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**INFORMATION AS AN INSTRUMENT  
AND A SOURCE  
OF NATIONAL POWER**

**INFORMATION STRATEGIES FOR STRATEGIC LEADERS**

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## **INFORMATION AS AN INSTRUMENT AND A SOURCE OF NATIONAL POWER**

National objectives are what a nation wants to do, national interests are the reasons why, and a national security strategy is a nation's plan to achieve its objectives. Underpinning all of these is national power. Without power, a nation has no means to implement its plan to achieve its objectives. Sources of national power are different for, each country and can change. When a nation possesses the requisite power to implement its plan, it exercises that power through the four instruments generally described as economic, diplomatic, informational, and military.'

In recent years, information has gained prominence as a fundamental instrument of national power. Along with diplomatic, economic, and military strength, the technology revolution has brought information to the fore as both a source and an instrument of national power. However, while the other three lend themselves to more quantifiable measurement than information, information potentially will become the primary force that shapes our diplomatic, economic, and military involvement around the world.

Information can be both an instrument and a source of national power. It is an instrument when used to shape events, strategies, national will, and international perceptions. It a source when possession of specific information achieves a comparative advantage that enables national leaders to shape, or react to, national and world events.

### **Information's History**

The concept of information as a source or instrument of power is not new. Leaders have used information as a tool since before biblical times. Traditionally though, information has been used primarily to support and sustain a nation's military power.

As noted in the Bible, Gideon used a force of only 300 men to defeat opposing armies numbering more than 120,000. How? Psychological operations (and some strong help from the

angels!).<sup>2</sup> When Genghis Khan sent runners ahead of his advancing armies to warn those about to be conquered what fate would befall them if they resisted, he used information as an instrument of national power. The mere thought of facing the Mongol hordes - knowing the legends and stories that preceded them - often acquiescence without a fight.

However, information as an instrument or source of power does not relate to just military power. For example, information on weather patterns helps economists predict crop yields in the United States and around the world. Knowing, for instance, that the wheat crop in Russia will be significantly smaller due to an extremely dry winter enables our Department of Agriculture to predict how much wheat Russia may need to import. Economically, this information can be used to project how much wheat US farmers may be able to sell compared to wheat growers in Brazil or Argentina. Diplomatically, this information might enable our ambassador to open early negotiations with Russia to determine how we might assist them through the crisis. In any spectrum, possessing key information early gives an advantage that allows a nation to shape events and perceptions to its benefit.

### **Information's Reality**

Information - and the ability to act on that information - is perhaps the single most important factor in achieving the desired outcome in a given situation. From tactical to strategic levels, knowledge of events, potential impacts, forces at work, and probable outcomes all operate together to give leverage to the possessor of that knowledge. Leverage translates directly into power. The challenge is then using that power to achieve desired results without alienating those on whom the power is used, thereby creating another problem requiring resolution.

International policy and strategy is no longer predicated solely on military might. Shaping public opinion through information technology can pre-empt the need for military action

- but not always. Public opinion usually translates into national will - either good or bad - and national will can ultimately be the driving force behind success or failure of a national strategy. Our experience in Vietnam is a prime example of how national will was shaped by information.

The United States initially engaged in South East Asia for honorable purposes - to prevent the spread of communism and maintain freedom for the people of Vietnam., However, as our nation's involvement grew and the war became protracted, people began to question why we were there and just what we were accomplishing. Much of that questioning was fostered by information wielded as a tool to shape national will by those opposed to the war. As the information grew increasingly negative, national will dissolved, resulting in an ignominious withdrawal from conflict. Thus, information was a driving force that diminished our national will, reduced our national power, and prevented the accomplishment of our national objectives.

More recently, our experiences in the Persian Gulf provide a positive example of information used as an instrument to shape events. Air drops of literally millions of leaflets telling Iraqis why we were coming, how to assist us, and how to prevent harm to themselves preceded both of our incursions into Iraq. The proximate result was mass surrenders of Iraqi forces during the first Gulf War, and significantly reduced resistance from the Iraqi people during current operations. Further, the embedded media provided a direct, immediate window into tactical operations for people around the world. When the vaunted resistance of the Muslim population failed to materialize, real-time reporting of this and the welcoming appearance of many Iraqis helped shape favorable world opinion.

### **Information's Potential**

Information and information management come in many variations. Within the military context, information as an instrument of power often takes the form of propaganda,

psychological operations, and perception management or, the, latest nuance, strategic influence. Militarily, information is a proven force multiplier increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of fewer combat forces and limiting friendly force and non-combatant exposure to harm.<sup>3</sup> However, information is also useful in each of the other instruments of national power, such as the economic example for agriculture noted above.

