

Strategic Communication and National Security

By JAMES G. STAVRIDIS

I don't know what the hell this [strategic communication] is that Marshall is always talking about, but I want some of it.

—Attributed to Admiral Ernest King during World War II

Winston Churchill is said to have observed that the principal difference between management and leadership is communication. Effective communication requires the leaders of an organization to take an early and persistent role in deciding how ideas and decisions are shaped and delivered. Certainly in the national security context, a leader can improve the effects of operational and policy planning by ensuring that the communications implications of that planning are considered as early as possible in the process. If planning is done in this fashion, then it is likely that the communications associated with it will indeed be strategic in their effects.

Simply stated, the objective of strategic communication is to provide audiences with truthful and timely information that will influence them to support the objectives of the communicator. In addition to truthfulness and timeliness, the information must be delivered to the right audience in a precise way. This generalized approach can be applied to essentially any organization, to the Department of Defense (DOD) broadly,



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and specifically to the individual nine combatant commands of the United States.

Our approach at U.S. Southern Command is to consider strategic communication as an enabling capability for our policy and planning decisions and actions; provide truthful information about those decisions or actions; communicate it in a timely and culturally sensible fashion; use messengers who are likely to be well received; measure the results of our efforts diligently (clearly our hardest challenge and greatest shortcoming); and adjust both message and method of delivery accordingly. In the Southern Command's region—32 countries and 13 territories including some 450 million people speaking 4 principal languages and dozens of dialects—our view is that nothing we do is more important than strategic communication. This is a part of the world, thankfully, where it appears highly unlikely that we will launch Tomahawk missiles. It is, however, an area where it is necessary to launch ideas, concepts, information, conferences, viewpoints, interviews, and the many other streams of data that constitute effective strategic communication. It is, in every sense, our “main battery” at U.S. Southern Command.

As Newt Gingrich, an astute student of strategic communication, has written, “Strategic Communication in a real-time worldwide information system is a branch of the art of war comparable to logistics or intelligence. It will require staffing, educating and practicing at about the same level of resources as intelligence or logistics to be successful.” It also will require the early and persistent involvement of commanders at all

levels. That is precisely our approach from our headquarters in Miami looking south, and we are working to add resources to this important—indeed, vital—aspect of our mission in Central and South America and the Caribbean.

In attempting to discover the right approach for strategic communication in the Southern Command's diverse region, we have examined a series of historical examples of strategic communication. Some of the more famous include the announcements surrounding the assassination of Julius Caesar in the first century CE, Abraham Lincoln's campaign to publicize the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Japanese Empire's “Economic Co-Prosperity Sphere” in the mid- to late 1930s. More recent examples of strategic communication that we have examined include the announcement of involuntary feeding of detainees at Guantanamo Bay; publicity for a humanitarian exercise in the Dominican Republic; and the cruise of the Navy's hospital ship, USNS *Mercy*, through the Pacific. Each of the recent case studies is worth thinking about in somewhat more depth as we consider an appropriate approach for the Southern Hemisphere.

Case Studies

The first case study was largely a public relations challenge and required a response at the tactical level. A group of detainees in Guantanamo Bay's detention and interrogation facility began a large coordinated hunger strike on August 8, 2005. DOD policy is to always preserve the lives of the detainees, and, as a result, 43 hunger strikers were enterally fed, using U.S. Federal Bureau of Prisons guidelines, which include use of a restraint chair and a very small diameter flexible rubber tube inserted through the nostril, down the throat, and into the stomach. A motion was filed in February 2006 alleging torture through the use of the restraint chair to assist in involuntary feedings.

Given the DOD policy of preserving life, the leadership view at Guantanamo Bay was that a detainee on a hunger strike requiring feeding clearly qualified as a lifesaving emergency. However, there was significant public outcry concerning the procedure, which we failed to anticipate. In particular, the use of a restraint chair—necessary to accommodate the procedure—was

categorized as “torture,” despite the fact that it is an entirely humane and common procedure in U.S. and other prison systems worldwide to preserve life.

The surprise negative press and false characterizations, which reinforced challenges to DOD detention operations, compelled the Department to conduct a reassessment of policies and procedures in order to counter the impression that the United States had something to hide. This campaign included a wide variety of tactical responses, which were orchestrated loosely out of the Pentagon. They included bringing a team of distinguished physicians to Guantanamo to observe the procedure; publishing articles on the process; emphasizing the lifesaving character of the operation and the common procedures used in accredited prisons; and sending representatives to conduct interviews with the media to describe the procedure in detail. The commander of the Joint Task Force, Rear Admiral Harry Harris, USN, had the procedure performed on himself so that he could correctly describe it and personally refute allegations of torture. While an initial challenge was apparent, particularly in not correctly predicting the response to the feeding techniques, DOD eventually turned the corner, and when publicity died down, the vast majority of hunger-striking detainees began eating again.

