

Strategic Communication

(PARAMETERS AUTUMN 07) ... Richard Halloran

The late Colonel Harry Summers liked to tell a tale familiar to many who served in Vietnam. In April 1975, after the war was over, the colonel was in a delegation dispatched to Hanoi. In the airport, he got into a conversation with a North Vietnamese colonel named Tu who spoke some English and, as soldiers do, they began to talk shop. After a while, Colonel Summers said: "You know you never defeated us on the battlefield." Colonel Tu thought about that for a minute, then replied: "That may be so. But it is also irrelevant."

If that conversation were to be held in today's vocabulary, it would go something like this. Colonel Summers: "You know, you never defeated us in a kinetic engagement on the battlefield." Colonel Tu: "That may be so. It is also irrelevant because we won the battle of strategic communication—and therefore the war."

On a contemporary note, a US officer returning from Iraq said privately: "We plan kinetic campaigns and maybe consider adding a public affairs annex. Our adversaries plan information campaigns that exploit kinetic events, especially spectacular attacks and martyrdom operations. We aren't even on the playing field, but al Qaeda seeks to dominate it because they know their war will be won by ideas."

For five years, Americans have been struggling to comprehend strategic communication as they have seen the standing of the nation plummet around the world and political support at home evaporate for the war in Iraq. They have lamented the seeming failure of their government to persuade the Islamic world of America's good intentions while Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda operate in the best fashion of Madison Avenue. A perceptive Singaporean diplomat and scholar, Kishore Mahbubani, was asked two years ago what puzzled him about America's competition with Osama bin Laden. Mahbubani replied: "How has one man in a cave managed to out-communicate the world's greatest communication society?"

Communication Campaigns

The White House, Defense Department, State Department, Central Intelligence Agency, and other agencies in Washington have floundered in trying to organize a strategic communication campaign. The White House formed the Office of Global Communications in 2003, but it never really took hold and soon faded into the background as a minor office within the national security staff. President George W. Bush appointed a close adviser, Karen P. Hughes, to be Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs in 2005 but she has proven to be less than effective. Among the latest efforts is the Counterterrorism Communication Center (CTCC), set up in April 2007. In a memo, the CTCC says it "is an interagency office, housed within the State Department's Bureau of International Information Programs. The center was set up to provide leadership and coordination for interagency efforts in the war of ideas, and to integrate and enhance the US government's diverse public diplomacy counterterrorism efforts."

Moreover, the nation's political and military leaders have yet to agree on what they mean by strategic communication. If five government people were put in a room and told to come up with a definition, eight different answers would come out. The definitions that have been drawn up are mostly bureaucratic gibberish. One, for example, reads: "Focused United States government efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of United States government interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power."

Maybe that sentence answers Ambassador Mahbubani's question because it is 50 words long, and any primer on good writing would say that is 25 words too many.

There should be no great mystery about what strategic communication is nor an unnecessarily complicated definition of it. In short, strategic communication is a way of persuading other people to accept one's ideas, policies, or courses of action. In that old saw, it means "letting you have my way." Strategic communication means persuading allies and friends to stand with you. It means persuading neutrals to come over to your side or at least stay neutral. In the best of all worlds, it means persuading adversaries that you have the power and the will to prevail over them. Vitally important, strategic communication means persuading the nation's citizens to support the policies of their leaders so that a national will is forged to accomplish national objectives. In this

context, strategic communication is an essential element of national leadership. As a former Chief of Staff of the Army, General Edward C. “Shy” Meyer, once said, “Armies don’t fight wars, nations fight wars.”

None of this is new. Strategic thinkers have touched on aspects of strategic communication for centuries. Sun Tzu, the Chinese strategist, wrote 2,500 years ago, “To fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting.” In the West, Carl Phillip Gottfried von Clausewitz, the Prussian strategist, wrote in 1832 of the “wonderful trinity” of violence, chance, and reason personified by the people, the general and his army, and the government. Strategic communication was not in his vocabulary, but clearly he envisioned persuasive communication as an element of leadership among the three elements of national will. Like Clausewitz, General Vo Nguyen Giap, who commanded North Vietnam’s forces against France and then the United States, wrote not about strategic communication but said, “To educate, mobilize, organize, and arm the whole people in order that they might take part in the Resistance was a crucial question.”

