

The background of the cover is an abstract, dynamic composition of curved, flowing lines in shades of yellow and black. The lines create a sense of movement and depth, resembling a tunnel or a path that leads towards a bright light source. The overall color palette is dominated by warm yellow tones, with deep blacks and dark greys providing contrast and shadow.

THE
MISSING
ELEMENT **STRATEGIC**
COMMUNICATION

By Major General Mari K. Eder, U.S. Army

In the realm of ideas, the United States has failed to make use of what is potentially one of its most powerful weapons in the war against terrorism.

ISTOCK PHOTO

WITH PURPOSE AND POWER Strategic communication is a soft power, which draws on many sources, media, and individual messages to create an overall vision of the American identity.

“Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther . . . and one fine morning—

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”

—F. Scott Fitzgerald

How are we to implement the strategic communication function in government? Since the 21st century began—what we now recognize as the war on terrorism, an era that truly started with the attacks of 9/11—our efforts in the United States have been limited. They have been restricted by our desire to right ourselves following those attacks and regain not only a sense of balance but also a sense of identity. They have been limited initially by what the 9/11 Commission report referred to so harshly as a “failure of the imagination.” We failed to imagine that such an attack could or ever would be possible or that our own aircraft could be used against us.

A larger failure of the imagination has occurred since 9/11. Our reactions have been defensive and not proactive or strategic—an ongoing failure to conceive a path ahead with purpose or power. We have launched wars and strengthened homeland security institutions but strategically have not imagined beyond a vague and naïve hope that the future will improve and thus, as in the final words of *The Great Gatsby*, we falter and inevitably are brought back into the past, repeating the acts of before.

The issue goes beyond combating terrorism or even combating the ideological support for terrorist organizations. We must understand that our national identity is at stake and the American national response to acts of terrorism is insufficient to result in prevention of future acts or deterrence. From containment to engagement, further to preemptive response and beyond, we must develop a national security strategy that recognizes the potential of strategic communication and resonates with the American people. We must develop an application of soft power that can last through the generational duration we now anticipate will be the nature of the war on terrorism. This newly forged identity must be one that can be generally supported and formed as an American enterprise—industry, government, and academia—approach to crafting a vision for the future.

Reaction, Not Action

The George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies sponsored a series of international conferences on how governments can counter both the ideological sup-

port for and appeal of terrorism. At the 2007 conference in Ankara, Turkey, participants from more than 40 nations observed that gains thus far are for many western governments primarily defensive in nature. They noted that those states, including America, tend to “address radicalization after it has occurred, instead of developing and implementing an effective preventive strategy that erodes the foundations of terrorists’ motivations.”¹ We react; we do not act.

Yet, even as we discuss ideological deterrence, the notion of winning hearts and minds from the outside of a culture or ideology is doomed. We send messages internally; externally we project identity. It is a well-known tenet of public relations and communications planning that one way of building support and momentum for an organization’s actions is to preach to the choir. We have to cultivate the audiences who are listening to us, supporters as well as those who may be indifferent, neutral, or undecided. It is a basic aspect of mass communications that one does not speak to those who are against our ideologies because they will not be listening anyway. We should continue to reinforce the message internally or find champions or secondary message carriers for it to reach other audience bases. Deterrence cannot work otherwise.

In a recent research study, a survey of more than 600 journalists in 13 Arab countries revealed that they could be valuable allies and a conduit for explaining American policies to their audiences. That has not happened to date and the researchers noted, “America has failed to make use of what is potentially one of its most powerful weapons in the war of ideas against terrorism.” Thirty-four percent of the journalists agreed, stating that “U.S. policy was the most popular answer to the question of what is the greatest threat facing the Arab world today.”²

The war on terrorism is an ongoing, long-term crisis. And at this point, as the horror of 9/11 fades in the American collective memory, our determination appears to falter, our commitment to fade. We are numb to the pervasive yet vague threat to our way of life, inured to the persistence of Code Orange billboards at airports and on interstates, and impatient with security searches of our person, removing water bottles, cosmetics, and shoes. And in the latter half of 2008 the lack of political will to move forward, from the seat of government, in the Departments of State and Defense, growing numbers of vacancies in key strategy, policy, and communications positions within the administration, and a stalled national security strategic focus leave our efforts to develop a strategic communication capability adrift, the backward movement inevitable.