In the current National Security Strategy, President, Bush states that we will use effective public diplomacy to promote the free-flow of information. and ideas to kindle the hopes and aspirations of freedom for those in societies ruled by the sponsors of global terrorism.<sup>4</sup> Effective public diplomacy can only happen when we have sufficient knowledge about how the message will be received by those to whom it is sent, thus allowing us to appropriately shape the message.

Information is also the primary means to shape world opinion about the United States. Just as our diplomatic institutions help us reach out to others around the world, our public information efforts are helping people around the world learn about and understand America. To be effective, our information must again be shaped in such a way that those to whom it is sent can receive it, understand it, and know it is believable. This can happen only when we have the requisite information about the target audience that allows us to do this.

Information has the potential for great good or great harm. Those who use or direct the use of information determine the potential for achieving results at either end of the spectrum. Knowledge about these individuals directly affects the legitimacy and effectiveness of the message for the receiver.

### **Fostering Legitimacy and Effectiveness**

In October 2001, the Defense Science Board's Task Force on Managed Information Dissemination completed a study jointly sponsored with the Office of the Undersecretary of

State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs., This report concluded, "In the information age, influence and power go to those who can disseminate credible information in ways that will mobilize publics to support interests, goals, and objectives."<sup>5</sup> So how do we establish credible value and legitimacy for information as an instrument and source of national power?

First, content matters. When the whole world has ready access to the media, the message vice the medium makes the difference. With steadily improved journals and around-the-clock news sources, today's average citizen is bombarded with complex foreign policy concerns that often are boiled down to their essences by experts with opposing views. The result is a populace who better understands the interrelationship of economics, domestic politics, diplomacy, and military force. The man on the street often can converse articulately on the oil price shock that might result from a preemptive attack on Iraq, or knowledgeably discuss the effects of an Iraqi regime change on the House of Saud.<sup>6</sup> To be accepted, the content of the message must be accurate, substantive, reliable, and verifiable. When the receiver accepts credible and legitimate information, it becomes both a source and an instrument of national power.

Second, the credibility of the messenger is as important as the content of the message. Just before Labor Day 2002, the American people were uncertain about the need to act soon in Iraq, the Bush administration seemed to be in disarray, members of Congress were objecting to a broad grant of authority to use force, and our allies' were even more unhappy than usual. What happened? The president called in the Congressional leadership, and made his case before the United Nations. The country supported him, his administration united behind him, and he won large bipartisan majorities in Congress. What made the difference? Primarily, the clarity, toughness, and straightforwardness of President Bush. Underlying all the speeches and releases of information was an understanding that the President said what he meant, meant what he said,



and" could be trusted to do the right thing.<sup>7</sup> The President used information as both a source and an instrument of national power.

As important as credibility and legitimacy is effectiveness. A credible and legitimate, message with no measurable [effect](#) is of no value. How does one, measure the effectiveness of an information campaign, be it military, economic, or diplomatic in nature? The term "network-centric warfare" says all that needs to be said about criticality of information on the battlefield. And, while diplomats once conferred in closed rooms, they now meet in a global fish bowl, and the street reacts to what it sees, hears, and reads in its own media. Finally, the global economic engine would sputter to a halt in seconds without the fuel of instant, constant and secure information.<sup>8</sup> These are meaningful measures of effectiveness, and whether used in support of military, diplomatic, or economic interests, effective information is both a source and an instrument of national power.

### **Looking to the Future**

Military superiority, diplomatic skill, and economic influence are clearly measurable and, for the most part, globally respected instruments of our national power. Information is gaining in prominence as a potent strategic resource and foundation for national power, but still lags in earning equal recognition.<sup>9</sup> Global communications capabilities daily create new avenues for American values, culture, and interests to radiate overseas and vice versa. Unfortunately, much of that message never reaches the man on the street because of governmental controls limiting unfettered distribution of information. Our continuing struggle remains one of exploiting our strengths and defending our weaknesses while learning to wield information as effectively on the street as we have on the battlefield.

As stated at the outset, information can, be both an instrument and a source of national power. Further, the United States enjoys significant economic prowess and advantages from our lead in information technology. However, these advantages alone will not elevate information to equal status with the other instruments of national power. As we move into the future, we must determine how best to translate these advantages into useful national power that sustains our economic prowess, enhances our military as it moves through transformation, and, supports our diplomacy with friends, allies, coalition partners, and adversaries around the world. Once that determination is made and the plan is developed, we must execute the plan - and our use of information as both a source and an instrument of national power will be critical to success.

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<sup>2</sup> The Book of Judges, Chapter 7, verse 1 through Chapter 8, verse 10, The Rvrie Study Bible (New American Standard Translation), Moody Press, Chicago, IL, 1978.

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<sup>4</sup> Bush, George W., The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, The White House, Washington, DC, September 2002, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> Campen, p. 33.

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<sup>7</sup> Kristol, William, "From Truth To Deception," The Washington Post, Oct 12, 2002, p. A3 1.

<sup>8</sup> Campen, p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

