ad hoc CIC. The order is clear in its mandate:

The office shall coordinate the formulation among appropriate agencies of messages that reflect the strategic communications framework and priorities of the United States, and shall facilitate the development of a strategy among the appropriate agencies to effectively communicate such messages.

Almost four years after it was given this mandate, the OGC has yet to produce a national communications strategy. With previously described historical case studies in mind, it becomes clear that a long-term National Perception Management strategy is critical for the coordination of interagency efforts. Without it, the myriad efforts of multiple government entities work inefficiently at best. At worst, countervailing efforts can lead to "Perception Management fratricide" or even real casualties in the nation's military conflicts.

State Department Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, Karen Hughes, headed the Department's strategic communication efforts from 2005-2007. Her position as a department Undersecretary, however, did not make her

effective in the interagency arena. In addition to a relatively small staff, she had no budgetary authority over public diplomacy officers in the department or embassies.

Without budgetary authority, Hughes position as undersecretary was crippled from the start. In recognition of the continued gap in interagency coordination, President Bush replaced the Strategic Communication PCC with the newly-created Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication PCC in April 2006 and made Karen Hughes its chairperson. Like the OGC before it—which Hughes is largely credited with creating—this PCC has not yet (as of 2007) produced a national communications strategy.

Review of Operational-Level Perception Management Strategy in the “Long War”

The Department of Defense is by no means immune from the Perception Management struggles faced by the rest of the Government. In fact, the institutional friction between the media and the Government is nowhere more pronounced than in the Defense Department.

In the post-9/11 confusion and amidst a lack of strategic direction and interagency coordination, the Pentagon created the Office of Strategic Influence (OSI) on October 30, 2001. The OSI was doomed to early failure after unsubstantiated accusations were made that it would plant false stories in the foreign press. The OSI was brought down in a barrage of criticism from within by US Government critics and from without by the American media. The “OSI debacle” serves as an example of the power of perceptions.

Perceptions, rather than reality, were enough to doom an organization to failure before it even started. The OSI serves as an example of a wartime organization that died from wounds not inflicted by an external enemy, but rather by governmental and nongovernmental forces within the United States. Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith built the OSI to serve as the coordinator of a strategic information campaign in support of the war on terrorism. This office “was to develop a full spectrum influence strategy that would result in greater foreign support of US goals and repudiation of terrorists and their methods.” It was ostensibly established to provide strategic oversight and coordination to the traditionally tactical application of military IO, namely PSYOP (radio/TV broadcast and print operations). However, the OSI came under almost immediate attack by the press as well as public affairs officials in various government departments. Public affairs branches of other government agencies and departments (even within the DOD PA community) were concerned that, at best, a lack of

coordination between them and the OSI could lead to confusing and contradictory messages which would damage the overall government Perception Management effort. At worst, they feared a loss of government PA credibility and negative press coverage based on perceived OSI disinformation efforts.

However, the immediate and universally negative reaction to the creation of the OSI by the domestic press brought about its disillusion, only a week after news of its creation was widely reported. Unfounded accusations were the chum in the water. It was not long before the sharks began to circle, and in four weeks the office was dead. Secretary Rumsfeld announced on February 26, 2002 that the “office has clearly been so damaged that it is pretty clear to me that it could not function effectively.” Perceptions became reality, and with no one managing perceptions from within the Pentagon, failure was inevitable. All this happened with no enemy involvement—making this another instance of American Perception Management fratricide.

The OSI debacle illustrates two of the three challenges that

form the theme of this article, that politics & personality and the adversarial government-media relationship hinder an effective Perception Management campaign. A tactical example from Operation Iraqi Freedom illustrates the third.

As a battalion commander responsible for sector security in Baghdad in 2005, US Army Lieutenant Colonel Robert Roth built a relationship with a local leader with known ties to insurgent elements. This relationship was paying

dividends for the American battalion in terms of information and enemy understanding (reinforcing the maxim “Keep your friends close and your enemies closer...”). Without his knowledge or prior coordination, forces of another US Government agency snatched this local leader, whom they had listed as an insurgent worthy of capture, in a nighttime raid.