‘A Travesty’

In a recent Heritage Foundation paper, *Strategizing Strategic Communication*, authors Tony Blankley and

Oliver Horn state frankly, “The fact that there is no national security strategy for strategic communication—or even a government-wide definition of ‘strategic communication’ seven years into the War on Terror is nothing less than a travesty.”³ Perhaps a greater travesty is the growth of boutique strategic communication organizations, in different parts of various Defense agencies, all with different missions and application of what each thinks its strategic communication turf is. Like weeds, these organizations vary in size, structure, and focus, within DOD, State, and the combatant commands. Often there is a resulting duplication of efforts and haphazard application of resources.

Our lack of a strategic communication strategy has been to our enemies’ advantage. Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations have effectively moved into the virtual battlespace offered by the 24-7 global media environment and used the Internet and mass media tools to communicate with the citizens of its burgeoning virtual state worldwide. More than 4,000 Web sites encourage the faithful, coax the uncertain, and effectively preach to that choir, unhampered by law, free

press rules, or censorship. These groups have effectively wooed new members unopposed. And while operating freely in the vacuum, their communications have expanded in quantity, quality, and variety. Their internal messages are extremely effective; their external identity is becoming a recognizable brand.

As-Sahab, the media arm of al Qaeda, released more than 90 videos in 2007, up from 58 in 2006. And the number of other distributors of violent recruitment videos and training academies is expanding.⁴ Beyond messages to the faithful, the content includes recruitment of suicide bombers and training academies, providing examples and information for would-be terrorists. How can this communication movement be openly countered?

Good guidelines and solid, significant recommendations abound. The Defense Science Board undertook the most comprehensive study in 2007. For this study, Strategic Communication Task Force members listened to a wide variety of sources in both government and industry on communication abroad. They heard from a number of successful enterprises where actions matter more than words.⁵

In their 2008 report, the task force provided a number of recommendations to the Secretary of Defense, and more broadly to the White House, to better position the U.S. government to conduct strategic communication in today’s volatile security environment. In the report’s introduction, Defense Science Board (DSB) Chairman Dr. William Schneider Jr. noted, “The DSB first examined the matter of strategic communication in 2001, finding it an important instrument of national power.”⁶ The board

‘America has failed to make use of what is potentially one of its most powerful weapons in the war of ideas against terrorism.’

provided significant recommendations then, in 2004, and again in this latest report.

The Way Forward

To undertake a transformation to build a strong network of strategic communication capability, the 2008 report recommended:

- Establishment of an independent Center for Global Engagement.
- A permanent strategic communication structure within the White House in the form of a Deputy National Security Adviser for Strategic Communication and Adviser to the President.
- Better use of existing structure and tools within DOD to support strategic communication.
- Enhance the status, structure, and funding for the State Department's Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs.
- Review the mission and capability of the Broadcasting Board of Governors as an integral element of this capability.
- Create in DOD a permanent Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Strategic Communication, reporting to the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy.⁷

Even without a detailed reading of the 131-page report, it is patently clear that the board addressed two major issues affecting the implementation of strategic communication as a function of government: first, the recognition and elevation of its function within the National Security Council and in the Departments of State and Defense, and second, providing significant funding for this function. Absent these two acts, further discussion of strategic communication as a valid application of the information element of national power remains an empty and purely academic discussion. Further, without this national commitment, any continuing bleatings in the press by either advocates or critics of the war on terrorism as a protracted battle of ideas amounts to purely meaningless self-flagellation. We forfeit the game and the other side wins.

So, is there movement? Is government making progress in “branding” the West, tarnishing the image and appeal of terrorist organizations, successfully empowering third parties to speak on our behalf, and continuing research into the dynamics of the global media environment?

One of the criticisms of government attempts to brand the West is that the act of branding or identity takes place continuously, and from the outside as well as from within. The U.S. government, whether engaged in public diplomacy or military action, is not the only entity actively

defining the nation and its values, goals, and ideals. This process is also done independently, a necessity one might argue, and it is done by a myriad of sources. Often the consequence is mere noise and dissonance, mixed messages, and confusion. It is rare that a coherent picture emerges. That which does emerge is often the result of even more than mass media or reporting by the civilian press. It is the image projected by the American entertainment industry, one that in many cases cannot be an image of pride, but rather one of decline, one that could be a true inspiration to terrorist goals.



