



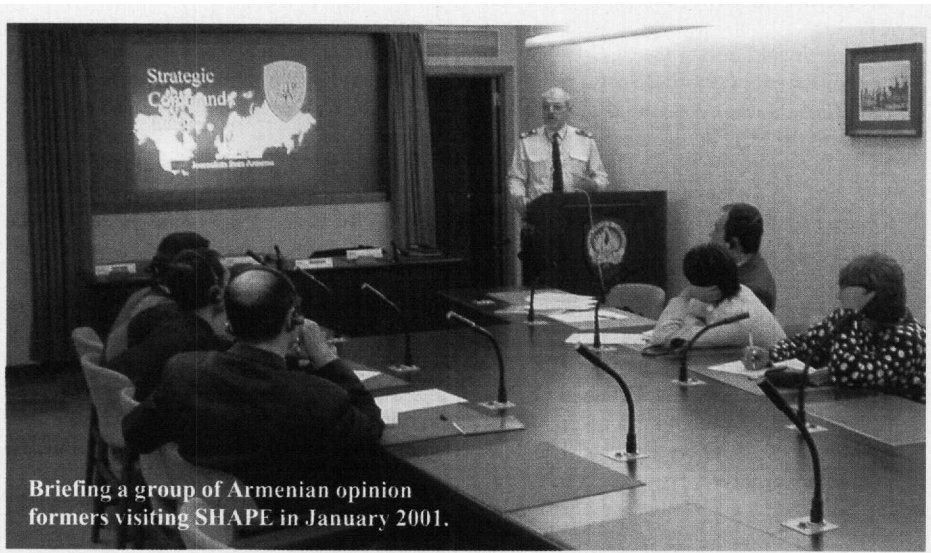
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# SHAPE PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICE

HOW TO DEAL WITH PUBLIC OPINION



Briefing a group of Armenian opinion  
formers visiting SHAPE in January 2001.

It is not an easy undertaking to write something meaningful on public information and public opinion when considering such vast subjects in the relatively narrow scope of “50 years of NATO’s integrated military structure.” Communicating with the public is one of the oldest professions:

- Thousands of years ago, cave dwellers drew pictures on walls. They did not do this only for their entertainment, but undoubtedly also to communicate with others – and we are still trying to read their messages today.
- Moses found a way to make known to his people the Ten Commandments, and nowadays they are common knowledge and spread worldwide.
- In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the Norwegian King Olaf had bards in his army so that they could witness his military strength and inform and impress people about it in their songs and stories.
- Catherine the Great defined publicity as an art of government, and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century practically all European states had established information offices and regarded informing the public as an important function.

I cannot go into the varied definitions of public *opinion* since this debate seems artificial – like the discussions about the castle poltergeist: nobody has seen him, but everyone is afraid of him. However, public *information* plays a valuable role in reducing the “fear of the poltergeist” since this concern often stems purely from wrong perceptions and unreasonable attitudes.

In fact, when elaborating on “public opinion,” it is justified to state that public information, or published information, contributes to *forming* opinions rather than to *dealing* with them. In a democracy, the mature citizen decides, he is the “political sovereign.” With his vote, he determines his legislature or parliament and, consequently, his governmental administration. From this individual citizen all public authority emanates. But he can make prudent sovereign decisions only if he is well informed. Therefore, all government institutions are obliged to provide the citizen with information. Indeed, it is in the government’s best interests to do so and military organisations are not immune to that. This is the political-legal *MUST* for Public Information. Thus, public information officers are found in all NATO countries’ armed forces and public information offices are established within the NATO international structure at all levels. The taxpayer is interested and should know what is done with his money. The taxpayer should be assured that the military spends it in a reasonable way. In other words, public information is not only to enhance public knowledge but also to create a climate of understanding and, ultimately, support.

Public information, as we know it in NATO, is a communication process where a powerful transmitter is put up, the right frequency is chosen and a message is broadcast



in hopes of reaching the desired audience. The end result can be a public that is more receptive to the message and, thus, the organisation. Public information is a powerful tool that for 50 years has been recognised and effectively used by SHAPE.

Just hours after taking command of NATO's newly formed Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, the first SACEUR, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, held a press conference. The press conference with the assembled international journalists wasn't added to his daily agenda in an effort to occupy the new SACEUR's time. On the contrary, this man – charged with building and leading a multinational military power to help provide peace and security in Europe – had many demands on his time, but he understood the importance of communicating with the public.

Communicating with the diverse international audiences is as important to SHAPE today as it was on that first day 50 years ago with General Eisenhower. Despite rapid advances in technology that have modified delivery methods, the basic tenet of the SHAPE Public Information Office remains unchanged: to present SHAPE to the world. Never before have so many options existed for people to keep themselves informed: 24-hour news channels, the Internet, direct-feed wireless devices and a plethora of radio broadcasts. The public demand for news and information is almost insatiable. The Information Age and technology advances also, however, enable SHAPE PIO to reach audiences faster and more directly than ever before.

SHAPE PIO is organised into four main sections and three sub-cells to provide SACEUR, SHAPE staff and subordinate Allied Command Europe headquarters with varied support functions related to the full spectrum of public communication.

The office provides direct counsel to SACEUR and senior SHAPE officers regarding media relations. This is accomplished primarily through our *Media Section*, one of PIO's two public outreach tools. The Media Section acts as a liaison between news outlets and SHAPE to help ensure the accurate and timely delivery and presentation of public information. The section's work includes assisting journalists to schedule and conduct interviews with SHAPE subject-matter experts, and seeking opportunities to reach the general public or particular audiences through the media. Digital photography, Internet applications and satellite communications combine to enhance and improve the section's effectiveness.

The *SHAPE Officers' Association (SOA)* is administered as a sub-cell of the Media Section. The SOA is a vibrant organisation of 1,800 officers currently or formerly assigned



**NATO's Supreme Commander Europe, General Joseph W. Ralston speaks to Czech press in Prague in January 2001.**

in building public understanding and trust in NATO, especially among the public in former Warsaw Pact countries.

Lastly, the Public Information

Office's *Executive Cell* provides leadership and administrative support for the sections. Included in this section is our dual-hatted deputy chief of public information, who also acts as the SACEUR's special assistant for US-specific public information matters. The executive cell is also responsible for SHAPE's presence on the World Wide Web. The site is an important means for us to reach a growing segment of the population that increasingly relies on the Internet for news and information.

These various sections, with personnel from 13 NATO countries, work in complete harmony, each adding capability to the other and together enabling us to meet the goal of reaching the world's public with news and information about SHAPE.

NATO's missions in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo are vivid illustrations of the importance of public information efforts. PIO assists the commanders in reaching the local populations while simultaneously keeping the worldwide population informed of the missions' progress. During Operation Allied Force, the NATO air operation over Yugoslavia, PIO played an important role in providing accurate information to the world in the face of fierce propaganda and misinformation campaigns mounted by President Milosevic.

General Eisenhower's scheduling of a press conference during his first hours as SACEUR showed his understanding of what remains true today: communication with the public is vital to SHAPE's success. Allied Command Europe has an all NATO nations-agreed document, ACE Directive 95-1, "Public Information Operations", in which it is stated: "Public Information is a function of command." All ACE public information officers join SHAPE PIO in supporting this principle and in making communication a reality.