The local Iraqis in Lieutenant Colonel Roth’s sector saw him as the face of the American military administration. They were shocked and angered by the nighttime arrest and asked him how the captured leader could be a friend of the Coalition one day and be arrested the next. Despite efforts to contact the US Government agency that arrested the Iraqi leader, LTC Roth was unable to get any answers. This operation shook up the neighborhood, sent mixed messages to the local population, damaged LTC Roth’s credibility, and eliminated any chance he had in succeeding in his endeavor to gain the trust of the local populace.

Interagency confusion is not unique to this or any war, but in this age of instant communication and more rapid



*Operational level perception management in practice.
(Defense Link)*

information flow, the need for close coordination to manage perceptions has never been more important. At the tactical, operational, and strategic levels, the lack of a unified Perception Management campaign with commonly understood tasks, effects, objectives, and end states, can adversely affect the accomplishment of America's long-term goals.

These examples, from both the strategic and tactical levels of operation, underscore the importance of politics & personality. They also highlight the frictions caused by an adversarial government-media relationship. Finally, they illustrate that bureaucracy is not confined to the Washington, D.C. Beltway—soldiers must battle the “Interagency Bureaucracy Leviathan” on the streets of Iraq. Despite honest efforts by well intentioned leaders and government employees, all of these factors continue to hinder an effective Perception Management campaign.

The informational element of power may be the most elusive for the US Government to wield, but its importance is proportional to its difficulty. Viewing the Perception Management problem through the lens of three specific reports, originating from three separate areas of the US Government, we can clearly identify both the difficulty in achieving a coordinated Perception Management strategy and the necessity for it. These documents identify the problem of America's strategic direction, in terms of both the overall “War of Ideology,” and the Perception Management policies in that war. While distinct in their viewpoint and recommendations, the reports all agree that a partial solution lies in a presidential-level direction to refocus the efforts of the interagency community with respect to the national Perception Management strategy. The reports reveal several consistent themes in their analysis:

- Informational element of power receives significantly less attention than other traditional elements of power
- A unified strategic direction is critical for the successful employment of the informational element of national power
- Current US Government informational efforts are tactical and reactionary and are not producing results
- PM campaigns can only be effective when their application is nested in a series of mutually supporting plans tied to a central, long-term Perception Management strategy

The 2004 DSB Report on Strategic Communication

In September of 2004, the Defense Science Board (DSB) Task Force on Strategic Communication published its report, which found that US strategic communication “lacks sustained presidential direction, effective interagency coordination, optimal private sector partnerships, and adequate resources.” Among its recommendations, the DSB Task Force urged the President to establish a permanent strategic communication structure within the NSC, headed by a Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communication. It also recommended he work with Congress to create legislation and funding for a Strategic Communication Committee within the NSC and an independent, non-profit, non-partisan Center for Strategic Communication. Of these recommendations, only that to

create an NSC Strategic Communications Committee has been implemented. This article shows however, that a committee of equals without an authoritative director is a recipe for inaction. The previous analysis of the Strategic Communication Committee reveals that it has yet to deliver the product it was created to produce. The DSB report argues that “A unifying vision of strategic communication starts with Presidential direction. Only White House leadership, with support from Cabinet secretaries and Congress, can bring about the sweeping reforms that are required.” It shares this finding, that an orchestrated interagency Perception Management campaign must be led by strong White House direction, with the other two reports cited below.

The DSB Task Force also recognized that the current interagency environment is large, insular, and heavily dependent on the strength of key personalities. The report targeted the ineffectiveness of the government structures created in the wake of 9/11, when it stated:

Unlike previous coordinating mechanisms with nominal authority, this Strategic Communications Committee should have the authority to assign responsibilities and plan the work of 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.