In the spirit of what the Chinese call “the rectification of names,” strategic communication has its roots in the true and classic meaning of “propaganda.” The word “propaganda” itself, however, has taken on too much baggage over the last century to be useful in today’s context. The Roman Catholic Church seems to have fashioned the modern concept of propaganda. In 1622, Pope Gregory XV established in the curia in Rome the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. Its marching orders were to spread the Catholic faith, “propagate” and “propaganda” being derived from the Latin, “propagare,” meaning to spread. Until World War I, propaganda was a neutral term that meant using information, which should be factual and accurate, to advance whatever cause one was promoting.

In World War I, however, the Germans began to distort the meaning of propaganda and even more in World War II when Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi propaganda minister, made it a prominent weapon in the Nazi arsenal. They enhanced the technique of the “Big Lie,” a colossal distortion of the truth. A report from the US Office of Strategic Services contended that the Nazi rules were “never allow the public to cool off; never admit a fault or wrong; never concede that there may be some good in your enemy; never leave room for alternatives; never accept blame; concentrate on one enemy at a time and blame him for everything that goes wrong; people will believe a big lie sooner than a little one; and if you repeat it frequently enough people will sooner or later believe it.” The author George Orwell referred to the Big Lie in his novel 1984, saying that when it was applied to an opponent, “it means the habit of impudently claiming that black is white, in contradiction of the plain facts.”

The United States was no slouch in promoting propaganda during WWII. The Office of War Information coordinated flows of information directed at the American people, allies, and the German, Italian, and Japanese enemies. A prominent radio newscaster, Elmer Davis, led that office. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the allied commander in Europe, had solid advice for military leaders for dealing with the press and fostering strategic communication, even if he didn’t use that term. After the war, Eisenhower wrote: “The commander in the field must never forget that it is his duty to cooperate with the heads of his government in the task of maintaining a civilian morale that will be equal to every purpose.” In any case, the word “propaganda” has been tainted and compromised beyond repair as it has become a synonym for untruth or deception. “Strategic communication” is a worthwhile replacement.

Sending the Message

Successful strategic communication assumes a defensible policy, a respectable identity, a core value. In commercial marketing, the product for sale must be well-made and desirable. The strategic communication stratagem hasn’t been built that can pull a poor policy decision out of trouble. Strategic communication begins with identifying audiences. In military terms, what are the targets? In most cases, that should be fairly easy—the government and public of an ally, the pro-American leaders in a neutral nation, the dissidents in a potential adversary, American citizens regardless of political party or geographic region whose support is essential. Some may be immediate believers, others may be dubious. All need to be addressed.

Strategic communicators should be aware of what might be called “eavesdropping audiences.” The pervasive nature of communication technology today—news agencies, radio, television, newspapers,

magazines, the Internet, movies, blogs, cell phones—makes it impossible to address a discrete audience. A single audience may be in mind but many other groups will hear, see, or read about the transmitted message. You cannot say one thing to one audience and something else to another.

Crafting the message is a critical factor. This can be hard work, and strategic communication should begin while a policy is being fashioned, not added later. All too often, strategic decisions are made without considering how various audiences will receive them. President John F. Kennedy, as he put his administration together in 1961, asked the preeminent television newscaster of the time, Edward R. Murrow, to become head of the US Information Agency. Murrow reluctantly agreed but set one condition, that he be consulted when decisions were being made, not just when things went wrong. “If you want me to be there on the crash-landings,” he is reported to have told the President, “I better be there on the takeoff.”

The message itself needs to say precisely what is meant. It must be clear, thought through, and tested for possible misunderstanding. Often the shorter the message, the better. Shakespeare says in *Henry V*, “Men of few words are the best men.” Perhaps the best war slogan of the twentieth century was “Remember Pearl Harbor.” It summarized the resolve of the American people, buoyed American allies, and threatened Japanese adversaries. President Bush’s phrase, “Axis of Evil,” did not necessarily generate applause at home or abroad but surely everyone remembers it and no one doubts its meaning.

