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The Demise of the Office of Strategic Influence

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On 19 February 2002, the New York Times published an article by James Dao and Eric Schmitt entitled “A Nation Challenged: Hearts and Minds; Pentagon Readies Efforts to Sway Sentiment abroad.” In this report, the authors stated, “The Pentagon is developing plans to provide news items, possibly even false ones, to foreign media organizations as part of a new effort to influence public sentiment and policy makers in both friendly and unfriendly countries.”¹ This article ignited a print and broadcast media outcry resulting in the Department of Defense shutting down the Office of Strategic Influence (OSI) just four months after the organization was established. The OSI set out to address a critical need in the global war on terrorism, but met an untimely demise due to timing challenges and turf battles in the policy coordination process. This paper will examine the factors surrounding the decision to terminate the OSI by addressing the organization’s mission, key players, staff processes and decisions.

The Mission

The Office of Strategic Influence was established in November of 2001 and reported to the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, Douglas J. Feith. Specifically, this small office operated out of the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict. In describing the OSI at a press conference, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld stated, “The OSI, under Feith’s purview, was created last November to aid U.S. efforts to influence countries overseas to help or at least support the war against global terrorism.”² Undersecretary Feith hired Air Force Brigadier General Simon P. Worden to be the OSI Director. During an interview, Gen Worden described the initial efforts of the OSI, to include development of an organizational charter and campaigns for strategic influence. “The OSI plan was first designed to use information tools to interdict recruitment of young terrorists. Second, it

aimed to undermine anti-United States regimes through providing unfettered public access to global information. Finally, it was designed to reverse negative perceptions of the United States and its goals throughout the world, not just the Islamic world.”³ While the Department of Defense (DoD) has employed information and psychological operations extensively at the tactical level in past conflicts, this initiative sought to support the global war on terrorism through a coordinated, long-term influence campaign at the strategic level.

The Players

Following the tragic events of September 11th 2001, elements of the U.S. government prepared to fight the global war on terrorism. In addition to the direct staff in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) that stood up this new office, key players in the interagency were involved, including the National Security Council, the Department of State, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Joint Staff. The role of each of these players and the interplay with the OSI will be described in more detail in the following paragraphs.

During his interview, Gen Worden provided a copy of a document he authored titled “Information War: Strategic Influence and the Global War on Terrorism.” In this document he describes the role of the National Security Council: “Although the interagency working group to address these issues had been in existence since late September 2001, a formal structure to address what can best be described as the national information war emerged in November with the appointment of retired General Wayne Downing as the National Security Council Director for Counterterrorism.”⁴ Further, “The group’s purpose was to coordinate information and influence operations across the U.S. Government, and later operated in parallel with a public diplomacy and public affairs interagency group set up in late February 2002 under White House Communications Director Karen Hughes.”⁵ During our discussion, Gen Worden emphasized all

the OSI plans and activities were coordinated with this group and its other participants including the State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Joint Staff and others.⁶

The Department of State (DoS) is the government's lead agency for U.S. public diplomacy. Following the Cold War, the U.S. Information Agency's responsibilities for providing information to foreign audiences were integrated into the State Department. Despite this lead role, one report estimated, "The State Department's public-diplomacy department took about a 40 percent hit in funding between 1991 and 2001."⁷ Following September 11th, the State Department began to reinvigorate this effort by hiring Ms. Charlotte Beers, a Madison-Avenue advertising executive, as the Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy. Mr. Arnold Abraham, a DoD civilian who worked in OSI, stated during an interview, "The State Department public diplomacy office loved the OSI initiatives because the State Department's diplomacy office was vastly under resourced and under appreciated."⁸ This support was captured in a news report that stated, "To Beers credit...she took a positive approach to OSI's clandestine and semisecret operations plans, worked cooperatively with the OSI leadership and signed off on its early operations."⁹

In contrast to the State Department, Gen Worden's organization received little support from the Joint Staff and unified commands.¹⁰ While planning is a key strength the Joint Staff could bring to the OSI's efforts, in late 2001 the Joint Staff was focused on the war in Afghanistan. To support information operations in Operation Enduring Freedom, the Joint Staff had recently established the Information Operations Task Force. General Richard Myers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, described the responsibilities of the task force during a February 2002 hearing with the House Armed Services Committee as "Developing, coordinating, deconflicting and monitoring the delivery of timely, relevant and effective

messages to targeted international audiences.”¹¹ Despite the parallels to the OSI initiatives, Gen Worden indicated the Joint Staff and unified commanders were resistant to dedicating additional resources to support development of a broader strategic information campaign for the war on terrorism.¹²

The Congress played only a limited role with respect to the OSI and only after the attention following the New York Times article. Since the OSI was resourced from existing OSD manpower and received funding from a broader supplemental appropriation, there was little direct congressional oversight in the short tenure of this organization. Following the Times article, Senator Carl Levin, Senior Democrat on the Armed Services Committee, sent a letter to Secretary Rumsfeld seeking more information on the purpose of the office.¹³

The Process

As a new organization within the OSD staff, the OSI had to begin functioning by not only immersing itself within the interagency, but also establishing itself as a viable staff organization within OSD. To examine how the OSI set out to operate, it’s important to examine in more detail how the organization was established and the corresponding sequence of events.

