

GETTING SERIOUS ABOUT STRATEGIC INFLUENCE

How to move beyond the State Department's legacy of failure

J. Michael Waller

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A decade has passed since the Clinton administration and the late Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) joined hands in destroying America's public diplomacy machinery. The shocking development occurred for a combination of reasons: a turf-conscious State Department that wanted total control of public diplomacy that previously had been the purview of the semi-independent U.S. Information Agency; an administration that thought public diplomacy was only for fighting the Soviets and now, with the end of the Cold War, no longer needed; and a staunchly conservative senator who had some bones to pick with U.S.IA and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Not even the 9/11 attacks and two major wars would bring that machinery back, even as eminent scholars and former senior officials popularized concepts like "soft power" and its successor, "smart power."¹ The U.S. government continues to flail fecklessly in the international scene as public diplomacy officialdom regurgitates stale ideas

with a myopia rivaling that of Quincy Magoo. The State Department's sense of urgency is no more impressive, and its continued primacy in the public diplomacy mission equally perplexing.

Public diplomacy and public affairs need to be put in their proper places, as part of a larger discipline called strategic communication. Its mission must be similar to the mission of the armed forces: to project American power and influence and provide a permanent system through which to ensure the national interest globally. The mission must not be communication for communication's sake, or simply to make the United States a player in the "global marketplace of ideas." The mission must be to dominate that market. It must be to fight to win. It must be run strategically, like a permanent political campaign. To do so, it must be run not by diplomats and public affairs pros, but by real strategists and practitioners in the art of political action.

Failed stewardship

Why, after all these years, do bipartisan majorities in Congress and mainstream public diplomacy advocates insist that the State Department be the nexus of the nation's strategic communication effort? The George W. Bush Administration hobbled itself from the beginning by re-wiring the federal government's tangled public diplomacy circuitry, and routing virtually all international communications efforts—including military psychological operations and information operations—through the office of the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. Yet for half of the eight years of the Bush presidency, the post of under secretary stood vacant. And when the position was filled, did it really matter?

Can we name a single significant enduring positive public diplomacy legacy from under secretaries Charlotte Beers, Margaret Tutwiler, and Karen Hughes? Or, for that matter, Secretaries of State Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice? Forget about whether or not one agreed with the "War on Terror" policies at the time; did the people on duty step up to the plate? Can anybody point to a wartime reorganization of what almost everybody admitted was a moribund, ineffective public diplomacy machine? Was there a resolve at State that matched the wartime urgency of the U.S. military and the intelligence services? Where was the big hiring surge? What about the revolution in training new recruits and re-training those in place? Apart from international broadcasting, an oddly autonomous system with a bickering bipartisan board over which the State Department has little influence, where were the big budget requests from Congress?

The White House stumbled all over itself, organizing and reorganizing, setting up a laughable Office of Global Communications that served as more of a domestic PR mouthpiece than a real office of strategic communications. And it had no real authority over the State Department's public diplomacy portfolio. National Security Council staffers seemed powerless to do anything significant, grasping at straws about how to implement impactful information and communication campaigns that would make a difference around the world. When NSC staff met in a room, they would refer these questions to the State Department representative, who would either act as if everything were under control or simply shrug that nothing could be done. Neither of Bush's national security advisors, Condoleezza Rice nor Steve Hadley, would create a billet on the NSC staff exclusively for strategic communication and staffed by a capable veteran of ideological conflict. And when Rice became secretary of state, Hadley continued her non-

engagement policies and remained deferential to her desire to keep strategic communication under her domain.