A second case study involved a humanitarian exercise (New Horizons) in the Dominican Republic in the spring of 2006. Troops from U.S. Southern Command were sent to participate in a series of joint endeavors with the Dominican armed forces to build clinics and dig wells. Unfortunately, our strategic communication plan was not well executed, and as the *Los Angeles Times* reported, “As the equipment and troops amassed over weeks with little explanation in the local media, suspicions deepened that the Americans were engaged in something more than a humanitarian mission.” As a result of not thinking through and executing a well-constructed strategic communication plan, our erstwhile effort actually created a negative backlash in the local media. We also need to link such events into 3-year plans for strategic communication, not treat each as an isolated event.

The third case study was an unqualified success and involved the strategic communication associated with the voyage

of the hospital ship USNS *Mercy* through Southeast Asian waters in 2006. The cruise was conceived as a follow-up to American assistance rendered during the tsunami crisis of late 2004 and early 2005, and the ship’s sailing a month later was designed to show continuing U.S. involvement, commitment, and presence in the region. During the course of the 60,000-ton ship’s cruise from May to September, the crew of nearly 700 (including many volunteers from international relief organizations) performed over \$30 million in services and goods transfers and saw over 200,000 patients. All of this was aggressively communicated using a detailed strategic communication plan. The onboard public affairs team, supplemented by people in each of the various ports of call, was able to have a measurable impact on the impressions Southeast Asians have about the United States.

Communication Guidelines

Drawing on these three case studies, as well as many others, we have developed a series of principles that serve to guide strategic communication, with a focus on our own efforts in the Southern region.

Tell the Truth. The first principle is the simplest: always provide the truth to the audiences with whom you are communicating. Nothing will more quickly doom strategic communication to failure than even a single instance of falsehood. A strategic communication team can have superb messages, excellent messengers, a carefully crafted plan—yet all of it can fail if they are proven to be lying about anything. This has been demonstrated most often in the history of “damage control” types of strategic communication. Many political scandals, for example, tend to explode when revelations of lying to investigators after the fact emerge, as opposed to during or immediately after the initial malfeasance. The truth, throughout a program of strategic communication, constitutes absolute bedrock. Tell the truth, and emphasize that you do tell the truth. Over the long run, it is unquestionably the best approach.

Have a Good Message. All the brilliant strategic communication in the world will not sell a bad message, as the Japanese Empire discovered with the East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere. A brutal, extractive regime that brought little or no benefit to the “partner” nations could not be dressed

up as anything other than imperialism. Again, this seems quite simple, but in practice, there are many in the world of strategic communication who believe that a bad message can be sold effectively. It cannot. The strategic message must resonate with the audience because it shares appropriate human values, such as liberty, justice, honesty, economic improvement, security, fair treatment, and so forth.

Naturally, there are times when the message is, in fact, bad news. The world will always be full of mistakes, disasters, failures, and acts of incompetence. But when that happens, the effort must be made not to spin the truth, but rather to tell what happened honestly, let people know truthfully how bad it was, apologize when warranted, pledge improvement, and outline measures taken to prevent reoccurrence. Torie Clark, in her excellent book on strategic communication, describes this as “not trying to put lipstick on a pig.”

Understand the Audience. This is the constantly rediscovered golden rule of strategic communication. Too many communicators develop plans in a vacuum without spending the necessary time and resources to understand the nuances of the audiences to whom they are pitching the product. A classic example of this is in Central and South America and the Caribbean, where one message definitely does not fit all audiences. Can there be two more different countries in the world than enormous Portuguese-speaking Brazil and tiny English-speaking St. Kitts? Or more different than Spanish-speaking, economically strong Chile and poverty-stricken French-/Creole-speaking Haiti? In each country or territory, to each group of people, during each particular season, the audience is different, and therefore the messages must be evaluated and tailored with the diverse qualities of the receiver in mind.

Pull the Trigger Promptly. This seems self-evident, but all too frequently an excellent plan comes to naught because we are unable to execute in a timely manner. Do not let “perfect” become the enemy of “very good.” In other words, develop a reasonably good plan fast and execute it. Otherwise, it is far too easy to end up “back on your heels” in the world of the perpetual news cycle.