ANOTHER MEDIA OUTLET This advertisement from Al Jazeera notes that it connects with its audience. A survey of Arab journalists revealed that they could be an invaluable conduit for explaining

A first step in understanding global media in the words of Dr. Mark Maybury is:

[U]nderstanding how information flows among various media. For example, information posted on a Web page might subsequently be reposted on a blog and invoke discussion which might then be picked up as a story in a news site and eventually find its way to broadcast news. Understanding these often global flows is essential for modern public diplomacy.⁸

[J]ust as Madison Avenue has developed methods (e.g., audience analysis, targeted marketing) to very successfully model and influence consumer behavior, so too governments need to skillfully leverage modern communications. . . . [because] media, and the information they convey, can be a force multiplier or a force divider.⁹

We Are What We Broadcast

The thought of MTV or even *CSI Miami* being viewed by young Saudis in Riyadh should be enough to make the average American swallow hard and resist the urge to cry out, “Our culture isn’t like that. Really!” However, it remains evident that the shame evidenced by this export is telling enough. These do reflect our culture and na-

tional identity. It just is not a complete picture. But the gratuitous sex and violence of average television shows and movies is certainly a reflection of a decadent culture where the veneer of civilization is wearing thin. Many times I have had to explain to European friends why it is safe to travel to the United States, and the country is not as violent as they have seen on television. I can recall clearly the day I stood in a classroom in the Swedish International Training Command several years ago trying to answer a question about Jerry Springer's reality show and why so-called average Americans wished to participate in it. It wasn't a program I had ever seen, and I was most uncomfortable in the realization that I represented that culture.

At the height of the Cold War, the fictional Texan oil-drilling Ewings became the shining image of American life.



JUST A NORMAL AMERICAN FAMILY From 1978 to 1991 viewers all over the world flocked to their television sets to see the latest intrigues in the Ewing family of Dallas, Texas. Little did we casual viewers realize that, according to some sources, the Ewings were winning the Cold War.

We have come a long way from the days of facing one enemy across the plains of Europe, nearly 30 years now removed from the 1980s. Then—President Ronald Reagan was the “Great Communicator,” the embodiment of American identity who stood tough against the Cold War threat. But even then some of America’s greatest ambassadors were not elected leaders but rather representatives of American cultural excess, the mass media, and the entertainment industry. The characters from the television series *Dallas* were some of America’s best-known citizens to those behind the Iron Curtain. Then, at the height of the Cold War, the wealthy Texan oil-drilling Ewings became the shining image of American life where it was easy to acquire money, cars, oil, land, power, and influence. Citizens from more than 100 countries, including many in the Warsaw Pact, watched the se-

ries faithfully, not with a disdain for the vulgar American capitalism as their communist leadership had hoped, but with a deep envy and yearning to acquire that lifestyle for themselves.

An April 2008 article in the *Washington Post* argues tellingly that “*Dallas* won the Cold War.” The authors state, “That lesson is more relevant than ever in an increasingly globalized world in which movies, music, and more cross borders with impunity—and the free West engages the semi-free East, whether in China or Iran. For all the talk of boycotts and bombs, the United States is interested in spreading American values and institutions, a little TV-land may go a lot further than armored personnel carriers.”¹⁰

The vast expanse of *Dallas*' Southfork ranch was one of the most compelling images America had in its arsenal of deterrence in the 1980s and it was that cowboy image that conveyed so well the notion of security and prosperity. Strategic communication can serve as the strategic and policy power for developing an image of America in the war on terrorism, one that was not forged by accident but by design. That image, supported by existing culture and other message carriers will be the one to carry the battle of ideas forward.

Indeed, we must go further to create that image, with fully conscious planning and awareness of the implications of what we create. The recommendations of the Defense Science Board go a long way toward determining what this structure should be. A comprehensive and complete definition of strategic communication should likewise be considered. Before we can develop that

strategy, however, there must be a solid government-wide definition. Attempts to date have been rendered so bland as to be nearly incomprehensible.