So the State Department insisted on—and got—responsibility for and control of public diplomacy and strategic communication at large. But what has it really done? It issued a simplistic, lackluster public diplomacy strategy in 2007, and effectively declared victory. Not until the last fitful months of the Bush Administration did a serious person with a meaningful understanding of communications strategy come to the fore, and even then, it was too late for him to do anything. James Glassman, a professional communicator with a good deal of strategic thinking under his belt, was named Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs in 2008. Glassman did his homework. He placed the job in the context of fighting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and waging ideological counteroffensives around the world. At least, that's what Glassman told supporters he intended to do; actually executing it within the State Department was another matter. Moreover, Glassman coordinated as effectively as he possibly could prior to his Senate confirmation with the military combatant commanders around the world so that when he was finally allowed to take his post, he could hit the ground running. This advance coordination with the military is what won him support from pro-defense operatives in Washington. But the Bush Administration didn't pull out all the political stops to get Glassman into his post, clumsily handling his nomination and alienating a conservative Republican senator to the point that he put a Helms-like "hold" on Glassman, delaying things for months as men continued to fight and die in Iraq and Afghanistan. Once Glassman made it through the Senate, he took his office at State only to find that the bureaucrats had gone on a spending spree, deflating his office's accounts for the rest of the fiscal year. He could do almost nothing to reform public diplomacy, and with the election of Barack Obama, was shown the door.

Nobody has been held accountable for the public diplomacy mess. Yet everybody seems to want the State Department to continue its role as the leader in wartime strategic communication.

In the eight years since 9/11, the State Department has not once asked Congress for a budget for a world-class, information-age public diplomacy capability befitting the world's only superpower. Instead, it relied on money re-programmed from the Pentagon. It has not reorganized itself, and the old and decrepit former U.S.IA bureaucracy now under its control, to face the post-Cold War challenge. Most of the veteran public diplomacy professionals from the U.S.IA years quit or retired long ago. By contrast, the Defense Department went through a thorough, top-to-bottom reorganization simultaneously as it managed two wars. State, however, has neither devised a real grand strategy, developed a strategic communications doctrine, nor configured itself to move very far beyond its slow and bureaucratic ways of doing things.

And because it didn't, others stepped in. Across the Potomac, civilian and uniformed personnel alike—with groundbreaking efforts by the bipartisan Defense Science Board under the leadership of William Schneider—worked out a new strategic communications vision and strategy. Whether or not one agrees that this is the military's proper role is immaterial for the moment; the point is that, when all others failed, the military filled the void. With the civilian Defense Science Board leading the way, the Pentagon moved quickly to pitch in where the State Department was failing. It set up an assistant secretary position for "public diplomacy support" (deliberately placing itself in an auxiliary role to State); pushed the envelope with the expansion of information operations from narrow cyber-warfare to "hearts and minds" work that would eclipse traditional

psychological operations (PSYOP) and tread where the public diplomats dared not go; and integrated the informational aspect of warfare into a new, broadly acclaimed, and—for the moment—successful counterinsurgency doctrine and field manual that propelled Gen. David Petraeus to near-superstar status. At the higher education level, the military colleges encouraged mid-level officers to think about strategic influence to win wars more humanely and less expensively, and even to prevent them from breaking out in the first place.² Defense Secretary Robert Gates has reached down into the mid-level officer corps—the warfighters themselves—for new ideas that he has been implementing from the top, and a lot of those ideas have to do with communicating strategically in defense of national interests.

But much more remains to be done. Not everyone is comfortable with the military expanding its role into these areas, and this unease is held widely within the armed forces themselves. Yet nobody else has stepped up to the plate. So the military is carrying the load for now, only to catch the opprobrium of Congress. Yet Congress won't act to force change in the strategic communication field as it did on the military with Goldwater-Nichols, or after 9/11, on the intelligence community with the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act.

A changing of the guard

What is the point of public diplomacy, anyway? To make America look nice around the world? To help other people like us? To do good? What about strategic communication? Is it to tell others about our feelings? To convey information so they will arrive at more informed opinions and decisions?

The answer is no to all of the above. Public diplomacy, like public affairs, international broadcasting and information operations, is a mere component of strategic communication—the systematic development and application of information and messages to global and selected audiences outside the United States. The purpose is to shape the opinions and attitudes of foreign publics and decision-makers, with the goal of influencing their policies and actions. The goal of strategic communication, in other words, is strategic influence.