According to a New Republic article by Franklin Foer, “The OSI’s real purpose—as conceived of by Feith in the weeks after September 11—was to adapt the CIA’s old cold war approach to the Middle East...its mission had already begun to emerge; OSI would address the root ideological cause of terrorism.”¹⁴ Undersecretary Feith hired Gen Worden in late October to execute this mission and Gen Worden began the task of hiring staff from within OSD, obtaining resources, and developing plans. By mid-November, Gen Worden briefed Secretary Rumsfeld. According to Gen Worden, Secretary Rumsfeld was seeking “non-kinetic solutions” for the war

on terror and when Gen Worden completed his briefing on OSI's plans, Secretary Rumsfeld said, "I am pleased."¹⁵ Gen Worden used this support to advocate and gain funding for operations.

Following the briefings in November, the coordination of OSI's charter and campaign plans began. Gen Worden described in our interview a trip to Pakistan that occurred around this same time. Working with the U.S. Ambassador Wendy Chamberlain, the OSI staff sought "to define how the DoD could assist in Pakistan's own commitment to reversing several decades of tilt towards fundamentalist Islam."¹⁶ This trip was part of OSI's "Information Freedom Campaign" designed to use broadcast technologies to improve the flow of information to remote regions. While in Pakistan, the OSI staff visited Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan and the largest province in Pakistan. Meeting with the Baluchi education minister, the staff demonstrated its broadcast satellite radio and its potential for reforming the education system in the region. Gen Worden went on to describe that while in Quetta they drew the attention of an MSNBC reporter staying at the same hotel. Gen Worden agreed to be interviewed by the reporter and the MSNBC article appeared on-line in mid-January. According to Gen Worden, this "resulted in higher visibility within the United States for our efforts, as well as some consternation on the part of many who had hoped our activities would remain low key."¹⁷ To clarify, this trip occurred prior to the OSI having completed OSD coordination of their organization charter and plans.

Shortly after Gen Worden and the OSI staff returned from their overseas trip, bureaucratic resistance to the activities of the OSI began to emerge within the OSD staff. In Gen Worden's assessment, "We were at war, but the bureaucracy did not share this perspective or sense of urgency."¹⁸ Mr. Abraham elaborated on this resistance. He described how five or six packages defining OSI's plans and the charter for the organization were in simultaneous

coordination, but the OSI staff couldn't get the packages signed off.¹⁹ For example, according to Gen Worden's paper, "The DoD legal staff objected that the proposed work was outside conventional DoD areas of responsibility and should therefore be done by other agencies."²⁰ Mr. Abraham described similar concerns raised by the DoD Comptroller. Both issues were resolved after Gen Worden personally briefed the legal and comptroller leadership and convinced them the efforts were militarily relevant and had the support of Secretary Rumsfeld.²¹

The greatest resistance over the activities of the OSI came from the DoD Office of Public Affairs. During our discussion, Mr. Abraham indicated, "Public Affairs raised concern that OSI's initiatives overlapped and conflicted with their mission."²² Gen Worden sought to address these objections by "limiting DoD involvement to hardware and not content support."²³ Similar to the other directorates within OSD, Gen Worden personally briefed Victoria Clarke, the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs. Despite the efforts of Gen Worden and his staff, he was not convinced Assistant Secretary Clarke's concerns were resolved.²⁴ Recounting the timeline of this coordination effort, Mr. Abraham said within days of this briefing the story about the OSI appeared on the front page of the Times and in his opinion, "What killed it (OSI) was the overall process. When it looked like OSI was going to make it through the bureaucracy, someone went outside the internal process and leaked it."²⁵

The Decision

Following the leak and the subsequent 19 February 2002 New York Times article, the media blitz ensued. It's interesting to note that in the 1400-word Times article, there are 16 references to "senior pentagon official" or "senior military official," yet no sources were identified. More critical reporting subsequently pointed directly to Assistant Secretary Clarke as the source of the leak. For example, a New Republic article highlighted a memo to Gen Worden

in which Clarke expressed concerns over plans to establish an education initiative with Pakistan. The report indicated she wrote “I do not concur with the current plan’s tools and tactics since they would play into the hands of our adversaries by providing evidence of a controlling, biased education system.’...OSI would undermine ‘the trust, credibility and transparency of our access to media.’”²⁶ This article went on to say that, “Amid the ensuing fury, Clarke did almost nothing to defend the office.”²⁷ This silence was particularly revealing when it came from the Defense Department’s top representative to the media.