Finding a Definition

Jeffrey Jones, former Director for Strategic Communication and Information on the National Security Council, offered in a recent *Joint Forces Quarterly* article that strategic communication is the “Synchronized coordination of statecraft, public affairs, public diplomacy, military information operations and other activities, reinforced by political, economic, military, and other actions, to advance U.S. foreign policy interests.”¹¹ This is a full and comprehensive definition and completely illustrates why strategic communication will be ineffective if buried under an existing public affairs structure or within an information operations

campaign. The function must be able to integrate actions, build consensus across stovepipes, and establish clarity of direction as well as unity of action. Otherwise mixed messages result.

More alarming than the lack of unity is the emerging evidence of competition and discord. Each agency, combatant command, and organization is left to develop strategic communication capabilities as it feels best suits its mission, goals, and objectives. The Smith-Thornberry amendment (H.A. 5) to the 2009 Defense Authorization Bill seeks to remedy this through requiring a complete interagency strategy for strategic communication, specifying the roles and responsibilities within both Defense and State, and creating a Center for Strategic Communication.¹²

These provisions will fully implement the broad recommendations of the Defense Science Board. They will move the process of strategic communication to the point in the American government where it can successfully engage across the globe. The provisions will seek to reestablish the American identity as that of the same people who stood behind the Marshall Plan and not those who advocate moral abdication of responsibility.

The identity should seek to reaffirm what George C. Marshall referred to as America's position in his Marshall Plan speech of 1947:

An essential part of any successful action on the part of the United States is an understanding on the part of the people of America of the character of the problem and the remedies to be applied. Political passion and prejudice should have no part. With foresight, and a willingness on the part of our people to face up to the vast responsibility which history has clearly placed upon our country, the difficulties I have outlined can and will be overcome.¹³

It will take leadership and legislation, from the White House, Congress, and the Departments of State, Defense, and Homeland Security to create a unified, comprehensive strategic communication capability. Understanding and harnessing this capability and its power to unify strategy and policy will move America's vision forward to the future, and not permit it, like Gatsby, to be borne back into the past. But it must be developed. Soon, for the shore grows closer. And tomorrow is here. ✨

1. Advancing International Cooperation in Countering Ideological Support for Terrorism (CIST): Toward Building a Comprehensive Strategy, p. 17, A Summary Report of the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, Dr. Sharyl Cross et. al., 2007.



MEDIUM ISN'T THE MESSAGE With more than a dozen microphones, all with Arabic-marked windscreens, arrayed in front of him, Army General David Petraeus and Iraqi Interior Minister Jawad al-Bolani face the press. How the general's message is perceived by each station's audience is the message.

2. Lawrence Pintak, Jeremy Ginges, and Nicholas Felton, "Views of Arab Journalists," *The New York Times*, 25 May 2008.
3. Tony Blankley and Oliver Horn, "Strategizing Strategic Communication," <http://www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/wm1939.cfm>, WebMemo #1939, 29 May 2008.
4. Phillip Seib, J.D., "The Al-Qaeda Media Machine," *Military Review*, May-June 2008.
5. I was an Army Advisor to the DSB Strategic Communications Study and participated in many of the sessions.
6. Final Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication, January 2008.
7. *Ibid.*
8. M. Maybury, 2008. "New Media," In Heil, A. (ed.) *Local Voices/Global Perspectives: Challenges Ahead for U.S. International Media*. Washington D.C.: Public Diplomacy Council. p.107.
9. *Ibid.* p.115.
10. Nick Gillespie and Matt Welch, "How Dallas Won the Cold War," *The Washington Post*, 27 April 2008, p. B2.
11. Jeffrey Jones, "Strategic Communications: A Mandate for the United States," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, No. 39, at www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/jfq_pubs/1839.ct.
12. Blankley and Horn, "Strategizing Strategic Communication."
13. George C. Marshall, U.S. Secretary of State, The "Marshall Plan" speech at Harvard University, 5 June 1947.

Major General Eder has more than 30 years' experience in communications and international relations. She is currently the Deputy Chief of the U.S. Army Reserve, served formerly as the Deputy Chief of Public Affairs, U.S. Army, and holds masters degrees from Edinboro University of Pennsylvania and the U.S. Army War College.