Giving an individual or committee the power to direct other government elements is a necessary step, but it cannot guarantee success. In its references to the success of the former US Information Agency (USIA) in its advisory role to the President and NSC, for example, the DSB conceded that its effectiveness was linked to its proximity to key decision makers. Its report recognized that “the degree of participation depended almost always on personal relations between a President and a [USIA] Director.” This recommendation harkens back to the importance of former directors George Creel, Edward R. Murrow, and Charles Wick—and their access to power in the government.

The report also emphasizes the importance of long-term planning, stating that even if all its recommendations are implemented, we are dealing with at least a decade to have a significant impact. In a complementary train of thought, the report argues that the highest levels of Perception Management operations in the US Government (i.e. the NSC, the Office of Global Communication and the Undersecretary of State for Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy) must get away from tactical actions and focus on long-term strategy.

With respect to the Office of Global Communications, the DSB report asserts that despite its charter to develop and coordinate a strategic direction for Perception Management, “the OGC evolved into a second tier organization devoted principally to tactical public affairs coordination. The OGC does not engage in strategic direction, coordination, or evaluation.” This problem is not unique to the OGC. As

illustrated by examples in this article, the speed and complexity of the current informational terrain combined with institutional and individual friction at the highest levels had left the US Government in a reactive, vice proactive stance.

The 2003 Djerejian Report

Representing a comparably diplomacy-centric view, the 2003 *Report of the Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World*—known as the Djerejian report—made a series of recommendations to overhaul what it called an inadequate public diplomacy apparatus. The report made nine major recommendations, supporting a three-part theme of dramatically increased strategic (specifically presidential) focus, increased funding for information programs designed to reach foreign (specifically Muslim) audiences, and an increased interagency coordination to support the new strategic direction for US public diplomacy.

Most importantly, the Djerejian report focused on responsibility at the executive level, and it identified the President, specifically through the NSC, as the central coordinator of all Perception Management efforts. The report argues Public Diplomacy requires “a new strategic direction—informed by a seriousness and commitment that matches the gravity of our approach to national defense and traditional state-to-state diplomacy.” Recognizing that the effort will only succeed if driven from the top, the report recommends the creation of a cabinet-level Counselor to the President. Stating that the current structure is “strictly tactical [and] inadequate to meet the demands of public diplomacy today,” the report recommends “a new strategic architecture, headed by an eminently qualified person who has the President’s ear.”

The Djerejian report also addressed the interagency struggle, and it specifically outlined the challenges of interagency balance in the current overseas effort. “While the State Department is generally considered the lead agency in public diplomacy,” the report states, “the Defense Department dominates public diplomacy in Iraq—the most immediate battleground in the struggle for ideas.” In its recognition that the Defense Department has a clear role in public diplomacy due to its obvious and pervasive influence of the populations it directly influences, the commission stated that the Defense Department “Must be more closely tied to the reinforced strategic direction and coordination that we propose.” The report reveals an acceptance of the reality that under the current paradigm of the “Long War,” DOD is currently the dominant actor in US global engagement. The authors of the report were justifiably concerned that unilateral planning and action by one dominant element of national power prevents the effective synergies that can arise from coordinated interagency operations.

The 2005 GAO Report on Public Diplomacy

The third analysis came from the US Government Accountability Office (GAO) in 2005. The GAO report found further evidence of a lack of effective interagency coordination, succinctly summarized in its title: *US Public Diplomacy—Interagency Coordination Efforts Hampered by the Lack of a National Communication Strategy*. It stated that since 11 September 2001, the creation of additional coordinators and committees at the highest levels of US government did little to coordinate interagency efforts.

The report identified that the President’s executive order creating the Office of Global Communications in 2003 had not yet been implemented fully. It stated that because the Office of Global Communications had not developed a National communication strategy, “Agencies have developed their own roles and missions and coordinated their activities on an ad-hoc basis.” The report echoed the Defense Science Board’s 2004 finding that the Office of Global Communications has “evolved

into a second-tier organization devoted principally to tactical public affairs coordination,” and stated that the Defense Department reports were “an attempt by the department to fill the planning void left by the lack of strategic direction from the White House.” Specifically, the GAO report recommended the full implementation of the role envisioned for the office, including the development of a national communications strategy to guide and coordinate the efforts of the State Department, Defense Department, and other agencies. In its report, the GAO concluded that:

[The] State [Department] lacks a comprehensive and commonly understood public diplomacy strategy to guide the implementation of programs.... Furthermore, there is no interagency public diplomacy strategy to guide State’s and all federal agencies’ consistent messages to overseas audiences and thus achieve mutually reinforcing benefits. ... [T]he disparate efforts by individual agencies and departments could result in Perception Management fratricide.