A couple of additional factors complicated the furor surrounding the OSI situation. First, the bureaucracy within the Pentagon was in full force. According to Mr. Abraham, following the leak, Gen Worden could never get “in the door” to personally present a way ahead to OSD top leadership. Additionally, Undersecretary Feith was out of town when the story leaked, leaving no one to “carry the fight” on the issue.²⁸ The lack of a response from within OSD was obvious to the media. According to a Washington Times editorial, “The Pentagon, which found itself reeling from the negative publicity surrounding OSI, immediately tried to distance itself from the fiasco.”²⁹

The second complicating factor was the New York Times report broke while President Bush was overseas which angered the White House staff. According to a Washington Post report, “One senior official said whoever leaked the story ‘did a tremendous disservice to the president’ by raising questions about the administration’s credibility while he was overseas.”³⁰ Upon the President’s return from overseas, the topic of the OSI potentially influencing foreign audiences continued to raise questions for the White House as well as the DoD. The New York Times reported, “When asked today whether he had ordered Defense Secretary Donald H.

Rumsfeld to close the office, Mr. Bush said ‘I didn’t even need to tell him this; he knows how I feel. I saw it reflected in his comments the other day.’”³¹

Within a week of the Times article, Undersecretary Feith made the decision to shutdown the Office of Strategic Influence. Speaking during a DoD news brief, Secretary Rumsfeld stated: ...Life’s filled with things like this, and what happened was this office was established in the Department of Defense not for the purposes that the press was bantering about, that it was supposed to do terrible things, illegal things. Quite the contrary, it was established because there’s a very important information function that the Pentagon needs to play...But the net result of it was the office got pounded around so much that it didn’t seem to me like it made an awful lot of sense to try to resuscitate it.³²

To this day, Gen Worden is adamant the New York Times article was off the mark and the OSI had no plans for misinformation in any of their campaign plans.³³ Shortly after the Office of Strategic Influence was shutdown, Gen Worden was reassigned outside the Pentagon and his staff moved to new positions.

The Aftermath

On the heels of the controversy surrounding the short lived Office of Strategic Influence, Secretary Rumsfeld articulated the validity of what the office set out to do stating “...to the extent we need to engage in those kinds of activities, which we do, perfectly legal, perfectly legitimate, nothing to do with misinforming people or the American people or the press, then we’ll do it out of other offices and life goes on.”³⁴ Now two years later, Secretary Rumsfeld’s validated his commitment to this requirement in a 16 October 2003 memo to his staff.

Describing the memo, Bill Gertz of the Washington Times reported

Mr. Rumsfeld suggested a '21st century information agency in the government' to help in the international battle of ideas, to limit the teaching of terrorism and extremism, and to provide better education'... The shock of the September 11 terrorist attacks led to some changes, he said, 'but the natural tendencies of big institutions are to keep doing what they're doing, and to make incremental adjustments.' Iraq and Afghanistan are battles in a bigger war against terrorism, and longer-range strategies are needed he said. Mr. Rumsfeld said a lack of cooperation among government agencies had made long-range strategic planning difficult. 'The hardest things to do are things that are between agencies...' ³⁵

Secretary Rumsfeld's comments clearly summarize his desire for an integrated information campaign and the difficulties in forging consensus within the interagency process amidst the myriad organizations, cultures and interests. While the Department of State is the rightful organization to lead our public diplomacy efforts, the OSI example illustrates the resources and planning capabilities that reside within OSD and the Joint Staff. The OSI emerged in the aftermath of September 11th with a vision for a long-term influence campaign, resources to execute and leadership support at the outset. It's important to reiterate the OSI didn't have a coordinated charter at the time of the media leak. When faced with vocal challenges to the Department's credibility, the decision to terminate the office was clear.

The OSI initiatives were further complicated by the evolving role of information operations within the DoD and the interagency. Information operations include military deception and denial, which have always been integrated into military planning. The DoD and the interagency hadn't resolved how broader, developing roles for information operations overlap, compete and conflict with existing diplomacy, public affairs and public relations efforts.

While attempting to create an integrated strategic approach for the government, the OSI campaign plans potentially blurred the lines between these important, but to date, separate efforts which contributed to the demise of this organization. In addition, the organization's sequencing of events as it emerged detracted from its credibility. In hindsight, although a bureaucracy sometimes appears to stifle progress, it often provides the sequencing framework needed for success. Had the OSI completed its coordination efforts prior to implementing operations like the Pakistani initiatives, it may have been able to better defend itself within the OSD staff.