Words are important and doubly important when addressed to people in different cultures where the words don’t have the same meaning. That can be true even among Australians, Britons, Canadians, New Zealanders, and Americans, all claiming English as their mother tongue. A Briton who was a United Nations weapons inspector in Iraq during the days of Saddam Hussein tells about a multinational raid on a suspected nuclear facility getting fouled up because the Americans counted the ground floor as the first floor while the British counted the first floor as the one above the ground floor.

Communications researchers at Arizona State University say “this dynamic is illustrated by the efforts of the United States to promote democracy in the Middle East.” While it is hard for westerners to imagine anyone disagreeing with this goal, Middle Eastern “extremists interpreted this message as yet another attempt by the western crusaders to impose their foreign values on Muslims.” Consequently, the scholars conclude, “The more the United States promotes its goal of democracy for Muslims, the more evidence the extremists have to reproduce their crusader analogy.” European Christians launched nine crusades against Islam from 1095 to 1291. Christians saw them as campaigns with a noble purpose; Muslims saw them, and still see them, as European attempts to destroy Islam.

It gets more complicated when the message must go through translation to reach an audience whose language is not that of the sender. A Japanese friend once said, “You carry around a dictionary in your head, and I carry around one in my head. But sometimes your dictionary and my dictionary don’t say the same thing.” America’s relations with Japan are replete, in peace and war, with misunderstandings that grew out of dictionaries not saying the same thing. In September 2005, Robert Zoellick, then Deputy Secretary of State, gave a speech that was touted to be a definitive statement of the Bush Administration’s policy toward China. Among other things, Zoellick said the United States wished China to become a “responsible stakeholder” in the international arena. That sent Chinese translators in Beijing scurrying for their dictionaries, which weren’t helpful. It turns out that “stakeholder” was a word coined in the middle of the nineteenth century in the gambling saloons of the American West. The stakeholder held the money, or stake, put up on a bet until a winner was declared and paid. That puzzled the Chinese even more, and it took some days for the Americans to explain what they really meant, which was for China to play a constructive role in seeing that the present international political and economic system remained stable.

The written word is often more effective and less likely to be misunderstood than the spoken. When he was commander of the US Pacific Fleet, Admiral Gary Roughead found that communication in multinational naval exercises had improved because new technology allowed written messages to be encoded, transmitted, and decoded swiftly. Many Asians read English reasonably well but often have not been exposed to spoken English. The receiver of a written message whose mother tongue is not English thus need not fight through a variety of American accents, differences in word usage, slang, and jargon. In effect, “now hear this” had been replaced by “now read this.”

The most difficult part of strategic communication is finding a means to get the message across to the intended audiences. Not only is that difficult in itself, but the sender must cut through all the static, clutter, and competing messages flooding the scene. This solution is straightforward even if complicated—use every channel possible and as many as possible.

Sometimes a message is sent through only one channel, but more often it should go through a combination of media. Some officers and officials seem to think that strategic communication is little more than hyped public affairs. Not so. Strategic communication subsumes speechwriting for the President and senior leaders in government and military service, testimony before congressional committees, and remarks at ceremonies such as decorations for valor and changes of command.

It includes public diplomacy and information operations, both of which are themselves still ill-defined, as well as public affairs and civil affairs. Intelligence should play a large part in strategic communication. Government officials, especially in the intelligence community, should be persuaded that information is gathered to be used, not squirreled away, in the war of ideas.

Sources and methods must be guarded, of course, but with thought and a bit of sandpaper, that can be cleaned up so that the intelligence itself can be entered in the lists.

