

National Center for Strategic Communications
By Sam Brownback
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One might conclude from the last seven years without a successful al Qaeda attack in America either that we have crippled our enemies or that the terrorist threat is overstated. Unfortunately, neither is true: violence is rising in Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere, and the ideas behind this violence continue to proliferate from Europe to Asia and across the world wide web. But while we spend a great deal of time discussing tactics and troop deployments, we rarely analyze the broader ideological struggle.

Indeed, while military force may sometimes be necessary in the war on terrorism, force alone cannot defeat the threat posed by violent Islamist extremism. Recognizing this fact, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates worries about the state of the “war of ideas” and rightly points out that it is “plain embarrassing” that al Qaeda communicates more effectively than we do.

The answer to this problem is not more money. We have spent billions since 9/11 on a wide array of public diplomacy initiatives, international broadcasts and information and exchange programs. Some succeeded, others failed, but none were developed in accordance with a national strategy overseen by an official accountable for making strategic communications work.

The U.S. Information Agency focused on strategic communications during the Cold War. After the defeat of communism, USIA’s mission seemed fulfilled, and I supported its dismantlement. Today’s ideological threats, however, demand the same focus on strategic communications that the USIA provided a generation ago. Today, I am introducing legislation that would establish a new National Center for Strategic Communications, inspired by the USIA model, that can meet 21st century challenges.

My proposal abolishes the existing Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy at the State Department and the Broadcasting Board of Governors, transferring their functions to the new Center where they would be managed by single director. The Director would report to the president as the nation’s top strategic communications official and oversee the creation of a new national strategic communications strategy. Just as important, the Director will oversee an interagency panel of representatives from other federal agencies and departments, including the Department of Defense, whose missions inherently involve strategic communications with foreign publics.

More than providing information about America, the goal of strategic communications should be nothing less than the ability to persuade individuals all over the world to choose freedom, human rights and the rule of law over any challenging ideologies or philosophies. My legislation would correct a number of deficiencies in our current structure in support of this objective.

First, the new Center would separate public diplomacy – speaking to foreign publics – from official diplomacy – speaking to foreign governments. We should not let public diplomacy be held hostage to the official priority of the moment, nor should public diplomacy budgets compete with official diplomatic priorities.

Second, the Center would manage U.S. international broadcasts directly. Too often in the last few years, taxpayer-funded broadcasts have been kept at arms-length from government oversight and undermined rather than affirmed U.S. policies and values. My legislation makes our broadcasts more transparent and focused on the national mission by giving the Center close oversight of our broadcasts and abolishing outdated Smith-Mundt Act provisions that keep the American public from knowing what the government is saying abroad.

Third, the Center enlists the support of private, non-profit and non-governmental organizations. There is no reason to believe the U.S. Government must always deliver key messages, and outside groups may have the best ability to counter ideological support for extremism. My proposal enables the new Center to make grants to such groups and places representatives of the Center in key countries around the globe to implement our national strategy on a local level.

Our vision of a free, prosperous and peaceful world is under attack from extremists who propose endless violence and fear. Military force may keep these extremists at bay for a time, but ultimate victory depends on winning the war of ideas. Though some would throw more money at our strategic communications problems or settle for smaller, marginal reforms, I believe major reforms are necessary for us to succeed. I look forward to developing this proposal with the next administration and the new Congress. No matter who ends up in power, we will have a shared in reforms that can help win the war on terror without just relying on more bullets.