Summary

Whether leaks to the media are a natural tool of business inside the beltway or a deplorable element of the interagency process is open to debate. What's clear is the media uproar over the reported activities of this fledgling office, factual or otherwise, sealed the fate of the Office of Strategic Influence. While the media was the most visible factor in this decision, there were additional factors that contributed to the decision to shutdown the OSI. First, the sequencing of events in standing up a new organization may directly contribute to the success or failure of an endeavor, as demonstrated by how the OSI was adversely affected by attention drawn to its activities in Pakistan at the same time the organizational charter was being coordinated in the Pentagon. Second, the organization suffered due to bureaucratic turf battles over the overlap between information operations, public affairs and strategic influence. By examining the key elements of this decision, including the players, processes and interagency interplay, we can better understand the considerations that must be addressed to move forward in information operations. If the U.S. is going to win the "war of ideas" in the global war on terrorism, a strategic information campaign based on an integrated interagency solution must be developed and implemented.

Notes

1. James Dao and Eric Schmitt, "A Nation Challenged: Hearts and Minds; Pentagon Readies Efforts to Sway Sentiment Abroad," New York Times, 19 February 2002, 1, Proquest (28 December 2003).
2. Donald Rumsfeld, "Strategic Influence Office 'Closed Down,' says Rumsfeld," FDCH Regulatory Intelligence Database, 26 February 2002, <<http://search.epnet.com/direct.asp?an=32W1944117058&db=mth>>, EPNET (29 December 2003).
3. Simon P. Worden, Martin E.B. France, and Randall R. Correll, "Information War: Strategic Influence and the Global War on Terrorism," (Draft), 6 October 2002, 6.
4. Worden, France, and Correll, 2.
5. Worden, France, and Correll, 2.
6. Brig Gen Simon P. Worden, former Director of the Office of Strategic Influence, interviewed by author, 29 December 2003.
7. Franklin Foer, "Flacks Americana," New Republic, 20 May 2002, 25, <<http://search.epnet.com/direct.asp?an=6671862&db=afh>>, EPNET (29 December 2003).
8. Arnold Abraham, Department of Defense civilian with the former Office of Strategic Influence, interviewed by author, 6 January 2004.
9. J. Michael Waller, "U.S. Message Is Not Getting Out," INSIGHT, 14 April 2003, 2, Lexis-Nexis (24 December 2003).
10. Brig Gen Worden interview, 29 December 2003.
11. Eric Schmitt and James Dao, "A Nation Challenged: Hearts and Minds; A Damaged Information Office is Declared Closed by Rumsfeld," New York Times, 27 February 2002, 4, Proquest (28 December 2003).
12. Brig Gen Worden interview, 29 December 2003.
13. Eric Schmitt, "A Nation Challenged: Hearts and Minds; Bush Seals Fate of Office of Influence in Pentagon," New York Times, 26 February 2002, 17, Lexis-Nexis (24 December 2003).
14. Foer, 28.
15. Brig Gen Worden interview, 29 December 2003.
16. Worden, France, and Correll, 10.
17. Worden, France, and Correll, 12.
18. Brig Gen Worden interview, 29 December 2003.
19. Arnold Abraham interview, 6 January 2004.
20. Worden, France, and Correll, 12.
21. Arnold Abraham interview, 6 January 2004.
22. Arnold Abraham interview, 6 January 2004.
23. Worden, France, and Correll, 13.
24. Brig Gen Worden interview, 29 December 2003.
25. Arnold Abraham interview, 6 January 2004.
26. Foer, 29.
27. Foer, 29.
28. Arnold Abraham interview, 6 January 2004.

29. "Disinformation Nonsense," The Washington Times, 25 February 2002, 20, Lexis-Nexis (24 December 2003).

30. Mike Allen, "White House Angered at Plan for Pentagon Disinformation," Washington Post, 25 February 2002, 17, <<http://foi.missouri.edu/osi/pentagondisinfo.html>>, (3 December 2003).

31. Schmitt, 17.

32. Donald Rumsfeld, "DoD News Briefing," M2 Presswire, 28 February 2002, 3, <<http://presswire.net>>, Proquest (28 December 2003).

33. Brig Gen Worden interview, 29 December 2003.

34. Donald Rumsfeld, "DoD News Briefing," M2 Presswire, 28 February 2002, 3, <<http://presswire.net>>, Proquest (28 December 2003).

35. Bill Gertz, "Rumsfeld Pushes 'New Sense of Urgency,'" The Washington Times, 24 October 2003, 1.

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