But “strategic influence” is a dirty word in Washington—at least as far as promoting the national interest abroad is concerned. Just look at what happened to a Pentagon office with that name. Immediately after 9/11, a number of top DoD planners realized that the U.S. no longer had the capability to combat the ideological dimension of the war. The CIA had been gutted of its covert assets and had not, at that point, moved far beyond the Cold War in terms of building new agent networks and clandestine political influence capabilities. In late October 2001, the Pentagon's policy shop cobbled together a group of military officers, civilian careerists and highly capable contractors as an Office of Strategic Influence (OSI). This writer was a volunteer supporter of OSI in a very peripheral way, but still had a good insider view of what transpired. All of OSI's initiatives received inter-agency approval, including from the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy. Where it got bogged down was within the Pentagon's own public affairs office, where the new spokeswoman, Victoria Clarke, expressed disapproval and would not sign off on key initiatives. The apparent reason was because OSI was treading on public affairs turf, and risked creating public relations problems.

One key OSI initiative dealt with the 26,000 Saudi-funded *madrassas* in Pakistan that were cranking out disaffected, heavily indoctrinated young men to become Islamist fanatics and terrorists. With the support of the Pakistani government, OSI worked out a plan to use the large budget and unrivaled logistical capabilities of the U.S. military to provide alternative textbooks, fund alternative teachers, and essentially build a network of schools to replace the thousands of *madrassas* that Pakistani authorities would take down. President Pervez Musharraf made a veiled reference to the plan in January 2002, when he referred to an impending “jihad” in education in Pakistan. However, the plan was never executed; Clarke and the public affairs people opposed it. In a memo to the OSI director, Clarke 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 educational system. The campaign does not show its awareness of the many voices protecting educational choice and religious instruction as separate from government influence.

There are additionally the unintended consequences of information warfare that can ‘blowback’ into our faces. Several of the campaign’s plans are, in my view outside the bounds of the military mission.... Our joint success relies on the trust, credibility and transparency of our access to media. As we seek to provide this freedom to others, we cannot afford to do so in a way that could be construed as limiting that freedom.³

Clarke and her military public affairs aides then orchestrated a phony leak to the *New York Times*⁴, falsely alleging that OSI was involved in disinformation, while forbidding OSI officials from speaking to the press.⁵ OSI became so tainted by the bureaucratic hit that its mission became compromised, and it was immediately disbanded.⁶ More than seven years later, we can see the fruits of the bureaucratic sabotage of the anti-*madrassa* campaign, with U.S. strategic influence eroding as Pakistan plunges into Wahhabi-inspired political violence.

Significantly, the internal sabotage of the Pakistan educational reform effort was not a failure of public diplomacy vision. Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy Charlotte Beers approved the OSI initiative. The point here is to illustrate how a constituent element of strategic communication—public affairs—wrecked a vital influence effort through inappropriately conventional thinking, timidity in confronting the enemy, undue turf consciousness, and bureaucratic underhandedness. The military public affairs culture can be, in many respects, quite similar to the State Department’s public diplomacy culture, although Pentagon public affairs has become light years ahead of the State Department in terms of influencing perceptions abroad.

Just as war is too important to be left to the generals, public diplomacy is too important to be left to the diplomats. And strategic communications is far too vital to be entrusted to diplomats and public affairs professionals—especially because the net effects of failed strategies and policies can kill the people in uniform. The State Department goes to absurd lengths to make sure it suffers zero casualties in war zones, as the lingering controversies about private security companies like Blackwater and others attest. Yet it will barely move to create a public diplomacy/strategic communications support network for the warfighters.

So if the military has done all the strategic thinking on strategic communication; built nearly all of the new wartime information processes and infrastructures; developed entirely new cadre and systems for information operations and related fields; asked for

and received massive funding increases in support of strategic communication; moved astonishingly ahead with countless constellations of websites, blogs, social networks and other global electronic multimedia; and continues to invest in the information and influence training of its personnel by the many thousands, why are we selling it short?

Sure, the military has moved extremely fast for a large bureaucracy, and as with all forms of war-fighting, is proceeding on the strategic communications front through trial and error. It has made its share of mistakes. It has gotten ahead of itself in terms of strategy. It has yet to develop a strategic communications doctrine—in large part due to a continued deference to the State Department as the lead agency. But it is moving ahead faster than anyone else, and at far greater sacrifice to its own people. Yet the mantra continues: State should take the lead. And many in Congress want to take the military out of the strategic influence infosphere almost completely.