Actions or Words

Actions are among the better purveyors of strategic communication. Army engineers dispatched to Honduras in the 1980s built ramps over the beach in case heavy weapons and equipment needed to be landed to fight the forces of Daniel Ortega in next-door Nicaragua. The engineers also built a road that allowed farmers to get their produce to market more easily and economically, dug wells in a village so that women need not walk five miles with large tins balanced on sticks over their shoulders to get water for their families, and erected a tropical hut that was the best building in the village. The Hondurans turned half of it into a village hall, the other half into a school. A more publicized effort was Operation Sea Angel conducted by the US Marines in Bangladesh in 1991 under Lieutenant General H. C. Stackpole, commanding the III Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF). The Marines were returning by ship from the Persian Gulf to their base in Okinawa when they were diverted to Bangladesh in the wake of Cyclone Marian, a catastrophic natural disaster. Marian's 140-mile-per-hour winds and 25-foot tidal wave had devastated Bangladesh, killing nearly 140,000 people and leaving over five million people homeless. Within 24 hours of a request for help from the Bangladeshi government, advance teams from III MEF arrived. Operation Sea Angel engaged 7,000 soldiers, sailors, Marines, and airmen. They provided food, water, and medical care to nearly two million people. Their efforts are credited with saving 200,000 lives. When a tsunami hit Indonesia and other countries bordering on the Indian Ocean on Sunday, 26 December 2004, the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln was in Hong Kong. The ship finished its replenishment on Monday and sailed on Tuesday morning to the Indian Ocean. About Wednesday, the Indonesian government grasped the magnitude of the disaster and asked for international assistance. On Saturday, Lincoln took up station about ten miles off the Sumatran coast and started flying relief missions. The strike group's 17 helicopters were in constant operation during daylight hours and delivered 50,000 pounds of food and water ashore a day. Forces from Singapore, Australia, France, Germany, Russia, Japan, and China joined in. A US officer said, "We burned through our first quarter budget in two weeks," implying an operations tempo six to seven times the normal rate. "We have a flight surgeon who spends a lot of time with the crews, and whenever people hit the 100th monthly flight hour mark we have them go for a checkup," he said. "But morale is high, performance is high." Day-to-day operations were directed by the Indonesian armed forces. "We take direction from them and provide feedback," said the officer.

Each of these humanitarian operations could have been highlighted in a strategic communication campaign. In the case of Honduras, the Army supported correspondents who covered the engineers, but minimally. The Marines got more mileage out of Operation Sea Angel, perhaps because General Stackpole was press-savvy. The Indian Ocean tsunami was so devastating that all sorts of media showed up to cover it.

Violent military actions often send forceful messages. In 1972, US negotiations with North Vietnam intended to end the war in South Vietnam had stalled. President Richard M. Nixon then unleashed an operation called Linebacker II, bombing North Vietnam in an attempt to break Hanoi's will. Before Christmas that year,

the Air Force violated the military principle of mass by sending B-52 bombers three at a time into North Vietnam's powerful air defenses, where they were chewed up and suffered heavy losses. After a stand-down on Christmas Day, the Air Force returned the next day to the principle of massed formations, dispatching an armada of 120 B-52s from Guam and Thailand to strike ten targets in Hanoi and Haiphong within a period of 15 minutes. The day after, Hanoi asked that negotiations resume; an agreement ending the war was signed in a month. In this case, the US government sought to block all media coverage and let the bombing itself carry the message. That didn't work, however, as correspondents in Guam, for instance, managed to find aviators willing to talk.

Strategy for This Century

The traditional channels for communication—the printed press, radio, television, and motion pictures—are supposedly well understood by political leaders, government officials, diplomats, and military officers. Despite years of experience in dealing with journalists of all stripes, however, those leaders are often inept. James Lacey, a reserve Army colonel and a freelance journalist, once wrote: “Thousands of officers who spend countless hours learning every facet of their profession do not spend one iota of their time understanding or learning to engage with a strategic force that can make or break their best efforts.”

The same could be said of leaders in other walks of public life. Thus the role of the printed press, television news, and radio news are needs to be underscored. They are an essential element of strategic communication—not the only element, by any means, but one that is vital to successful mass communications.

Seven basic principles for dealing with the press are:

Project a professional and civil attitude, neither pandering to the press nor evincing hostility. The old saying applies: “You catch more flies with a spoonful of honey than with a barrel of vinegar.” Besides, the journalists own the printing presses and buy ink by the 55-gallon drum.

Understand that there is no such institution as “the media.” The press, television, and radio are too diverse, too competitive, and too unruly to be classed as an institution. The biggest difference is between print and broadcast. Print reporters need time and explanation; broadcasters need pictures and sound bites.

Learn the ground rules, which is press lingo for the rules of engagement. Know what is on the record, on background and not for attribution, and off the record. The safest rule is always tell a journalist only what you want to see in the newspaper or on the air.