Think at the Strategic Level. Public affairs and strategic communication are two very different things. A strategic communi-

cator must stay at the strategic level and not dip down to the tactical level represented by public affairs. Strategic communication consists of a wide variety of tools and processes within a command such as U.S. Southern Command, to include public affairs, protocol, legal, political-military analysis, medical outreach, engineer and construction support, logistics, personnel, and many more. Each has a role to play in effective strategic communication at the tactical or operational level, but none of them is a substitute for a strategic plan operating at the level of the entire theater, across time, space, language, and culture. At the strategic level, the intellectual firepower of the command must be brought most distinctly to bear.

Organize at the Operational Level to Enable at the Tactical. For a combatant commander, the place to “organize” strategic communication is at the operational level. This means that strategic communication plans must be developed that can operate across subregional sections of the command area. In U.S. Southern Command, we divide the region into four subregions: Andean Ridge (Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela); the Southern Cone (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay); Central America; and the Caribbean. By organizing in this fashion, we can better tailor messages, maximize resources, find



synergies, and move out on the strategic plan that we have developed for the region as a whole.

After organizing at the operational level, we try to execute smoothly. Tactically, in the sense of strategic communication for U.S. Southern Command, we are operating at the individual national level. This is where all the components of the strategic communication plan must fit together, and most particularly our plan must be fully coordinated and synched up with the Embassy’s efforts. The

tactical level is where public affairs and all the associated efforts are linked together and execution of the plan occurs—all of it fast, furious, and energetic. This is not the cerebral part of the operation, but rather the place where instant response, dynamic creativity, and good language skills matter most.

Measure Results. So many strategic communication plans flounder because the implementers, thrilled with having developed and “sold” the plan, are completely consumed with execution—but then end up not doing what is the most important single step: measuring results. The absolute key

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to effective communication is rolling out a plan, organizing it widely, executing energetically, and then measuring results. There are obviously many means of doing so, but a few crucial ones include polling by reputable local firms and backing up the polls with an international polling firm; contacting individual trusted and sensible interlocutors for candid assessments; monitoring articles in journals, newspapers, and other publications; sampling Web content, including blogs; observing television and radio coverage; and working with a local public relations firm. We are in the infant state of this at U.S. Southern Command but are working hard to improve because it is the critical path for achieving results.

Adjust Fire. No strategic communication plan is perfect from conception. All must be put into practice and adjusted as time goes by. A way to approach measurement is to adopt a short-, medium-, and long-term view. Short term is immediate reactions, say 24 to 48 hours. Medium-term measurement is after 30 to 45 days. And finally, long-term measurement must occur at the 1-year point. After each of these measurement windows, the plan should be evaluated and recast, after reacting to what is working and what is not.

Add Spice. Strategic communication should not be boring. A look at the “strategic communication” of the Cold War by both sides shows a pattern of rote, predictable, and almost entirely ineffective patterns of communication. It was not until late in the Cold War with the arrival of the Reagan

administration that spice was added to the diet with strategic communication tactics (for example, describing the Soviet Union as the “evil empire” and President Reagan ordering, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall”). When looking at successful strategic communication plans, industry is often a good guide. The performance of Chrysler Corporation under Lee Iacocca provides a wonderful example of a plan perfectly executed. To communicate his vision, Iacocca began with a simple message that inspired customers and employees alike: “Quality, hard work, and commitment—The

stuff America is made of. Our goal is to be the best. What else is there? If you can find a better car, buy it!”

Chrysler’s remarkable turnaround resulting from Iacocca’s leadership shows that following each of the principles above—from having a truthful plan to constantly measuring and adding spice—is the best approach. In the case of U.S. Southern Command, we are constantly seeking new ways to describe the benefits of partnering with the United States in our areas of expertise (for example, military-to-military relations, counternarcotics, antimuggling). These can range from new techniques (use of unmanned vehicles and subsurface surveillance) to better packaged training for officers and soldiers of individual countries back in the United States. Mix it up!

Steady Pressure. Very seldom do strategic communication plans succeed overnight. Just as careers of individuals take time to build to fruition, a good strategic communication plan needs steady pressure over a significant period to bear fruit. In U.S. Southern Command, we have been working hard over the long term to make improvements across the board in reducing human rights violations by military forces in a region with a long tradition of such problems. This is a strategic communication plan that takes a long time, sometimes generations, to fulfill. It includes sending key officers and enlisted leaders to schools in the United States; our leadership giving speeches and writing articles on the subject; hosting regional conferences, often including international

human rights groups; and a myriad of other initiatives. It is gradually bearing fruit, but there will be setbacks. The key is applying steady pressure.

Bursts of Energy. The analog to steady pressure, of course, is bursts of energy. In any strategic communication plan, there will be moments when it is opportune to hit with bursts of energy. Such a moment might be immediately before or after an international conference or a national election; it might occur following a natural disaster; it could be on the anniversary of a particular event. A creative strategic planner is constantly looking for the right moment to come in high and hard with a burst technique. Such moments become efficient ways to increase “bang for the buck” of a particular event, speech, or other strategic communication resource.