Political warfare: The American way

When public relations statements and gentle, public diplomacy-style persuasion—the policies of attraction that constitute “soft power”—fail to win the needed sentiments and actions, what other tools does the United States have in its arsenal? There was a time when the CIA had the necessary resources, authority and personnel to help covertly shape political outcomes abroad. These ongoing operations had the necessary support from the top in Washington, and often were backed by careful diplomatic strategy. John Foster Dulles and Henry Kissinger come to mind as secretaries of state who adeptly waged political warfare as an instrument on the world stage.

Why shouldn't a secretary of state be a political warrior? In domestic politics, Americans of all stripes wage political warfare quite effectively—and ruthlessly. As Jonathan Pitney points out in his book *The Art of Political Warfare*⁷, American domestic political discourse is laced with militaristic jargon. Even the word “campaign” comes from the military. Politicians wage psychological guerrilla warfare, hit-and-run attacks, character assassination, even “going nuclear” or using the “nuclear option” in order to defeat the other guys and keep themselves in office. They gather dirt on their political opponents and potential opponents, sometimes using what the KGB called *kompromat* to compromise them into voting a certain way against their will, to withdrawing from a political race, or even into quitting politics altogether. They smear and slam and destroy. They leak privileged information, even national secrets, to the media in order to win internal policy battles. They pursue politics of personal destruction, even trying to criminalize the policies and actions of their rivals or predecessors, suing or prosecuting them to ruin their livelihoods and destroy them as viable actors, to discredit them and their ideas permanently and to get others out of the way. Both parties do it. Like it or not, we have a bipartisan consensus that political warfare is part and parcel of American democracy.

Yet, for some reason, our democracy-promotion efforts abroad must be squeaky clean. Almost nothing is covert. Our allies fall by the wayside without the needed support from Washington, as those who would do us ill grow in strength. Instead of marginalizing the worst of them, like Osama bin Laden, three successive presidents from both parties have unintentionally built him up. They singled him out by name, declared him the enemy, and vowed, depending on the temperament of the particular president, to bring him to justice or kill him. The U.S. leadership inadvertently helped give bin Laden and his al-Qaeda movement a winning brand: what better praise to heap upon a terrorist in a cave

than have the presidents of the United States identify him by name as the enemy! That kind of acknowledgment is what any aspiring politician would seek—immediate credibility from the president of the world’s only superpower, and instant recognition that he was a force to contend with. American public diplomacy arguably became al-Qaeda’s greatest recruitment vehicle, if for no other reason than it focused the diplomatic power and prestige of the United States presidency on an aspiring terrorist franchise and turned it into a prestigious name brand for people who wish us ill.

And what of combating the ideology of al-Qaeda, to say nothing of Saudi Wahhabism, the Muslim Brotherhood, and other forms of expansionist, imperialistic Islamist radicalism? The United States has tied itself in knots. Whether out of fear of offending the Saudis, weakness when charged with standing up for its principles, or simply cowed by phony “separation of mosque and state” arguments, American message-makers have failed to develop a coherent strategy to wage an ideological counterattack against political Islamism. They can’t seem to grasp that there is a significant difference between Islam the religion and the politicized, power-seeking ideologies of radical Islamism. Our national obsession with not wanting to offend has trumped our obligation to defend our national interests. And so our young soldiers continue to die.

Imagine, then, if the James Carvilles, Dick Morris and Karl Roves of the world put their visionary, calculating, often deviously cynical genius to work to promote the national interest globally. What would seasoned political strategists do? First, they would map the world country by country and take an inventory of existing friends, allies, neutrals, opponents and enemies. Then they would map the world by transnational issues, as one would with trans-state or trans-regional issues at home: ethnic, racial, linguistic, cultural, religious, business, labor, women, family, generational, environmental, and so forth. This would be followed by a strategic message for each and a constellation of surrogate spokespersons, both overt and covert; and the political ground troops of activists, donors, protesters, letter-writers, and arm-twisters.