Lying to the press is never permissible. Idealistically, it would be an ethical violation. Realistically, the liar will probably get caught and his credibility will be destroyed. A time may well come when you need the press to believe you, and they won't. Lastly, the truth is easier to remember the next time around.

Mind your own business and discuss matters pertinent to your nation, service, rank, and position. Never speculate since what you say could be overtaken by events. Never answer a hypothetical question, for the same reason. Never submit to an ambush interview, when the camera catches you off guard.

Anticipate, don't wait for the news to happen, go make the news. Muslims are killing more Muslims than are Americans, but US officials rarely make a point of this. Also, be ready to react as the press and TV will be there. Like Murphy's Law, assume that “what can leak out will leak out.”

Never let a mistake stand. Form robust “truth squads.” Uncorrected mistakes get into the public domain and databases to acquire a life of their own and are often repeated and compounded. Moreover, journalists don't learn unless their mistakes are pointed out.

The Internet is the newest battlefield for strategic communication, and one that the United States so far has conceded to Islamic terrorists. The Economist magazine had a solid report on the Muslim infiltration of the Internet for its “jihad,” or struggle, against America. It said “the Internet gives jihadists an ideal vehicle for propaganda, providing access to large audiences free of government censorship or media filters, while carefully preserving their anonymity. Its ability to connect disparate jihadi groups creates a sense of a global Islamic movement fighting to defend the global ummah, or community, from a common enemy.” The Economist, which is edited and published in London but circulates widely in the United States, continued: “The ease and cheapness of processing words, pictures, sound, and video has brought the era not only of the citizen-journalist

but also the terrorist-journalist.” The magazine asserted that “battlefield footage of American Humvees being blown up to shouts of ‘Allahu Akbar!’ (God is Great) appear on the Internet within minutes of the attacks taking place. In short, the hand-held video camera has become as important a tool of insurgency as the AK-47 or the RPG rocket-launcher.”

In the past when soldiers were trained to adjust artillery fire, they were instructed to make bold corrections because the eye often underestimates the distance to the right or left, up or down that the gun’s aim must be adjusted to hit the target. So it is with strategic communication. To date, the American effort to get into the game has been half-hearted and limited to bureaucratic fixes. Now is time for bold change. To compete, the United States should establish in the White House an Office of Strategic Communication with a Director of Cabinet rank, like the US Trade Representative, Director of the Office of Management and Budget, and Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency. The strategic communication director would sit in meetings of the Cabinet and National Security Council so that, like Edward R. Murrow, he or she would weigh in before the takeoff and thereby hope to prevent a crash-landing. The office would devise and issue guidelines to all departments of government on every aspect of their strategic communication and would seek, as the cliché holds, to get them to sing from the same sheet of music. A priority mission would be to devise ways to counter the infiltration of the Internet by Islamic terrorists.

Deception should be rigorously forbidden in strategic communication. Sun Tzu reminds us “all warfare is based on deception,” an adage that lieutenants leading platoons and admirals commanding fleets have long embraced. In the modern world of pervasive communication, however, it is all but impossible to deceive an adversary without also deceiving allies, friends, neutrals, and most important, the citizens of one’s own nation. For this reason, psychological operations, which rightly include disinformation and other deceptions, should not come under the purview of the Office of Strategic Communication. Rather, psyops should be kept in the Special Operations Command or spun off to the Central Intelligence Agency or wherever else might be appropriate. Everything in the realm of strategic communication should be as truthful as human endeavor can make it. Tell the truth even though sometimes, for security, you can’t tell the whole truth.

Lastly, a mission next to impossible: The Office of Strategic Communication needs to be kept out of partisan politics. That will take extraordinary leadership on the part of the Director and a fidelity to integrity on the part of the staff. Everyone from the President on down must be instructed to keep hands off the office and its work. Otherwise, it will no longer be an Office of Strategic Communication serving the nation but a propaganda ministry beholden to a political party—and therefore probably useless.

Richard Halloran writes a weekly op-ed column on the United States and Asia, with a focus on security issues. For 20 years he was a foreign and military correspondent for The New York Times. He now lives in Honolulu where he has served as Director of Communications and Journalism at the East-West Center and editorial director of the Honolulu Star-Bulletin. He was a lieutenant of infantry with service in Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Vietnam. He is the author of six books and the recipient of several journalistic awards.