The report by no means singled out the White House or State Department for criticism—the Defense Department received equally poor marks. Simply put, the military application of informational power has remained at the operational and tactical levels, predominantly as relatively narrowly defined psychological operations. The report notes:

Historically, DOD has been reluctant to define any of its activities in public diplomacy terms, though the department has begun to develop a “defense support for public diplomacy” strategy, which acknowledges that the department has a role to play in this arena.

When placed along side the two other reports, the GAO report completes the picture of the current problem: there is





Interagency cooperation on the tarmac: US State and Defense Department senior leadership visit Baghdad. (Defense Link)

still no single individual or office with the power to control the direction of the National Perception Management campaign. All three reports offer either an outline of a Perception Management process or specific elements of a public relations strategy. They offer recommendations that mirror very closely the process undertaken by any reputable public relations firm or well-run political campaign. Why, as the Djerejian report asks, can the White House put together a well-orchestrated campaign to research, enact, and “sell” a domestic program with a good PM campaign, yet fail so miserably in a larger international campaign to dissuade negative public opinions that can lead to violence against the US? This question has no easy answer. There are obvious differences from a short term political campaign. The first is an issue of scope. A Perception Management campaign on a global scale necessarily involves the synchronization of all elements of national power, not to mention coordination among disparate and far-flung elements of government from the strategic to the tactical levels. The second is an issue of time; namely the long-term nature of a national Perception Management campaign. A political campaign, for example, has a definite beginning and end. Even presidencies have a finite time frame mandated by law. A national Perception Management campaign to change the will of an enemy combatant (at least) and world opinion to be more favorable to the United States (at most) is, on the other hand, a task that may take generations. Nevertheless, the difficulties posed by such a campaign are not a justifiable reason to not undertake the effort.

The three reports are strikingly similar, not only in their recommendations but also in the sense of urgency they convey in the need for solutions. All three reports call for increased presidential-level leadership to elevate the informational element of power to a level commensurate with the other elements of power and appropriate to the current strategic environment. All three call current government efforts tactical and reactionary.

All agree a partial solution lies in a presidential-level direction to refocus the efforts of the interagency community with respect to the national Perception Management strategy. Two of the three recommend a cabinet-level counselor or advisor for Strategic Communication to the President.

While all three reports focus on the strategic level of government, it is clear that the implications are far-reaching and affect operational and tactical actions in the “Long War.” In the arena of Perception Management, operational-level actions are inextricably linked to strategic direction. Operational-level actions, whether they be military, economic, diplomatic, or informational, can only work when they tightly coordinate with and reinforce the national strategic Perception Management campaign.

Recommendations

Andrew Garfield’s observation bears repeating: “It is a paradox of our time that both the public and politicians are prepared to tolerate the use of bombs and bullets, but shy away from the use of information as a weapon of war.” History reveals that previous administrations have used Perception Management campaigns successfully in the past. These successes were, of course, relative and difficult to achieve. They happened despite the ever present and easily recognized frictions of politics & personalities, bureaucracy, and historical/institutional aversion to the effective use of mass media.

America’s strategic direction in terms of both the “Long War” and its Perception Management policies in that war shows clear weaknesses. A historical review and analysis of the current environment have shown that American policies and the global perceptions associated with them cannot be separated. Because they are inextricably linked and because Perception Management is so important, the two must be managed together in a unified direction. This direction can only (and must) come from the White House.