Accepting Defeat and Moving On. Some strategic communication battles are unwinnable. There will be moments when no matter how effective the plan, the message is not going to have any effect. This can occur for a wide variety of reasons, generally when the audience is simply unwilling to listen to anything at all. For example, when the Persian empire sought to invade Greece in 300 BCE, the Persian emperor Darius crafted a clever strategic communication plan that sought to divide the Greek city-states and offered reasonably benign terms to any state willing to sign on with the Persians. But the Greeks were utterly devoted to their nascent form of democracy and were unreceptive, leading to war. Despite having a rational message, a fairly good series of messengers, and a coherent strategy, Darius was unable to find an outcome other than war. And when he was eventually defeated by a coalition of the Greek city-states, he was wise enough to turn his attentions to the east and move on. So it must be, occasionally, in the world of strategic planning.

Knowing When You Win. Sometimes the hardest thing for any strategic planner is not accepting defeat but rather recognizing victory. As a general rule, “winning” in the world of strategic communication is never clean and seldom obvious. If your charter is to convince the populace of a given region that democracy and liberty are important values, it will not suddenly be obvious that you have succeeded. Tipping points are often hard to spot. But gradually, the benchmark measurements should turn in the right

direction, media outlets should repeat messages, and trends should begin to turn. At such times, a determination must be made as to whether it is time to back out and let the audience find its own way forward, apply a final burst of energy, or continue steady pressure. It is an art, not a science.

Recommendations

In addition to the principles above, there are four final recommendations worth considering as we approach strategic communication in the 21st century.

First, strategic communication is the ultimate team sport. It must be done as part of a joint, interagency, and commercial system. It does no good whatsoever to have a perfect strategic communication plan that is ultimately contradicted by other U.S. Government agencies, as—unfortunately—is often the case. Each plan must be vetted properly and hopefully become a combined effort. It should take into account what U.S. private industry is doing in a given country or region so that inherent contractions between public and private institutions do not undermine the entire effort. It must be crafted in a sensible, collaborative, collegial way and done in an appropriate voice.

Second, at least for strategic communication that goes beyond the shores of the United States (a safe assumption for virtually everything we do in this arena), the international community must be considered and often consulted. In other words, the impact on individual countries and international organizations should be considered, and—if possible—they should be part of the plan. In particular, international organizations have resources that can be used in execution and even in planning, as they were, for example, in the voyage of the *Mercy* and the Pakistani earthquake relief effort. Likewise, little can be done effectively in a foreign country without the cooperation of the host nation and regional organizations. Often, they can contribute to strategic messaging and should be consulted in many instances. While there are clearly exceptions, such consultations and cooperation can frequently pay enormous dividends.

Third, as we develop and execute our strategic communication plans, we should ask the simple question: Who are the thinkers? It is not inherently obvious who is “good” at strategic communication. Many commands, including U.S. Southern

Command, have hired individuals and sometimes commercial consulting firms to participate. We can find thousands of such entities by Googling “strategic communication.” But each strategic plan and each organization—and indeed each time a plan needs to be developed—may need a different set of thinkers. So look around the organization and even outside it, especially to non-U.S. sources of input and criticism, for advice, execution, measurement, and judgment. Also, recognize that the “strategic communication director” is more like the conductor of a band than an expert on a given instrument. Moreover, give the director of strategic communication unfettered access to the commander. At U.S. Southern Command, our director of strategic communication attends the daily morning standup with the commander, interacts constantly with the senior leadership of the command, and is a prime mover in every sense in our organization.

Fourth, and finally, we in the business of national security must work together to arrive at a shared understanding of what constitutes strategic communication in an international context. This is an effort that must involve practitioners at the Department of Defense, Department of State, and indeed at all Cabinet organizations and national agencies engaged in international strategic communication on behalf of the United States. It is also an effort that can be informed by those in private industry who work in this milieu.

In the end, working in strategic communication for national security is a bit like working in a laboratory trying to find a cure for cancer. There are many false starts, mistakes, and incorrect leads. Resources are often difficult to obtain, especially because it is often hard to show prime results. Steady pressure is generally the right solution, and occasionally a true burst of energy can make great strides. There is unlikely to be a perfect single-point solution, but one should expect incremental progress, measured in years, and only a series of partial palliatives obtained along the way. But it is all in a worthy cause, the work is fascinating, and in the end, the efforts of the strategic communicator can be of enormous benefit to the national security of the United States, especially in the emerging complex world of this unsettled 21st century. **JFQ**