By running strategic communication and its elements—public diplomacy, public affairs, international broadcasting, information operations, psychological operations and the like—in the same fashion as a perpetual global campaign on behalf of American strategic interests worldwide, the United States would be permanently conducting the “engagement” that so many advocate but so few actually practice. Like the permanent campaign of the American presidency and Congress, cadres of seasoned strategists and operatives would spend their time building alliances and keeping them—or at least maintaining a grassroots presence in reserve to be deployed as circumstances require them. But, unlike the permanent campaign, a real strategic influence capability for the United States as a whole would not be driven by domestic political issues. Much like standard diplomacy, or military or intelligence capabilities, the strategic influence capacity of the U.S. would be subject to domestic politics, but not driven by partisanship.

How can we do this? With what structures? Obviously the State Department has failed the nation in recovering the public diplomacy capabilities it absorbed a decade ago. Many thoughtful proposals have called for the revival of an independent U.S.IA-like agency, and for a dramatic change in bureaucratic culture⁸. Whatever the shape and character, such reforms will take years. What the U.S. leadership can do now is to define the purpose and nature of American strategic communication. That is why the nation needs diplomats and communicators who are political warriors, and not simply ex-politicians who checked their political instincts at the door when they entered the State Department.

Strategic communication must be strategic. It must be comprehensive. It must be integrated with all other instruments of statecraft, and long-term in nature. It must be designed to achieve national objectives through means other than lethal combat, and to enhance the capabilities of the warfighters who must go into battle. Communication cannot be an end in itself, but a means of exerting American influence globally in support of its national interests. Strategic communication is strategic influence. We mustn't be ashamed of the concept. It's time to embrace it.

About the Author

J. Michael Waller is the Walter and Leonore Annenberg Professor of International Communication at the Institute of World Politics, a graduate school of national security and international affairs in Washington, DC. He is author of *Fighting the War of Ideas like a Real War* (IWP Press, 2007) and editor of *The Public Diplomacy Reader* (IWP Press, 2007).

Notes

¹ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004); and Carola McGiffert, Craig Cohen, Joseph S. Nye, Jr., and Richard Armitage, *A Smarter, More Secure America: Report of the CSIS Commission on Smart Power* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007)

² See, for example, the work of then-Lt. Col. Stephen M. Tanous U.S.AF, *Building a Psychological Strategy for the U.S.: Leveraging the Informational Aspect of National Power*, U.S. Army War College Research Project, 2003.

³ Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Victoria Clarke, “Approval for DoD Participation in Pakistan Educational Reform Initiative,” Memorandum to OSI Director Brig. Gen. Simon P. Worden, February 7, 2002.

⁴ James Rao and Eric Schmitt, “Pentagon Readies Efforts to Sway Sentiment Abroad; Debate Over Credibility; New Office Proposes to Send News or Maybe False News to Even Friendly Lands,” *New York Times*, February 19, 2002. Clarke appeared in the front-page story both anonymously as a “senior official” at the Pentagon who voiced concerns about OSI, and on-the-record as DoD spokeswoman, failing to defend the office or her boss, and ratifying the concerns that she had given without attribution.

⁵ This writer and colleagues at *Insight* magazine, then a publication of the *Washington Times*, asked Clarke and her military public affairs officers no fewer than 26 times whether she was behind the leak, and they refused to answer. One night an *Insight* reporter confronted her in a Washington bar with a letter from the magazine editor, who knew Clarke personally, putting the question to her again. She said nothing but scribbled on the back, “You know.”

⁶ The most significant insider account of the OSI affair to date is by the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy at the time, Douglas J. Feith, *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism* (New York: Harper, 2008).

⁷ John J. Pitney, Jr., *The Art of Political Warfare* (Winnipeg, MB: Red River, 2000).

⁸ See, for example, Robert R. Reilly, “Ideas Matter: Restoring the Content of Public Diplomacy,” Heritage Foundation Special Report 64, July 27, 2009, and John Lenczowski, *Full Spectrum Diplomacy and Grand Strategy: Reforming the Structure and Culture of U.S. Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Institute of World Politics Press, 2009).