The burden lies with the President. As US chief diplomat and military Commander in Chief, he must place a priority on the Perception Management campaign to support the prosecution of the Long War. As head of the executive branch—with the authority to designate relationships of authority—he must give the person entrusted with implementation the power and authority to not only coordinate, but also direct the disparate elements of national power. Only then can the national Perception Management campaign achieve the operational synergy required to be an effective part of the National Security Strategy.

Personalities and their placement do matter. Today, we have no George Creel, no Wild Bill Donovan, no Edward R. Murrow. To this end, the administration must consider the collective recommendations of the reports cited and install a single “Director of Information” to serve as a cabinet-level direct advisor to the President. The title does not matter—the position and authority relative to the Government’s Departmental Secretaries does. This individual must have the authority to direct and coordinate the disparate efforts of the government as they relate to the overall Perception Management Campaign.

This is not a new idea. In 1953 former Assistant Secretary of State Edward Barrett argued for a “Persuader in Chief” who would fit the criteria above and provide authoritative direction to synergize the disparate efforts of the interagency community.

Aside from politics and personalities, institutional bureaucracy is an unavoidable point of friction in an organization the size of the US Government. Departments and agencies pay lip service to interagency coordination in their various strategy documents, but unless they are held accountable by a single overarching director with budgetary and policy authority, Perception Management efforts will remain disjointed at best—and self-defeating at worst. A great deal of friction currently stems from individual agency interpretation of priorities and approaches to PM. While unified executive branch direction will not eliminate inherent interagency friction, a clarified Government Strategic Communication policy for the “Long War” and a unified vision for a National Perception Management campaign will set the conditions for operational success.

With respect to media relationships, the government must take a proactive, vice reactive, stance. The government and its key institutions must get over its aversion to—and fear of—a media that often operates counter to its aims. It is very possible—and quite necessary—to better engage the media in a legal and truthful manner as a key component of the US Perception Management campaign.

It is all too easy to find examples of strained government—and particularly military—media relations. Senior leaders and young Public Affairs officers alike fall back on these examples as justification to not engage in a proactive manner. The media establishment will argue that they are not a tool to be “used” to further the government’s aims, but that is exactly what must happen. The media are the primary means through which the Government exercises the informational element of power. The government must be willing to use the media to engage foreign audiences as readily as it is willing to deploy military forces to foreign lands. This is not to say that these actions should be done deceitfully or illegally. Truthfulness is the only way to achieve credibility, and credibility is essential for effective PM.


The military principle of Offense has been an enduring principle of war for very good reason: one cannot win by simply defending. One must go on the offensive to win. In the war of ideas, as with conventional war, battles cannot be won by simply reacting to enemy attacks. This is what the US Government has done since 9/11, and it is one reason American “soft power” has declined in recent years.

Conclusion

Violent Islamic extremists and others combating US interests with terrorist tactics currently hold the Perception Management high ground. There are four reasons, none of which lend themselves to easy or immediate solutions. First, the enemy is small, agile, and unencumbered by the governmental bureaucracy of a

large nation state. Second, it is not bound by the ethical and cultural mores that prevent the US from responding in kind. Third, the nature of modern commercial mass media gives a disproportionate advantage to those who use acts of spectacular violence as a means to get their message across. Finally, a recent historical legacy of mutual distrust exists between the US government (particularly the military) and the media. This has resulted in a government abrogation of sorts on the use of the press as a medium to combat extremism.

To an observer of current events, these problems may seem insurmountable. The recommendations in this article, too, may seem to some as simply another Government restructuring to deal with the latest problem. A review of history, however, reveals that it is possible to have moments of interagency coordination, clear strategic direction, and nested, integrated, and effective Perception Management operations in support of a larger unified Perception Management campaign. World War I, World War II, and the Cold War all offer examples, however fleeting, of such successes.

The informational element of power may be the most elusive for the Government to wield, but its importance is proportional to its difficulty. Perception Management is more critical now than at any time in America’s history. All who serve in the US Government must strive to synergize their efforts so that America can once again regain the Perception Management high ground. 

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